

For ages, hunting has been enjoyed in its various forms and multiplicity of rules and... dogs. Sometimes a working dog is a jack of all trades, sometimes a specialist. The Otterhound is one of the specialists, developed solely for hunting another hunter: the otter.

History of Hunting

The Otter Hunt and Otterhounds

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Full Cry

My journey through the history of otter hunting began with a stone in the cemetery of Elsdon in Northumberland (U.K.). It reads: "Erected by a few friends to the memory of John Gallon, who was drowned while hunting his hounds in the River Lugar, Ayrshire, July 16th 1873, aged 59 years."

An article by David Courtney McClure in the July 17, 1873, *Ayr Advertiser* told the story. "Yesterday morning the pack of hounds belonging to J. Gallon, Esq., near Newcastle, met at Barskimming House at 7.30. A considerable number of lovers of the sport mustered, and a start was made under the guidance of the well-known and highly appreciated master, Mr. John Gallon. The hounds at once gave tongue, and went at a rattling pace up the Lugar for about a mile above Barskimming House, where a precipitous rock on either side of the stream, with an extremely narrow border below on which to pass, renders following the bed of the river almost impossible. Here



*The Otter Speared - 1844
by Sir Edwin Landseer (1802-73)
About 20 Otterhounds are depicted,
but a pack could consist of 40 or more.*

Mr. Gallon must have endeavoured to pass, but the other followers (none of whom were at the time in sight of him) left the bed of the stream lower down, and through plantations took the nearest course to Slatehole Bridge, to await his arrival with the hounds. His non-appearance, however, at the expected moment created no great surprise, as it was thought he had either got before his friends or taken a nearer way to a bend further up the river (the hounds being in full cry), but on their going about a mile further on, they fancied he could not have gone so far without their hearing his horn, or some other symptom, and resolved to turn back in search of him. On arriving at Slatehole Bridge they learned that no trace of him had been seen, and after sending scouts up and down the river unsuccessfully, their most anxious fears were aroused. A raft made of a cart and ladders was constructed, and a grappling iron procured from a smithy near at hand, and after about an hour's dragging the body was found about 150 yards below the bridge. The unfortunate

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The manuscript Livre de Chasse (1387-9) by French nobleman Gaston de Foix (Phoebus), contains a depiction of the otter hunt – two hunters along a stream in which an otter swims, the dogs on the bank and the spears at the ready.

gentleman had thus lost his life while hunting and cheering on his hounds at the sport he so dearly loved. We understand that he could not swim. Mr. Gallon has for the last 40 years been well-known and justly esteemed by all lovers of otter hunting as a thorough-going and most energetic amateur master and huntsman, and his loss will be sincerely regretted by all sportsmen on both sides of the Tweed. He was in his 61st year, and leaves a widow to lament his untimely fate.”

Both the memorial stone and newspaper article exemplify the otter hunt in England in the 18th and 19th centuries.

Lutra lutra

The otter (*Lutra lutra*), a.k.a. European otter or fish otter, is a member of the weasel family. Its coat is dark and dense, the skull is flat and its most striking anatomical feature



*On the Scent by John Sargent Noble (1848-98)
The dogs have located the otter and are notifying the hunters with their typical barking – “wonderful music.”*



*Charmer, owned by J.C. Carrick
of the famous Carlisle Otterhounds.
From Hugh Dalziel, British Dogs, 1889*

is the powerful webbed feet, very useful for swimming. Male otters are called dogs or boars, females are bitches or sows, and their offspring are called pups.

There has been a long, worldwide history of otter pelts being worn. In China, it was standard for royalty to wear robes made from them. People who were financially high in status also wore them. Otter tails were made into hats and belts, and children’s mittens.

Otters were hunted in Britain for their pelts from at least the Middle Ages, although it may have begun well before then. Early hunting methods included darts, arrows, nets and snares but later, traps were set on land and guns were used.

Otters have also been hunted using dogs, specifically the Otterhound. From 1958 to 1963, 11 otter hunts in England and Wales killed 1,065 otters among them. In such hunts, the hunters notched their poles after every kill. The penis bone was the prize trophy hunters would take from the otters, to wear as a tie pin. (Wikipedia)

Otterhound

This type of hound is so old that we have to guess at its earliest history, which probably lies in France. Long-lasting and frequent contacts and conflict between medieval France and England – English claims to the French throne date from Edward III in 1328 and lasted until 1801 – resulted in a busy traffic in working gun dogs.

From the 18th century, the history of the Otterhound is well documented with information about owners, breeders and packs.

Without any doubt, the most important ancestor of the Otterhound was the now-extinct Southern Hound that was present in England until the end of the 19th century. It is assumed that the modern Otterhound was developed out of crossings with the Bloodhound and rough-haired terriers, griffons and Harriers. For its part, the Otterhound is an ancestor of the Airedale Terrier, which inherited the Otterhound’s exceptional nose and love of water.

