

HAVE YOU HERD?

The Bearded Collie

A few decades ago, a British Beardie historian visited the U.S. and took in a dog show where one of the country's top conformation Beardies was being shown. Viewing him in action, she penned, "He sailed round the ring, silken locks flowing in the breeze while the ground rumbled beneath my feet as a thousand Scottish shepherds whirled in their graves." Viewing modern Beardies in the show ring, -primed, polished and artificially parted – it's easy to forget they were once hard working herding dogs. Fortunately, some still are working, having never lost the instinct. What were those early Beardies like?

Old books can sometimes give us a glimpse. *The Livestock Journal* of 1878 carried an article in which the author referred to the early Beardie-like canine, "It is shaggy-coated, thick-skinned with short, powerful limbs. Shepherds prefer it for its endurance of cold and fatigue and its ability as a driver, considering it the best dog for sheep. It is the size of an ordinary collie but a good deal deeper-chested and flatter in the forehead: a dark grey in colour, short-tailed; at home among the drift and snow; finely adapted for hill climbing." He added, "that this type of shaggy-coated collie instinctively made a wide sweep, with shepherds stating they could safely trust 200 or 300 sheep "to the sagacity of this valuable dog which does not hurry or push, but drives them as coolly and as cautiously as if its master were present." Shepherds of that time often termed the dogs as 'goat-haired collies.'

In *The New Book of the Dog* by Robert Leighton, published 1912, there was a bonanza of Beardie info. "Then there is the Scottish bearded or Highland Collie, less popular still with the flockmaster, a hardy-looking dog in outward style but soft in temperament and many of them make better cattle than sheep dogs. This dog and the Old English Sheepdog are much alike in appearance but that the bearded is a more racy animal with a head resembling that of the Dandie Dinmont rather than the square head of the Bobtail. The strong-limbed bearded Collie is capable of getting through a good day's work but is not so steady nor so wise as the old-fashioned black and white. He is a favourite with the butcher and drover who have sometimes a herd of troublesome cattle to handle and he is well-suited to rough and rocky ground, active in movement and as sure-footed as the wild goat. He can endure cold and wet without discomfort and can live on the Highland hills when others less sturdy would succumb. As an outdoor dog he is less subject to rheumatism than many."

In the late 1930s, British naturalist Richard Perry elected to live the life of a hill shepherd on the Isle of Skye, Scotland. Later he wrote a book *I Went A' Shepherding* which was published in 1944. In it he writes about using three dogs: one to gather small lots, the second to hunt and move sheep and the third "a noisy fellow this, for these mountain sheep were so darned obstinate and headstrong, especially those from a hill not regularly shepherded, the only a strong rough dog would keep them on the move – and none better at this game than the shaggy Beardie of the old crofting folk, a smaller, long-tailed and straight-haired likeness of the English Bobtail." Back in 1949, James Garrow, acknowledged as a working sheepdog expert, penned a letter to Mrs. G.O. Willison, the British lady credited with reviving the breed. In it he noted. "The Beardie was essentially a worker, famed for fleetness and brains, kept by butchers and farmers. The coat should not be overlong and of a raw, harsh texture. Have you drawn up the standard for the KC yet? You want to emphasize the rule on coat."

Though books can provide insight into our breed in earlier days, there's nothing like someone relating personal experiences. I was fortunate to be contacted in 1999 by a 78-year-old Scottish gentleman, Bill Remwick, who was living on Vancouver Island. A column I wrote on early Beardies started him reminiscing. Bill, his father and his grandfather all raised cattle and sheep in

Scotland and used no other dogs but Beardies as their herding dogs. Bill claimed his memory only went back to 1925 but his grandfather herded with Beardies as early as 1890. His grandfather, he recalled, would not own another breed of dog. And with good reason. “The Beardies,” he related, “were great dogs for the drovers. When it came time to sell the sheep, they would be driven by the thousands the length of Scotland, through Falkirk to the English market. On the road, the flocks would get mixed, but the Beardies could ‘shed out’ their own sheep without fail. The dogs had to be incredibly good to keep on the road for weeks.”

The Highland drovers themselves were unbelievable characters, according to Bill. They spoke only Gaelic, ate little else besides oatmeal and weren’t particularly fond of baths. However, they were organized folk who kept the flocks moving at the rate of four miles a day, lined up rest pastures along the way and could identify all the sheep in their keeping. Often, they drove sheep for 20 or 30 owners, kept track of the sales prices on each and delivered the money in cash back to the owners. “The drover’s word was his bond.” Sadly, the drove roads disappeared when railroads came in and flocks could be moved to market more efficiently.

Bill remembered his and his father’s dogs as being exceptionally hardy. Heat was their only enemy and he recalled them heading for a creek or the nearest horse trough to cool off when necessary. Then it was back to work.

“They were incredibly brave and gutsy dogs,” Bill commented. “They had courage in spades.” He confessed Border Collies were good workers, “but lacked the outright courage the Beardies showed in facing down obstreperous cattle or stubborn sheep.’ The dogs were never abused but they were working dogs rather than pets. Every year we weaned the lambs from the ewes. Tweed (Bill’s Beardedie) separated 600 reluctant ewes from their lambs routinely.”

In recent years since moving to Canada, Bill had watched Beardies in the show ring and remarked, “They’ve changed so much. I don’t know if they’d still be able to herd with all that long flowing coat.” His working Beardies were ‘raggy’ and never combed out. But the Beardedie coat was simply an example of the ‘wilder part of Scotland’ that included the coats found on Highland cattle and the black-faced colley sheep.

In those times, many sheepdogs were shorn with the sheep and slathered with a tar and oil mixture to act as a weather-proofer and insect repellent. A far cry from silken show coats. (I’m guessing they weren’t invited to share the shepherd’s bedding.) Looking back, Bill recalled, “You did difficult things with your Beardies and you thought nothing of it. “ It was simply expected of a good working dog. –*alice bixler, alice@bedlamkennels.com, Bearded Collie Club of America.*