

## History of the Beagle

**Learn about the beagle's history and how the beagle dog breed came into existence.**

Excerpts from Comprehensive Owner's Guide: Beagle

The origin of the Beagle, like that of most other hound breeds, cannot be positively traced; it appears buried in antiquity. In the second century AD, Onomasticon, a Greek dictionary in ten books by Iulius Pollux, mentions the dog being used by man for hunting purposes about 1300 BC. The ancient Greek author Xenophon made references in his writings of about 450 BC to small hounds used to hunt hare on foot. While no formal name was given to these small hounds, they were undoubtedly the prognosticators of the dog we have come to know today as the Beagle.

Early man hunted animals for survival itself but, through the centuries, hunting evolved from a means to sustain life into a sport. The landed gentry and nobility of England, as early as the fourteenth century, participated in blood sports as a social activity. They used horses and large and small hounds, along with small terriers, in the pursuit of deer, fox, badger and hare.

Selection for desired physical characteristics and mental traits to suit a purpose is how the various purebred dog breeds came into being. In prehistoric times, the breeder was the caveman looking for a dog whose basic instincts were strong, and he used the best of these dogs to assist him in finding and catching food. Later, the breeder was the farmer, who found that keeping a hardy and energetic dog around helped keep meat on the family's table. The caveman and, much later, the farmer both followed the dogs on foot.

Later, when the Beagle was kept by the British aristocracy, stockmen were employed and it was their job to make the selection of stock. The aristocracy, having the wealth to do so, kept large numbers of hounds together in packs; the evenness of type in these packs was highly regarded. The terrain varied from county to county throughout England and so the desired type varied from pack to pack to serve the challenges of the local hunt. The groups of wealthy sportsmen usually followed the hounds on horseback.

By repeatedly selecting desirable characteristics and traits to suit the purpose at hand, the breeder, whether the caveman, the farmer, the stockman, etc., fixed type within the dogs and these small hounds eventually were refined and bred with some consistency.

During the Middle Ages in England, there were two varieties of hound said to be quite numerous, known as Northern Hounds and Southern Hounds. There also were hounds of a larger type used for trailing deer, probably the Foxhound, and others of a smaller type used for trailing hare, thought to be Harriers and Beagles.

Little has been written to describe the Northern Hound but William Youatt, in his book *The Dog*, published in 1846, mentions "the shallow-flewed, more contracted lip of the Northern dogs" and claimed that this type was the swiftest. There is also mention of North-Country Beagles by seventeenth-century writers, including William Somerville (1675–1742), who refer to this dog as being fast and more slender than the Cotswold Beagle. Perhaps the Northern Hound and the North-Country Beagle are one and the same; it would seem so.

So what breeds of dog were put together to produce the Beagle? Some believe that the breed resulted from a crossing of the Harrier with the old South of England or Southern Hound. In some instances, they were referred to as "little Harriers."

Most scholars seem to support the theory that the modern Beagle came down for the most part from the Harrier. Selection for the smaller dog, litter after litter, over and over again, fixed the size— what was once called a small Foxhound or a small Harrier is known today as the Beagle.

During the seventeenth century, Beagles were mentioned by many different but similar names: Northern Hounds and Southern Hounds; Rough-Coated and Smooth-Coated Beagles. The Southern Hound was described by Gervase Markham as having "a longer nose, ears and flews more shallow, his general appearance slender and greyhound-like. They had good noses and were fast but in respect of mouth they were a little sharp, with no real depth of tone or music." William Youatt, in his book *The Dog*, agreed with Stonehenge (J. H. Walsh, a noted dog authority of the Victorian era) and felt that the Harrier crossed with the old Southern Hound was the combination that produced the Beagle.

In *Cynographia Britannica*, published about 1800, there are descriptions of Southern Beagles and Northern Beagles. The

small hounds were described as varieties generally distinguished by the parts of the country in which they were bred, which lends support to the quote credited to William Somerville at about the same time, "A different Hound for every different chase; select with judgement."

Northern Beagles were commonly wire-haired, straightlimbed and better formed in their shoulders and haunches, and endured bad weather and lengthy exercise better than the Southern Beagle. William Somerville described the Cotswold Beagle, whom he credited as producing some of his best Harriers when crossed with the old Southern Hound.