The Otterhound’s rough, water-resistant double coat and webbed feet underline its work of hunting a water animal, the otter.

Otter-dogges and Otter Hounds

Nowhere in the world was the otter hunt as intensively practiced and documented as it was in England. There were times when otter hunting was on the same level as stag hunting and fox hunting. Initially, the otter hunt was a necessity for vermin control because fish was a dietary mainstay. From the Middle Ages, otter pelts were a valued commodity.

Otterhounds were usually owned by those who could afford to hunt with a pack. There exist many documents and books about



Painting by George Wright (1850-1942)
Note the dogs' beautiful coat color.

game laws, the buying and selling of Otterhound packs, and the maintenance and care of the dogs.

Otter hunting is always mentioned in hunting literature; however, the dogs were called Otter-dogges and only recently Otterhounds.

In the well-known medieval book *The Master of Game* (1413) by Edward, 2nd Duke of York, the otter was described as common enough to be hunted on a large scale, to keep their numbers down.

The 19th century was the peak of English otter hunting, with 18 to 20 packs active in Britain. Between 1870 and 1890, 704 otters were killed by Geoffrey Hill's Hawkstone Otterhound pack consisting of 25 couples, 50 hounds. The best-trained Otterhound pack during the period 1829-1870 was owned by James Lomax of Clayton Hill. Lomax described the otter hunt in detail in his diary, published in 1910. A recent authority is Capt. John Bell-Irving, Master of the Dumfriesshire Hunt.

Vermin

The earliest mention of hounds used for hunting otters was about 1200 with the pack of King John of England (1166-1216); John's father, Henry II, probably hunted otter as early as 1170. One of the sources for these early Otterhounds may have been Norman hounds – the St. Hubert or Talbot – brought to England after the Norman invasion in 1066. The St. Hubert or Talbot Hound may be the foundation of the breed that became known as the Southern Hound.

In July 1212, King John sent commands "...to provide necessities for Ralph, the otter huntsman, and Godfrey, his fellow, with two men and two horses and twelve

otter hounds as long as they find employment in capturing otters in your shire."

In other words, this area was to be cleared of otters, then seen as vermin. In the days of King John it was forbidden to catch otters other than by hunting with hounds. There were more bans and orders: millers were obliged to stop the watermills during the otter hunt, to adjust the water level to the hunters' requirements.

King Edward II (1287-1324) owned 12 Otterhounds and employed two "feeders." In the 14th century, Edward III (1312-77) hunted with "water dogs" in the rivers of north Wales. William Melbourne was the King's otter hunter under Henry IV (1367-1413).

Elizabeth I (1533-1603) owned a pack of Otterhounds and was the first "Lady Master of Otter Hounds."

Simple and Effective

The manuscript *Livre de Chasse* (1387-9) by French nobleman Gaston de Foix (Gaston Phoebus), contains a depiction of the otter hunt – a colorful but simple image of two hunters along a stream in which an otter swims. The dogs are on the bank and the spears are ready.

There is a charter – a permit – dating from the 16th century and given to Thomas Horden, master of the royal otterhounds, by Henry VIII (1491-1547). Therein the people were instructed to cooperate with Thomas Horden should he ask for help when hunting otters.

In his book *Of Englishe Dogges* (1576), Dr. Johannes Caius wrote about the sort of dogs that were used in the otter hunt – the Bloodhound, for example, a breed that excels at otter hunting. Caius's colleague, George Tuberville, gave in his *Booke of Hunting* (1575/6) information about the simple and effective method used by hunters: the otters were hunted down by dogs and the hunters used a trident spear to kill them in the water. To keep the otters from swimming to deeper water, dogs and hunters drove them into trap-nets.

"The earliest illustrations of hounds used to hunt the otter were in French documents of 1338 and 1378. These are among the earliest illustrations of any kind of hunting hound in France, but none were rough-coated, clearly. The hound closest to what came to be the Otterhound was the lymer, or lyme-hound, a rather large, heavily-built hound. The lymer was not a breed as such but was probably chosen for its 'nose' from among the early Norman Hounds; they were used for tracking game, not chasing game. At some point the St. Hubert was the preferred lymer due to its sensitive nose." (Source: otterhounduniversity.com)



Terriers were also used for hunting otters.
This studio photo dating from 1923
shows William Carruthers,
three Border Terriers and the prey.

