



Jules Hudson

COUNTRY ESCAPE

With his two labradors, Teddy and Iolo, sat by his feet, Jules muses over our relationship with man's best friend as he looks forward to Ludlow Dog Day 2016

These days it's hard to avoid becoming a statistic. In the modern hi-tech world we're studied and appraised in virtually every area of our lives by advertising companies, on-line browsers and of course Her Majesty's Government. Nor is Her Majesty exempt from study; she's part of the statistic that says one in four of us now owns at least one of our nearly nine million canine companions here in the UK.

The role of the dog throughout human history has been profound, and I often try to picture that moment thousands of years ago when the first hound found its curiosity in a person reciprocated to the point where it became what we describe as 'domesticated'. Was there a conversation involved, or was it a simple exchange of meaningful grunts and gestures that brought the two together? Did our human forebears give it a name, and if so what might it have been and where did it happen? Chances are this pivotal moment in time occurred thousands of miles away in the near East or Africa, but it set in motion a relationship that has endured over as many years, and has spread to every corner of the globe and every continent. It was after all during the various famous races to the poles, both North and South, that dogs were used in the most inhospitable environments to pull sleds and explorers to the farthest known points on the globe.

Exploration and our quest for knowledge has partnered our growing understanding of our faithful friends. Regardless of specific languages, our ability to communicate with dogs knows no limits. As a dog owner myself and de-facto father to our two labradors, Teddy and Iolo, I can well understand the unique bond so many dog fans relish. Habit, respect and love are just some of the factors that can create a relationship so full of trust and devotion.

Throughout history, the dog has been the constant companion of kings, queens, and everyday folk like us. During times of conflict, the dog has taken its place on many front lines to act as sentry, messenger and, in more recent years, explosives detective, and have saved thousands of lives doing so. At home, the guide dog illustrates just how much of an equal a well-trained dog can prove when challenged with navigating the hazards and obstacles most of us face in our day-to-day

lives. Increasingly, dogs are also sharing with us not just their eyes but their ears as well, acting as hearing dogs, whilst a handful more are beginning to show an aptitude for detecting devastating illnesses.

When Iolo was just a pup, I took him to a fete in Brecon I was asked to open at a care home. Sadly, Alzheimer's and dementia were common among many residents I met there. Up to that point, Iolo was a relatively timid young man. Yet on that day I was astonished at how, without any coaxing or encouragement, he'd sit quietly by the most challenged of patients, many of whom had long since lost the ability to really move or speak, but who nonetheless welcomed the chance to see and stroke him. I'm quite sure Iolo knew they were unwell and that a few minutes with him would lift their spirits.

This month we'll open another event which has become a part not just of our calendar, but of our region as a whole. In the serene surroundings of Stokesay Court, we'll gather with several thousand other dog lovers and their animals for what has become a landmark festival. For the last three years, The Ludlow Dog Day has championed our love affair with dogs of all shapes and sizes, whilst raising many thousands of pounds for good causes, from hospices to charities that train both guide dogs and helping dogs. And this year is set to break all previous records. So if you're free, and you fancy revelling in our special relationship with man's best friend, I – along with my wife Tania, baby Jack, Teddy and Iolo – will look forward to seeing you there. But don't expect us to be the most well-trained team. Our dogs, like their forebears, still have a mind of their own with characters to match, something I wouldn't change for the world. Despite thousands of years of training, thankfully dogs aren't yet robots, nor do they care about statistics.

"Come on boys...who's ready for a walk?" 🐾

• For further details on Ludlow Dog Day 2016, turn to p. 10

JULES HUDSON was born in Essex but stayed in Wales after studying archeology at Lampeter University. He has worked in television since 1996 and is a member of the *Countryfile* team, but is best-known as the leading face of *Escape To The Country*. He moved back across the Border in 2012, to Herefordshire.

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