



A Home Without a Dog is Just a House.

First of all, let me thank all of you for your kind words, e mails, cards and letters about Max. He was a very good dog and a great character. You may be interested to know, that, if all goes to plan, I shall shortly be bringing home a new spaniel puppy, whom I shall name Tommy – just as soon as he is old enough to leave his mother, brother and six sisters. I hope you will soon be seeing him around and he may well be writing for this magazine.

In the mean time, I thought you might like to hear about some of the other dogs I have had since I became a clergyman. When I was curate at Orpington, back in 1980, I very much wanted a dog, but I felt that it was not possible to have one as I was out so much, sometimes having to stay away overnight. Dogs really love company and it is not fair to leave them for long periods on their own. I suffered a number of burglaries, however, and the police were not at that time treating domestic robbery as a priority, and my father urged me to get a dog, promising to look after him when I was away – a promise which I think he sometimes later regretted (though only a little bit). I enquired at the pet shop and they didn't have any dogs, but they knew of a family who had found a very young puppy abandoned in the woods. They had named him Blue, taken him home and looked after him, but he had become too much for them to manage when he got bigger. I took Blue off their hands. He was a spaniel type dog and adorable as they all are. Also mischievous. One Saturday afternoon I came in to discover that he had managed to get the Sunday joint out of the refrigerator and had made a start on it. My guests the next day and I had to share what was left. I didn't tell them that Blue had had first bite until the meal was over. Poor Blue. I did not have him very long. The people who found him had not been able to have him injected. I did, but it was too late and he must already have contracted the parvo virus of which he died.

Soon after, a friend and I went to some kennels where they took in strays. Believe it or not, we walked about ten miles in the pouring rain to this rather unprepossessing establishment. I realise now that it was a risk. We weren't shown where the dogs were kept, but it was all very dirty and muddy. I asked for a medium sized male and they led out a very thin springer spaniel, on a lead so poor that it would not survive the journey home. We took him back to Orpington by train, naming him Ben, as we passed near the place where I had lived as a small child and loved to ride on the back of our neighbour's dog also called Ben. Ben was so hungry that he tried to eat the chewing gum on the train floor, raided the biscuit bins in the pet shop at the station, and eyed up the guinea pigs alarmingly. We got him home and he proved to be a very friendly and devoted dog, perhaps too much so.

Next morning, I decided to leave him indoors for half an hour or so while I went to church. When I returned, the house was empty. Because he could not bear to be alone, he had jumped out of an upstairs window. He was now unharmed in a neighbour's shed. So now I had a guard dog who wouldn't stay in the house on his own. Well he did learn to, but mostly he came with me. I soon found that most people welcome dogs. The people I took him to visit would feed him biscuits and give him milk and tea to drink. There were people who used to come up to him in the street, people I didn't know, and speak to him. One poor woman with a similar looking dog was accused by some children of having stolen Ben. He visited schools and sheltered accommodation and often came to church and to various meetings. He happily travelled by car, bus and train. Once, when we were walking together, he got on a bus by himself and I had to ask the driver to wait while I got him back! He enjoyed many visits to public houses, where he sometimes drank beer from the ash trays. One night, when I hadn't taken him, I found myself locked out as he had put the bolt on and I was the one who had to climb in an upstairs window.

He loved playing football with the church youth club and any activity involving playing with children. He really clung to me. He would walk safely at my side without his lead. We went running together, covering many miles in the days when I too was fit. We ran in the woods around Orpington and the lanes in the surrounding countryside. When we moved to Ramsgate, we ran on the beach and he would also come in swimming with me in the sea. I don't think he really liked being out of his depth, but he loved splashing in

water – garden ponds, the lake in the park and the sea. When there was snow on the beach, he would run into the sea and come out with ice in his fur. It didn't seem to bother him. Ben loved fetching sticks and stones. If you threw a pebble on a beach, he could find the very same stone among all the millions of others and bring it back. When I cut the grass, he would drop sticks in front of the mower to make me throw them for him. When I threw weeds onto the compost heap, he would bring them back to me, even stingers.

He really hated being parted from me, however. He would jump a six foot gate, rather than be left alone in the garden, and, if I wanted to go out without him in the car, I used to have to take him for a little ride in it, park it round the corner, and then go back for it, when he had forgotten where it was. I don't know how old Ben was when he died of heart disease. I don't think he was very old, but he had had a very full life, packed with fun. Moreover, the possibility that he might be at home proved enough to deter the burglars.

A very short time after Ben died, and still living at Ramsgate, I went into town to pay some money into the church account. A few doors away from the bank was a pet shop with some black puppies in the window, cross collie and labrador. I bought one and a friend bought his brother, Gyp. Mine was Bobby, whom many of you will remember. He too had a very full life, lots of long walks at Ramsgate and, from 1987, in the beautiful countryside around here. He too loved to come running with me. If I went out running without him, he would turn his face to the wall in disgust and ignore me when I came in. When he became old, however, that changed. He would get in his basket and lie down just as soon as he saw me in my running shorts. Like Ben, Bobby was a frequent visitor in parishioners' homes, schools, sheltered accommodation and, of course, church. He made lots and lots of friends in the parish and further afield. Like Ben, he had his "clients" who would try to tempt him with biscuits and tea. Bobby was fussier than Ben, however, and would lead people on to make him tea just as he liked it, with plenty of sugar and milk, and then refuse to drink it. Unlike, Ben, he had never gone without.

Bobby very often came on holiday with us as a family and had lots of walks and runs on the beaches around Bognor, Bournemouth and Poole, and, once, Newquay, though he didn't particularly like the water and thought that the game of fetch was a waste of time. Those of you who remember Bobby will remember what a naturally good dog he was. He never made a fuss about anything and was generally obedient, much more placid than my spaniels. Bobby lived to be nearly 15 and he too enjoyed a good life with lots of fun and love.

It does sadden me, however, when I think that we couldn't do now what gave us so much joy in the past. The regulatory regime has dramatically tightened over the last thirty years and things like taking your dog on the beach or into certain establishments, which were formerly regarded as harmless fun, are now banned or regulated. Bobby was not as free as Ben. Max was less free than Bobby and, no doubt, Tommy will face more restrictions still. It's not only dogs, but we human beings as well whose lives are increasingly hemmed in with seemingly endless rules. From well-meaning, but over zealous, health and safety and political correctness to downright killjoy jobsworthery, bureaucrats and politicians are taking away our personal freedoms. We might live longer in the cocoons the bureaucrats are spinning for us, but what happened to all the fun in life? I'd rather be a butterfly than a chrysalis, even if there's a greater risk of being eaten by a bird or blown away in a storm. An important part of being human is to take responsibility. If all our responsibility is taken away from us by the state, our lives are impoverished; we are robots or puppets whose strings are in the hands of our masters, the bureaucrats. We cannot, however, take responsibility unless we are free to be irresponsible. That freedom is in itself a risk, but without risk, there is no freedom.

Max was thirteen when he died. There are many memories of him too, from puppyhood almost up to the present – his determination to do what he wanted, the strength of his character, his loving nature. I won't say any more about him just now. Most of knew him or at least knew all about him from these articles. He won't be forgotten. I am very much looking forward to sharing Tommy's life with you. I'll see that he has a lot of fun and I'm sure he'll bring me much joy too. Roger.