Merciless and Horrifying

In 1591, Sir Thomas Cockaine

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published *A Short Treatise of Hunting, compiled for the delight of Noble men and Gentlemen*, one of the earliest books written on hunting in Britain. Cockaine stated: "Your huntsman early in the morning before he bring foorth your houndes, must goe to the water; and seeke for the new swaging of an Otter, & in the mud or grauell finde out the sealing of his foote, so shall he perceiue perfectly whether hee goe vp in the water or downe: which done, you must take your houndes to the place where he lodged the night before; and cast your traylors off vpon the trayle you thinke best; keeping your whelps still in the couples: for so must they be entred. Then must there be on either side of the water two men with Otter speares to strike him, if it bee a great water: But if it be a small water you must forbear to strike him, for the better making of your houndes."

Books about otter hunting were published not only in England but also in Germany. In 1894, dog fancier and artist Ludwig Beckmann wrote: "It is wonderful to see a whole pack of barking and swimming dogs, chasing the otters." Not everybody was enthusiast about the sport. In 1995, Dr. Hans Räber stated that hunting methods in England were merciless and horrifying.

Rough-haired French Hounds

However the sport was practiced in Great Britain, there was no special breed involved. After the Renaissance, various types such as terriers, Bloodhounds and griffons were used. The now-extinct Southern Hound was frequently used, and forerunners of the Airedale Terrier were good otter hunters.

In 1611, Gervaise Markham (1568-1637) noted in *Countrey Contentments* the existence of a white or black spotted dog that hunted otters.

A cross between a Southern Hound and a water spaniel was mentioned in the *Hunting Directory* (1826). Unfortunately, the author did not mention when the cross happened and what kind of water spaniel was used.

Rawdon B. Lee wrote in *Modern*



An old photograph taken in France after an otter hunt. In 1972, the otter became a protected species in France.

Almost every famous British dog painter depicted the otter hunt. John Emms, Sir Edwin Landseer, Philip Reinagle, John Sargent Noble, Colin Graeme, Edwin Armfield, Joseph Appleyard, George Wright, Walter Hunt, and Alfred Duke are some examples.

these dogs were identical to Waldron Hill's own Otterhounds. Apparently the French dogs suited the English because in 1889 a French Griffon Vendéen bitch was crossbred with a Bloodhound.

Dogs (1897) that it was assumed the Otterhound was a cross between a Welsh Harrier, a Southern Hound and a terrier. Lee himself was of the opinion that the Southern Hound was an old variety of the Bloodhound.

In 1869, two rough-haired French hounds were acquired at a dog show in Islington by a Master of Otterhounds. It's notable that in 1870, French Count Couteulx de Canteleu, a fancier and owner of French griffons, presented some Chiens de Bresse as a gift to Mr. Waldron Hill, who was the "Master of otter-hounds" in East Lothian (Scotland). According to experts,

The result was Boatman, a rough-haired black-and-tan dog that was registered as one of the best Otterhounds in the Dumfriesshire pack.

A Dangerous Opponent

By the 19th century, Otterhound packs would do the whole job: track down, pursue, and eventually kill the otters, but in small shallow rivers hunters still used the otter spear.

Hundreds of depictions were made of the otter hunt – medieval depictions, 17th-century engravings and 19th-century paintings. Striking are the many depictions of heroic battles between otters

and dogs – not surprisingly, because a beaten-up otter can be a dangerous opponent.

The Field Book (1833) describes otters defending themselves: "In 1796 near Bridgenorth, on the river Worse, four Otters were killed, one stood three, another four hours before the dogs, and was scarcely a minute out of side."

Wonderful Music

"One of the most influential early otterhound packs was that of Squire James Lomax of Lancashire whose offspring found their way into many English and Welsh packs. These Otterhounds were predominantly rough-coated and piebald and may have contained a good bit of the Lancashire or West Country Harrier. These Harriers were closely related



The Dumfriesshire pack of Capt. John Bell-Irving consisted of Bloodhounds, French griffons, rough-haired Welsh Harriers, Otterhounds and crossbreeds. In 1891 this pack had 15 couples i.e. 30 dogs. The photograph was taken at the end of the 19th century.

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to the Welsh Harrier and even the Southern Hound, as may be suggested by the illustration in Lomax's hunting diary." (Source: otterhounduniversity.com)

The Carlisle Otter Hounds began formally in 1863, but there are records of a meet with another pack in the 1830s. It was one of the best packs in Great Britain, hunted by Mr. J.C. Carrick. The owner not only worked his pack, but also showed it and the pack was trained to perfection. Ron Black and Jean Gidman wrote a book entitled *Deep-mouthed Music* about the first 50 years of the Carlisle pack (1863-1913). In 1869, the then-Master declared that "the hunt would never use a spear and would rely on the skill and fitness of the hounds." (Source: *Lakeland Hunting Memories*)

By 1977, fewer than 10 Otterhound packs – mostly Foxhounds crossed with Otterhounds to improve the speed – were active in England. Their barking when hunting was described as wonderful music.

