

MY GRANNY LOVED A DONKEY!

While some grandparents are happy to knit booties or bake cakes, writer Charlotte Fairbairn celebrates the eccentricity of her animal-loving Grandmama and reveals how she hopes to follow in her unconventional footsteps

When I was a child, I used to go to stay for a week every holidays with my grandmother, Charlotte Reay. She was old school, highly intelligent (though, since she was born in 1908, largely uneducated) and lived in the Scottish Borders in a village called Gattonside, in a house known as Hoebridge.

To her fingertips, Grandmama was a countrywoman; her lifelong love was animals. Every morning, slightly before 6am, we would take a clutch apiece of her prize-winning long-haired chihuahuas (at any one time,

I hers, and because of this we had a bond. I was her first grandchild and, rightly or wrongly, her favourite. I too loved animals. So it was natural that, when she died, I was given her Donkey Stud photo album. I did nothing with the album when it first came to me. It was lodged in a bookshelf in Cumbria where I lived. I mourned my grandmother's passing because she was a marvellous woman from another era. She knitted socks. She sprinkled *finest herbes* on top of minced steak and fed it daily to

'Grandmama sprinkled finest herbes on top of minced steak and fed it daily to her dogs'

she had 15) and walk them along the banks of the Tweed. Each of her dogs had a classical name. My favourite was Psyche, though Echo came a close second. Behind us, as we marched riverside and the clock neared six o'clock, the entire village would start heaving to the sound of hee-haws - Grandmama's family of more than 30 donkeys having seen John, her gardener, arriving with their breakfast. Leading the klaxon, a malevolent child-munching monster of a stallion, white with a brown splodge on his bottom, known as Spot.

Grandmama was my namesake, or

her dogs. She bathed them weekly in Mary Chess. She had hunted side-saddle three days a week for a good part of her life. When we were not walking dogs together, she took me to Kelso Races - and on the way, driving her Triumph Dolomite like a demon, she would instruct me rather austerely on things and offer me a Vichy Pastille.

Then sometime after Charlotte's death in 2000, my own life turned upside down and I had to move house. Bookshelves, among other things, were cleared. I came across the album - it was a fine volume with gilt-edged pages and the title Hoebridge Stud writ

large on the cover. Inside were a few photographs. They began with a series featuring a small white donkey foal with a splodge on his bottom. He was getting out of a limo, and the door was being held for him by a man in a chauffeur's uniform. It was Spot! Examining the photographs of Spot further, I wondered where he and his chauffeur were exactly. It looked like Sandhurst. There was a drum horse. Spot was untethered and unbridled and yet clearly the star of the show. I thought perhaps he had been made a regimental mascot.

Alongside the Hoebridge Stud album, I also inherited a number ▷





Above: Spot emerges from a Daimler in 1966. Left: Charlotte Fairbairn with her grandmother's first chihuahua. Below: Robin Borwick and donkey foal, together with Robin's sister

Opposite page: Lady Reay with her granddaughter Charlotte Fairbairn in 1965. Above: Lady Reay with The Hoebridge Prize Reserve Champion at St Boswell's Show 1972





Left: Lady Reay with some of her many chihuahuas.
Below: Contented chihuahuas sunning themselves on Lady Reay's staircase



of books - out of date Good Food Guides in Dutch (my grandfather was a Dutchman), battered copies of the Chambers Dictionary (Grandmama was a demon at crosswords and went through a copy of Chambers a year), and The Donkey Breed Society Stud Book, Volume One. Piqued by the discovery of the hateful Spot (a nastier more ill-humoured animal never lived) being photographed having a day out in a chauffeur-driven limo, I opened my Volume One and searched him out. From the preface, I learnt that the Donkey Breed Society was founded around 1964 by the Hon Robin Borwick. I flicked through Section A: Stallions, and came across entry A/35/1. Ruffs Orchard Silverspot of Hoebridge. His mother was Marigold of the Trumpets. His sire Nimrod of West Wycombe. His breeder turned out to have been the Hon Robin Borwick.

This was gripping. I googled Robin Borwick and found out he was a member of the family of baking powder fame. I googled some more and found a photograph in the US, which I bought, of Robin Borwick with his sister, Robin sitting on one end of a see-saw, a donkey foal standing on the other. Further research revealed an old Pathé film, *Pets Adopt Humans*,

in which the Borwick family, during that nasty winter of 1962-63, brought a newly foaled moke into their Maidenhead sitting room to lie in front of the fire. The donkey joined three children, several dogs, one cat, a rabbit and a Hebridean sheep.

Later on, I found that Robin was an author - *People With Long Ears: A Practical Guide To Donkey-Keeping*. I ordered it at once and read it almost immediately. It concluded with those immortally useful words: 'Let me give you one final word of advice. Do not

allow your donkey on sofas or chairs. The springs will suffer.'

The Donkey Album, and the mysteries and eccentricities it enshrined, was not the only legacy I was bequeathed by my grandmother. In my stays at Hoebridge I was introduced to a number of other equestrian luminaries in the Borders. Like Borwick and Grandmama, they adored their beasts. Betty Sitwell, a pony-breeding legend, with her black eyepatch, her stupendous bosom, her fondness for Dubonnet (or Bonnet, as she called it).

Betty once wrote to the agony column of *The Lady* to complain that her butcher's bill was horridly high - all she was doing, she wailed, was placing a weekly order (from London) of beef fillet for her half-dozen dogs. Then there was Peanut. She had wiry hair, wore purple tweeds and showed ponies that were well-bred and fiercely scruffy. Ilay Campbell, Betty's son, who had a wonderful ring-o-bells laugh and an ample girth. His mount was an

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18-hand-high Shire known as Stationmaster - the sight of Campbell, top-hatted and tailed, in full flight aboard Stationmaster was the stuff of dreams.

In the goodness of time, I hope I might grow a pair of long ears myself. Perhaps I too will wear an eyepatch. Smoke with a very, very long cigarette holder. Recline on a zebra-skinned hairdresser's chair and pronounce epithets. And maybe bequeath somehow to my own grandchildren a glimpse backwards into that vanishing stable of truly rare breeds. ■