

Home Life

3. Whippets and Pigeons

Various animals were kept by miners and their families. Many were kept just as pets. Others were kept for sport and some, such as ferrets and terrier dogs, for hunting.

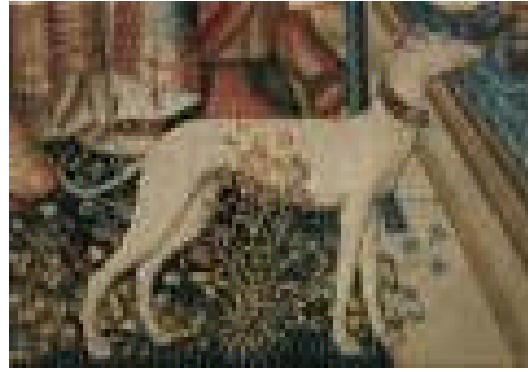
Ferrets are semi-tame relatives of stoats and weasels. Their truly wild cousins, known as polecats, hunt rabbits by going down the rabbit burrows. Many working families kept a pair of ferrets to hunt rabbits for the cooking pot. A ferret was sent down a rabbit hole, whereupon the rabbits would run away, out of other entrances to their burrow. But the owner of the ferrets would have first put nets over these other rabbit holes, and the rabbits would get caught in these. Many people still hunt rabbits with ferrets today. For very poor families, a dinner of a rabbit was a delicious treat.

Whippets are small to medium sized dogs similar to their larger cousins, greyhounds. (Originally, whippets were crosses between a greyhound and a spaniel or, sometimes a terrier. Since 1890 they have been recognised as a separate breed of dog in their own right.)

Originally bred for hunting, whippets are very good runners. Whippets came to be kept, as they still are, not for hunting but to race against other people's whippets. Whippets thus became popular both as family pets and as racing dogs – particularly so in the north-east of England where whippet breeding and racing remains a part of the culture of the former mining communities.



Whippets used to be used to chase and kill hares. Today, like this whippet, they are raced by them chasing a cloth 'animal' pulled along by a wire



This tapestry of a whippet dates from the time of Henry VIII (about 1510) showing that they have been around as a breed for a long time

Pigeons have been kept for various reasons for hundreds of years. Along with their close cousins doves, pigeons were originally tamed to keep for meat and, perhaps more importantly, as a source of eggs through the winter months. Pigeons were also bred for their looks, and many exotic breeds were developed.

However, what pigeons became famous for was their ability to fly fast and to find their homes from even hundreds of miles away – which is why they are sometimes known as 'homing pigeons'. People started to race their pigeons against other people's pigeons. The pigeons would be taken a long way from their homes and then released all together. The times when they arrived back at their homes would be recorded and later it would be worked out whose pigeon had flown the fastest and got home quickest.

Racing pigeons against each other remains very popular with all sorts of people, from the poor to the rich. Like her father before her, King George VI and his father before him King George V, the present Queen

is a keen breeder of pigeons which she keeps at her home in Sandringham in Norfolk.



A typical pigeon bred for its speed when racing home

These pigeons have been bred for their fancy looks rather than speed. The one on the left for its tail and the one on the right for its feathered feet.

While popular throughout the United Kingdom, pigeon breeding and racing has long been an important part of the culture of the mining villages of County Durham and Northumberland.