

## **Animal Crackers**

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Throughout the years there have been many eccentric pet owners and rabbit owners were no exception. Probably the most crankiest time was around the turn of the century when some extraordinary experiments took place and many people were rearing stock to satisfy the insatiable demands of scientist. Rabbits were kept by a wide cross section of people, from the upper crust to the wandering gypsy, from the monks to the criminals. During this period there resided in the very heart of rural Kent, a recluse. His old wattle and daub cottage was surrounded by a hedge of wild privet which towered into the sky to a height of twenty odd feet. Behind this was an almost impenetrable mass of bramble and hawthorn bush interlaced with several tracks which could only be negotiated by stooping until practically on hands and knees.

Local village folk said that they occasionally caught sight of a figure draped in sack cloth, unshaven and extremely dirty. He was obviously self supporting, for if he ever ventured from his plot, it could only have been during the depths of night. Children who happened to pass were warned by their parents not to tarry near the hedge or play in the vicinity, as rumour had it that no living thing that passed the hedge was ever seen again. Birds, bees and butterflies were reported never to be seen flying out and dogs howled dismally if forced by their masters to walk by. Some of the older residents remember a young man in his early twenties who inherited the property from his grandparents. He had come straight from Public school and had an avid interest in animals. The cottage soon became a hive of industry and within a short space of time he had erected sheds and aviaries about the grounds. He spoke to no one and allowed a barrier to grow between himself and the outside world. The authorities allowed him to carry on his own unusual way and refused to interfere with 'someone who was not causing any problems!'

In the year 1910, Police Constable Eric Jupson, was on his Saturday patrol and whilst cycling past the property noticed a bundle of clothing under the hedge. On investigation it proved to be an old man, probably in his seventies, no more than five feet tall and extremely thin. He had tried to crawl through the hedge but was caught in the brambles and had laid in the spot for several hours. Although still alive, it was obvious he would not survive very long. He was moved to the local infirmary where he died the following day.

It was exactly ten days afterward that a party of men armed with saws and fagging hooks arrived at the cottage and after many hours managed to cut a reasonable size pathway through the undergrowth.

Around the dwelling was a largish area of cultivation, but inside the house it was very bare. The main room consisted of an area fourteen foot by ten which contained a bed and an armchair, a rickety table with two upright wooden chairs stood at one end and several pictures of wild birds adorned the walls. A further room led off on end, this was like a large pantry ten feet long and five feet wide with shelves from floor to ceiling. The shelves were packed with books, which on inspection proved to be old manuals with pages that had been bleached to remove previous contents and the whole closely written in exceptionally beautiful copper plate hand. Later reports from the workmen indicated that they were some sort of animal breeding records with observations down to the finest detail.

Adjoining the building and of the same length was a lean to shed, which was found to house some forty rabbits. Only a few were alive and these were in an advanced stage of emaciation, they had obviously been neglected for several weeks. The men spoke with wonderment about the different colours and furs of these rabbits, which even in death was unbelievably beautiful. Some of the animals bore little resemblance to rabbits, head were in a variety of shapes and sizes and some of the paws were reputed to have delicately shaped fingers. Arrangements were put

in hand by the men's supervisor to obtain the necessary transport to remove the contents on the following day.

It was only an hour after the workmen had left, that the whole place developed into a roaring inferno. Dry brambles and undergrowth crackled and snapped as the flames ate their way across the whole area and within a couple of hours there remained nothing but a charred mess with wispy smoke to mark the spot.

As news of the incident circulated, many notable breeders and scientists visited the site in the hope that they might discover clues of the recluses activities, but apart from a few metal objects everything had been devoured by the blaze. Lots of theories have been discussed as to the old ma's objectives, his experiments were obviously strictly controlled but as to his final goal, this will never be known. It is fairly certain though that he reached an advanced stage of colour and fur control and had created an animal far removed from the present day rabbit.