

How Low Can You Go?

The clownish Basset Hound is serious about scent.

Kim Campbell Thornton

Who doesn't recognize the Basset Hound? From its early beginnings some 1,400 years ago in what is now Belgium, the dwarfed hound with the large head, long velvety ears and short legs has become a pop-culture icon. Sad eyes notwithstanding, the Basset Hound is a good-natured clown with a distinct sense of humor, a keen nose that rules its actions and a pleading gaze that it uses to good effect when caught breaking the rules.

The Basset descends from dogs developed at the seventh-century abbey of St. Hubert in the Ardennes forest, where Abbot Hubert – now the patron saint of hunters, archers and forest rangers – was fond of hunting. He spent much of his time developing a new strain of hound with powerful scenting ability. They became known as St. Hubert Hounds, and were prized throughout France and eventually England, where they arrived along with William the Conqueror in 1066.

One line of the St. Hubert Hounds became the Bloodhounds of today, but another line produced short-legged, slow-moving dogs that became the preferred dog of choice for hunters on foot in search of small game. The packs of dogs drove rabbits and hare from dense brush into open ground, where they could be seen by the hunters.

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