

THE LITTLE WELSH DRAGON by Terry Spencer, former Welsh Terrier Club Secretary, breeder and owner

Historians believe that the Welsh Terrier is one of the oldest pure bred terriers; evidence indicates that he has changed very little from the all round working terrier developed several hundreds of years ago in the high mountains and hidden valleys of Wales. Late in the nineteenth century when improved methods of transportation opened the more inaccessible areas of Wales up to travellers, the breed was seen by hunters and fanciers from all over the world who recognised and admired its possibilities.

Some confusion resulted when the English Kennel Club admitted the breed for registration on a joint basis with the Old English Wire Haired Black and Tan Terrier, now thought to be a hodge podge of other breeds that resembled the Welsh Terrier. In any event, the Black and Tan no longer exists while the Welshman remains a testimonial to the sound requirements set up by his breeders.

The function of the Welsh, common to all terriers, is that of an "earth stopper", or dog that will go to ground or into caves after game. Terriers were used with packs of hounds which drove the quarry to a spot where the terrier could corner and seize it, or force it once more into the open for the chase. Because they usually became involved in physical combat with such animals as otter and badger, terriers were bred for courage far greater than was needed in hounds or pursuit dogs. In the Welsh, strength combined with small size was desired and developed. A surprisingly good ability to scent game was also an important part of the Welsh character that increased its value as a working terrier.

At first glance, the Welsh Terrier might be mistaken for a black and tan Wire Fox Terrier or a miniature Airedale, but he is neither of these. The head of a Welsh, in proportion to his body, is more powerfully made than either the Fox Terrier or the Airedale, being boxy rather than wedge shaped. He is bred for power and endurance instead of speed which gives him a broader, compact "cobby" shape. Since early fanciers used terms familiar to breeders of the horse, it would be appropriate to compare the Welsh to a working horse, while the Fox Terrier is more like a hunter or racer. The Breed Standard details the requirements for a correct Welsh Terrier as laid down by the British Kennel Club.

To my mind, the Welsh Terrier embodies all that a dog should be - the canine equivalent of "all things for all men". He will retrieve and hunt, can take as much or as little exercise as you care to give him, is happy to lie in front of the fire (or on your bed given half a chance!), he is extremely inquisitive and above all a dog with which you can have fun. Not too big and not too small he is eminently suited to modern day living.

Don't run away with the idea that he is easy to live with - the Welsh, like all terriers, can be stubborn. You will need to let your dog know who's the boss from the start; otherwise this strong character will have his head. Right from puppy hood, you can see the advanced sense of humour. Watch him with an older dog - he will dive in and bite an ear, get a reaction, dance back and present his bottom, driving the older dog demented just for the hell of it. Get on the floor and he will do the same to you! They like nothing more than joining in with family activities - playing with children is a particular joy. If you need a hand with the gardening, the Welsh will willingly oblige - he'll happily watch you put plants in and then quietly follow you pulling them all out. Another favourite habit is picking flowers and fruit, he has an uncanny knack of knowing which tomatoes and grapes are ripe.

He can be difficult with neighbours' cats - if they run, he will chase. Although not normally aggressive, he finds it hard to control his natural instincts. He seldom seeks a fight with other dogs, preferring to play, but he will refuse to back down if under attack from another dog and will stand his corner to the bitter end.

Welsh Terriers are insatiably curious - this is just one reason why they should never be let off the lead in town: if something attracts their attention, then they will go, giving little regard to traffic. A well-fenced garden at home is a must; if you decide on solid, larch-lap type fencing, then make sure it is at least five feet high, otherwise curiosity will get the better of your dog and he will climb over - just to see what's at the other side. Obviously, if he can see through the fence, it needn't be so high. Bags and jacket pockets will be investigated on your return from the shops to see if you have brought a treat. Visitors tend to get searched on entry!

The Welsh Terrier is clean about the house as he does not have a seasonal moult. This makes him particularly attractive to the house-proud and those suffering from asthma and allergies. However, regular weekly grooming with a "terrier pad" (a rubber pad with wire teeth) and a steel comb, is essential to remove loose hair, knots and tangles. Bristle brushes have little or no effect on the wiry coat; they will not penetrate to the skin which requires massaging to maintain it in a healthy condition.

Professional hand stripping should be started around the age of five months and then carried out at approximately three monthly intervals. This skill can be performed by any owner, given time, patience, a little training and the appropriate tools. When born, puppies are predominantly black, the tan head and furnishings develop as the puppy matures and the grooming process begins. The dog may be clipped, but this will in time spoil the hard texture, rich colour and condition of the coat. Your breeder will be happy to advise on correct grooming techniques.

Welsh Terriers, although increasing in popularity, are not easy to obtain. The majority of breeders are enthusiastic exhibitors who only breed when they want a new dog to campaign themselves. You should be prepared both to wait and to travel in your search for a Welsh puppy. The Secretaries of the breed's clubs are usually aware of the national availability.