In 1978, otter hunting was banned in England and Wales, not because of opposition to hunting, but due to the fast decline of otters caused by river pollution, different fishing methods, and traffic. After the ban, attempts were made to save the Otterhound from decline; especially the Master of the Kendall pack did his very best.

Otter hunting is not allowed anymore so there must be found



The Otter Surrounded by Otterhounds,
by Edwin Armfield (1840-75)

other work for the Otterhound. Drag hunting and "clean boot" are sports in which a pack of hounds follows either an artificial scent or the scent of a human over a predetermined route. Drag hunting was developed in the U.K. in the early 1800s as a means of testing the speed and agility of hounds by laying a scent trail over a specified distance. (*Team Fox, The human sport of drag hunting.*)

The Otterhound is now on The Kennel Club's list of vulnerable breeds. After the prey (the otter) and the Otterhound, the hunter has become a species threatened with extinction as well.

Something About the Otterhound in America

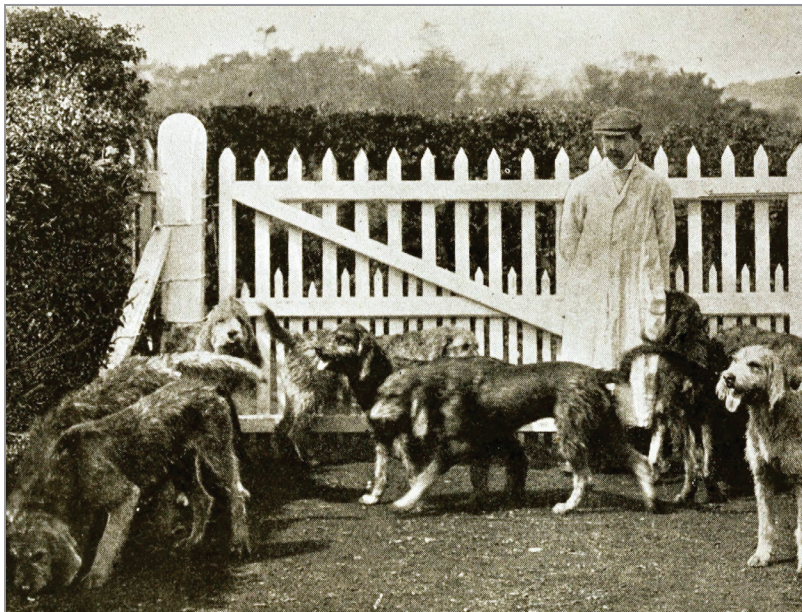
The Otterhound Club of America Inc. (OHCA) was founded in 1960 and recognized by the American Kennel Club as the official parent club of the breed in the United States. "The main objective of the Club is to protect and advance the interests of the breed by advocating responsible ownership and breeding of Otterhounds and by encouraging sportsmanlike competition at dog shows and events for which the Club is eligible under the rules and regulations of the AKC." With fewer than 800 Otterhounds worldwide, they are more rare than the Giant Panda and considered one of the most endangered dog breeds. (Source: OHCA)

The first Otterhounds in the United States arrived in the early 20th century. Six Otterhounds were exhibited at an AKC show in 1907. The first AKC-registered Otterhound was Hartland Statesman from England, in 1910. Dr. Hugh Moat bred the first litter with Bessie's Courageous and Bessie's Countess. In this litter were the first AKC champions, in 1941.

Only four to seven litters a year are born in the United States and Canada. Apart from these countries, there are breeders in New Zealand, Switzerland, the Scandinavian countries and the Netherlands. There is usually a waiting list of people wanting to purchase an Otterhound. Apart from the AKC's Otterhound page (akc.org/dog-breeds/otterhound), there is another page with interesting information about the breed in the U.S.: akc.org/about/archive/guide-collections/otterhound-collection/.

A retired bookseller and publisher, Ria Hörter is a dog writer from The Netherlands. She is the contributing editor of the leading Dutch National Dog Magazine Onze Hond (Our Dogs) and works for the Welsh Springer Spaniel Club of the Netherlands of which she was one of the founders. She served the club for 34 years, as secretary and chairman and is a Honorary Life Member of this breed club. She was nominated twice, and a finalist in the 2009 Annual Writing Competition of the Dog Writers Association of America, for her articles in Dogs in Canada.

On April 12, 2014 she was awarded the Dutch Cynology Gold Emblem of Honour. The award was presented by the Dutch Kennel Club.



By 1977, fewer than 10 Otterhound packs were active in England. A pack of Otterhounds would contain mostly Foxhounds crossed with Otterhounds to improve speed. (photo taken in 1908)