

Badger Baiting

Baiting in the 19th century



Badger baiting around 1810.

The Badger, written by Northamptonshire poet John Clare (1798 - 1864) shows that badger baiting was a form of public entertainment in the early 19th century. In fact, it had been so since medieval times. Badger baiting, along with cock fighting, bull baiting and the like, often took place in the back yards of taverns. These activities were organised to draw in the crowds and so increase the sales of beer. In some cases, the baited badger had its tail nailed to the ground; it was then baited until it died. Death came about either through injuries inflicted by the dogs, or because of gangrene in the tail.

Baiting in the early 20th century

In some cases, dogs were used to 'draw' the badger from a box, a barrel or an artificial tunnel. Ernest Neal, writing in his first book on badgers published in 1948, described the sequence of events:

"A badger ... is placed in a barrel or box to which it is chained, and the locals bring their dogs to test them out on it. Betting is a usual sideline, and the owner of the badger often makes quite a haul from the owners of inexperienced dogs. The terriers are often badly mauled in the process and even killed, and the badger may suffer a lot of ill-treatment. At one time the badger's lower jaw was cut away to give the dogs more chance. There is nothing whatever to be said for badger-baiting."

H. Mortimer Batten, in his book *The Badger Afield and Underground* published in 1923, wrote on the subject as follows:

"An amusing anecdote is told in the locality of Hutton-le-Hole concerning a badger drawing test which took place some years ago, and which, as usual, smelt of beer and pigsties. The badger was in the ordinary type of of rectangle wooden box, and the owner of it offered bets of two to one that no dog present could get it out. With becoming bashfulness a ruddy-faced farm labourer, the owner of a long-bodied, long-haired sheep dog whelp stepped up and and accepted the bet. It goes without saying that the badger was not new to the game, and that his owner's confidence was the result of many similar

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meetings.

"The ground was cleared, and the farm labourer introduced his cur to the mouth of the hole, 'ticing' him on with befitting sounds. The cur was not interested, so the man got hold of him and shoved him down the hole, tail first. A howl from the dog signified that the badger had got a good grip, whereupon the youth let go, and the dog shot out of the artificial earth with the badger still fast to his hind-quarters! So the youth won his bet.

"To anyone conversant with the habits and history of this beast, he stands out as a rather pathetic figure; but little is to be gained by dwelling on this unhappy phase of his life. The badger is a friendly and lovable beast. That he is not usually pictured as such is because he is most generally seen under unhappy conditions - perhaps as a cornered and terrified victim, filled with suspicion at his surroundings, and dreading attack. Fortunately, the badger never realises that his case is hopeless. I have known a starving and broken-hearted beast, after days of captivity and misery, to fight as gamely for its life as when first taken from its home, and, so long as a badger lives, its tenacity never wavers no matter how dark the prospects

Digging and terrier work - origins

Terriers - small but strong dogs with keen noses - were originally bred for hunting animals underground (*terra* is Latin for earth, and *terrier* is French for an animal burrow or den). They have long been used for controlling rats, rabbits, and foxes. The terrier is used either to flush out the quarry, or to hold the quarry at bay below ground until the hunters can dig their way down to their victim.

In addition to rats, rabbits and foxes, badgers too have long been hunted by means of digging with terriers. Traditionally, one of three fates has awaited a badger which is dug out: it is killed immediately, or taken away in a sack to be released elsewhere - or baited with dogs.

Digging and terrier work today

Hunt Servants Convicted of Badger Digging.

1984 Quorn hunt earth stopper fined £1,000 for badger digging offences.

1991 Isle of Wight fox hounds huntsman fined £500 for badger digging offences.

1991 Essex and Suffolk fox hounds huntsman fined £500 for badger digging offences.

1992 Enfield Chase fox hounds kennelman convicted of illegally interfering with a badger sett.

1994 Wynnstay fox hounds kennelman jailed for six months for badger digging offences.

1996 York & Ainsty (South) fox hounds terrierman fined £750 for digging badger sett.

1997 South Nottingham fox hounds terrierman convicted of digging for badgers.

NB - This list is by no means exhaustive!

Source: [w080]

Today, terrier work is still widely practised. Most packs of foxhounds have their terriermen who are called upon to use their dogs when foxes take cover below ground.

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The terriers are used to bolt the fox from its hole, or to hold it at bay so that the animal can be dug out and killed. It is interesting to note that many of those convicted of badger digging in Britain have been servants of fox hunts.

There are also many other terrier owners, both town- and country-dwelling, who provide a pest control service for farmers on a voluntary basis, so that they can work their dogs. Terriermen take great pride in the work carried out by their animals, and the more skillful a terrier is at tracking down and bolting, holding or killing its quarry, the more highly it is prized.

Unfortunately, a number of terrier owners take their pride in their dogs' abilities to the extreme. For these people, battle-scarred terriers with reputations as good foxers are macho status symbols. However, it is the badger that is seen as the ultimate test for a working terrier.

There are various Working Terrier Clubs around the country, which in theory urge their members to avoid digging at badger setts. However, the people running such clubs do not always set particularly good examples, as the following quote from a FAQ on an animal rights website shows:

"In 1997, a former Representative of the Fell & Moorland Working Terrier Club was gaoled for four months and banned for keeping all animals for five years for being in possession (including illegally transporting) of a live pregnant badger. The RSPCA believe the badger was to be used for baiting. Files also show several convictions for badger offences where those found guilty have previously held positions of authority within the Fell & Moorland Working terrier Club. Their 1996 list of "approved Representatives" even includes several people who have been found guilty of badger offences in the past." [w080]

Although digging for badgers was made illegal in Britain in 1973, it still goes on. It is particularly prevalent in areas around large town and cities with high rates of unemployment, especially in coal mining districts such as South Wales, Staffordshire and South Yorkshire. In some areas, badger numbers have been decimated by the activities of diggers.

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