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2213 A Canine Tale

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A CANINE TALE

“How does she do that?” This phrase has followed me since childhood due to an uncanny connection I have with our canine friends. For some unknown reason, I have the ability to understand their needs and they mine. It is almost telepathic. Where did this come from and why do I have such a strong bond with these creatures?

When researching my family history I never expected to find an answer to this phenomenon. However, the discovery of my fourth great-grandfather revealed a life that explained exactly where this had come from.

John Peel (c.1776 – 1854) was born in Caldbeck,^{1, 2, 3} a sleepy village in the county of Cumberland in the north-west of England Fig 1. The oldest son of William Peel (1752 – 1828) and Lettice Scott (1759 – 1840),^{4, 5, 6} John and his siblings grew up on the family farm surrounded by horses and dogs. This rural life gave John the opportunity to develop superior horsemanship and to learn how to work the farm dogs. These skills eventually led to a career that was in great demand by the local farmers, as a fox hunter^{7, 8}.



Fig 1 Greenrigg Farm, Caldbeck, birthplace of John Peel in 1776

Though abhorred now^{9, 10}, fox hunting was a normal part of country life. Foxes would attack flocks of sheep, killing and maiming many, severely impacting the livelihood of farmers. Thus fox hunters were in great demand, with those more skilled being called upon regularly, becoming vital to the local community^{11, 12}.

Before he became the legendary fox hunter of the song *D’Ye Ken John Peel*^{13, 14, 15}, John longed for a family. In his twentieth year he met and wooed Mary White (c.1777 – 1859)¹⁶. Sadly, Mary’s mother was not terribly in favour of the proposed union^{17, 18} but this did not stop the couple. They fled to Gretna Green sneaking away at midnight on John’s trusty horse Binsey, to tie the knot as local poet Hugh McKay noted:

*“So light to the croup the fair lady he swung
So light to the saddle before her he sprang!
She is won! We are gone! When Binsey shows heel
They’ll be swift steeds that follow, quoth young Johnny Peel”*¹⁹

John and Mary went on to have thirteen children^{20, 21, 22} establishing their home in nearby Ruthwaite.^{23, 24, 25} To make ends meet, John worked hard to establish his reputation with the local farmers, demonstrating his hunting skill in protecting their flocks from predators. His team of 24 hounds were highly trained and kept not only at his farm, but across a number of adjoining properties, always ready to answer his call. As his reputation grew, John’s prowess was rewarded with the title Master of the Foxhounds.²⁶

Hunts would be conducted at least weekly. To gather his pack of hounds, John would blow on a small hunting horn^{27, 28} and the hounds would come running. One such hound, named Towler, was kept at a farm in nearby Aughtartree and according to local legend *“when Peel came round with his horn, if he was a quarter mile away when he sounded it, Towler was off to him like a shot out of a gun. If that dog had been fastened up in the house it would have gone through the window to be with him.”*²⁹ Such was John’s connection to his hounds, they would break through any barrier to answer his call.

Ruby, Ranter, Ringwood, Bellman, True and Towler^{30, 31} were some of his treasured hounds who seemed to know instinctively what John wanted of them. A hunt would start early in the morning with the gathering of the hounds and horses. Most hunts were conducted on foot as the terrain could be difficult for the horses, thus the relationship between John and his hounds was critical. The hunt could last as long as 12 hours and cross up to 11 parishes over difficult and boggy countryside³².

As John’s reputation grew, increasing crowds of locals would come out to watch the spectacle as soon as he sounded his horn. One young couple at the altar preparing to marry were startled when, upon the sounding of the horn, the parson threw off his surplice and told the couple to come back the next day as he was off to watch the hunt³³. People were keen to witness for themselves the connection between the hounds and their Master.

Horn sounding, dogs barking, horses stamping – this cacophony would signal the start of the hunt. John’s dogs were referred to as a *“rare mongrel pack of hounds”* of all shapes and sizes with a profound loyalty to their Master. Observers noted the keen affection between John and his hounds and the mutual connection between them. If he ever raised his voice to a hound, John could be seen wandering aimlessly over the fields almost in apology for his harsh words³⁴.

As they approached their quarry the communication between Master and hounds was heightened with one observer noting *“he (John) was sure to be found talking to some favourite hound as if it had been a human being”*^{35, 36}. It could be said there was a kind of telepathic communication between them as his dogs understood what was needed at all times during the hunt. It was not unusual for John to be seen talking to his hounds, oblivious to the outside world³⁷.

John spent more than 60 years hunting across the county of Cumberland^{38, 39, 40} and in 1854 at the age of 78 he died from injuries received after falling from a horse. His funeral attracted several thousand people and when the cortege passed the kennels where his hounds were kept, it is said that mournful cries filled the air as his beloved canines expressed their grief^{41, 42, 43, 44}.

Such a palpable connection to these animals has somehow trickled down through the generations. The mystery of how I can sense a dog’s thoughts and they can sense mine may have been solved – an unusual tale about where I’ve come from.

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Fig. 1 Original postcard of Greenrigg Farm, Caldbeck, Cumberland from Author's personal collection