The author Beckford wrote in about 1750 of Fox-Beagles and described them as being exceptionally lively in temperament as well as fleet of foot. He records that he crossed his Harriers with them to give more dash and drive. Also mentioned are Rough-Coated Beagles and Wire-Haired Beagles, who almost certainly are the same, since both were found mainly in Devon in the South of England and in nearby Wales. William Youatt claimed the Wire-Haired Beagle was the stronger, stouter and better variety. Those familiar with both Fox Terriers and Beagles realize that there is cause to believe that Fox Terrier blood exists in present-day Beagles, perhaps the source of the Beagle's legendary stubbornness.

Kerry Beagles are also mentioned repeatedly by scholars and were quite different from the general idea of what a Beagle should look like: upstanding, rather lightly built, black-and-tan and in many ways resembling the Bloodhound. This breed was said to have existed in Southern Ireland for hundreds of years, and the Ryan family of Scarteen claims to have owned them since 1735. They were not seen in England until the early twentieth century. Some think the presentday Beagle gets his keen nose from the Kerry Beagle, who was in color and general appearance a miniature Bloodhound.

Stonehenge, in his *Manual of British Sports* (1861), gave the varieties of Beagles as follows: "First, the medium Beagle, which may be either heavy and Southern-like or light and Northern-like; second, the dwarf or lap-dog Beagle; third the Fox Beagle, and fourth the rough or Terrier Beagle."

Through the centuries, British royalty has favored the Beagle. During the reign of Henry VIII, Beagles are said to have been popular. There exists written evidence of Beagles during the reign of Henry's daughter, Elizabeth I (1558–1603), as well as pictures that depicted members of her Court hunting with Beagles. There is also a portrait of Queen Elizabeth I with a Beagle at her side. Interestingly, the Beagles in Elizabethan times were very small. Described as dwarfs, Pygmy Beagles or Pocket Beagles, they ranged in height from 8 to 10 inches at the top of the shoulder and were small enough to be occasionally carried to the chase in a pair of panniers on the horse's back.

Another royal who favored the Beagle is King James I (1566–1625), who enjoyed the sport of hunting the hare with his pack of Beagles. A century later, during the reign of King George IV (1762–1830), English Beagles were described as rough-coated or smooth-coated, with King George preferring the smooth-coated Beagle. While Prince of Wales, he enjoyed hunting with his pack of dwarf Beagles. These very small Beagles did not enjoy popularity much past this period.

Toward the end of the nineteenth century, organized dog activities began. The aristocracy, long committed to the hunt, owned packs of Foxhounds, Harriers and Beagles. They hunted mostly on horseback, chasing fox with the larger Foxhounds and Harriers, and hare with the smaller Beagle. "Beagling" is described as the art of hunting the hare in its natural surroundings with a pack of small hounds that rely solely on their noses to work out the intricate paths the hare has taken. Beagling became popular with the commoner, too, since the smaller Beagle could be followed on foot.

England's Kennel Club was formed in 1873 and dog shows were then held on a regular basis. The first recorded mention of Beagles being shown in England was at the Tunbridge Wells Dog Society Show on August 21 and 22, 1884, with eight or nine Beagles entered. There was a separate class for Beagles of any size, and the best hound under 14 inches in this class was presented with a silver cup and a hunting horn.

The Beagle Club of England was formed in 1890, held its first show in 1896 and published its first Year Book in 1897. World War I (1914–1918) stopped much of the Beagle activities, but interest increased again during the two successive decades. World War II (1939–1945) again interfered, and Viscount Chelmsford is credited with restarting the club.

The UK's Association of Masters of Harriers and Beagles was founded in 1891. The association's members were limited to those who were keeping, or had kept, registered packs that regularly hunt the hare. The object of both clubs was to further the interest of the Beagles. In the early 1950s, there was a great deal of renewed interest in the Beagle that carries through to this day. Since 1962, a number of regional Beagle clubs have formed around the British Isles.

Today, Beagles have classes at most of the Open Shows in the United Kingdom and at all of the General Championship Shows that come under the rules and regulations of The Kennel Club. Entries are large, often 100 or more, and sometimes twice that number.

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The Beagle Lineage

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