

The History of The Abyssinian Cat Club

By Dr. Margaret Frayne, breeder of Abyssinians and Somalis under the “Mycene” prefix

It says something for the appeal of the Abyssinian cat that its devotees have supported a breed club for over seventy years. But this is only part of the story. The Abyssinian as such has been in existence for nearly a century and a half though it would not have become a true breed without the foresight of Major E S Woodiwiss and his father who founded the Club in 1929 with its principal object “The promotion of the pure breeding of the Abyssinian Cat”.

ORIGINS

The tabby gene which gives the Aby its unique ticked coat, is dominant to the other forms of tabby, and in conjunction with the agouti gene, will mask every other colour and coat pattern except white spotting and silver. Inevitably therefore the early Abyssinians were elegant and striking mongrels, producing all sorts of different coloured kittens, including longhairs. Without the Abyssinian Cat Club this state of affairs would have continued, for it is notoriously difficult to clear recessive genes from a breed with a dominant phenotype.

Where the gene for ticked pattern came from in the first place is still something of a mystery, though it is undoubtedly more common amongst feral cats in the Middle and Far East than it is in Europe. If H C Brooke, a founding Vice-President of the Club, could write in 1930: “It is with genuine regret that I have to state that it has been impossible to discover any really satisfactory facts regarding the history of this beautiful and interesting breed”, we have little chance, seventy-odd years on, of uncovering the breed’s origins with any certainty.

One thing we do know: Mrs Carew-Cox had devoted herself to the breed for nearly thirty years before the ACC was founded. Without her, there would have been no Abyssinians from which to establish a pure breed! She saw her first Aby at a hotel in Somerset where it had been left by a gentleman who had travelled abroad. From then on she produced numerous Champions, both Usual and Silver, and it was her silvers who first left for the USA.

Perhaps the mysterious origin of the breed is part of the Abyssinian’s appeal: one cat always dream that Abys paced the halls of the ancient pharaoh, gaze at us from Egyptian bronzes ad papyrus paintings, and survive to this day, not only in our pets, but as lovingly preserved mummies in our finest museums. One of the ACC’s most treasured possessions is a mummified cat, presented by H C Brooke.

EARLY HISTORY

DATES TO REMEMBER

- 1868 Arrival of Zula, the first known cat to be called an Abyssinian
- 1889 First Standard of Points for Abyssinians published by Harrison Weir
- 1892 Sedgemere Bottle born
- 1894 Sedgemere Peaty born
- 1896 Above cats appear in the National Cat Club stud book: the first Abyssinians to appear there
- 1903 H C Brooke feature on Abyssinians in Frances Simpson’s “The Book of the Cat”
- 1907 First Abyssinians exported to the USA
- 1929 Abyssinian Cat Club founded by Major E S Woodiwiss
- 1930 H C Brooke published the pamphlet: “The Abyssinian Cat”
- 1931 First all-Abyssinian Cat Show
- 1940 Club disbanded for the war. Everyday business left in the hands of Miss Adams and Major Woodiwiss
- 1947 Post-war reorganisation meeting. A minute’s silence for Miss Adams, Major Woodiwiss and others who died in the war.
- 1951 Publication of Helen and Sidney Denham’s classic work: “The Child of the Gods”
- 1963 Sorrel Abyssinians recognised by the GCCF
- 1984 Blue Abyssinians recognised by the GCCF
- 1984 Abyssinian Cat Club’s first Championship Show

The first cat to be called an Abyssinian was Zula, brought from Abyssinia in 1868 by Mrs Captain Barrett-Lennard, or so the story goes. Harrison Weir published his own Standard of Points in 1889 and this 110 year old standard describes to this day the Abyssinian as we know it though perhaps interpretations may differ. 1896 saw Abyssinians in the National Cat Club stud book for the first time though most of them were registered with one or both parents unknown. Sedgemere Bottle (born 1892) and Sedgemere Peaty (a female born 1894) were owned by Sam Woodiwiss and the H C Brooke and both were what we now call "Usual" in colour. But Silver Abys were also around at this time, two of them being sent to the USA by Mrs Carew-Cox.

When the Club was founded in 1929 by Major Woodiwiss, the annual subscription was a massive five shillings and it remained at this level, with deteriorating value, into the 1950's. The first ACC Show was held on Wednesday 12th March 1931. Twenty cats and kittens were entered and were judged by Sam Woodiwiss.

On 27th March 1940, the club was disbanded for the duration of the war and its affairs left in the hands of Miss Adams, the Chairman, and Major Woodiwiss, Secretary and Delegate to the GCCF. No subscriptions were to be collected and all who paid their fees in 1939 were to remain members until the Peace was signed. Sadly, not all the 1939 members survived the war. They, Miss Adams and the Club's energetic founder, Major Woodiwiss, were remembered with regret at the reorganisation meeting of 21 May 1947. At this meeting, the minutes of the AGM of 1939 were read and signed, eight years after they had been written. The cats too had suffered in the war, with barely a dozen surviving to continue the breed in post-war years; among the members responsible for re-establishing the breed at this time were the Denhams, Mrs Basnett, Mrs Earnshaw, Lady Barnard, Mrs Winsor, Mrs Oswald, Lady Liverpool, Mrs Simmonds, Miss Bone, Miss Wilson, Miss Wiseman and Mrs Menezes.

Until the 1960s all Abyssinians were of one colour, Usual, and this was considered as much a breed characteristic as coat pattern and type. Then in 1963, almost 100 years after the first naming of the breed, cats with coats ticked with chocolate brown instead of the usual black were recognised by the GCCF and named sorrels. The next colour to be awarded Championship status (in 1984) was Blue, in which the Usual colour is diluted to a soft mushroom ticked with blue. In the same year the Abyssinian Cat Club held its first Championship show, over fifty years after the very first all-Aby show.

OWNING AN ABYSSINIAN

A gentle, people-loving breed with a touch of the wild in its lynx-like russet coat: this is the Abyssinian. Helen and Sidney Denham dedicated their delightful book, "Child of the Gods", to their own Aby, Tia Maria, "Without whose help this would have been written in half the time but without whose inspiration it would not have been written at all". That is the Abyssinian: involved in everything, chasing pens and typewriter keys, opening doors, retrieving toys, testing food with a delicately poised paw, and above all, butting heads with their besotted owners in a way few other domestic cats ever do. If you want a cat to sit in front of the fire, independent, self-possessed, ignoring everyone and everything, the Abyssinian is not for you. But if you want a real pal who will love you exclusively and to distraction, rush towards you with an extraordinary trill of greeting when you come in and refuse to leave you alone, then chose no other.

In 1938, Captain W H Powell, an eminent judge, said it all: "There is no other breed of cat against which nothing can be laid in the way of disparagement... The quiet, unassuming Abyssinian combines all the good points and none of the failings of his more widely advertised relations."

The preservation of this lovely breed is the aim of the Abyssinian Cat Club and is surely a goal well worth working for.

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