The Cardiganshire Welsh Corgi – Early History

Based on research done by W. Lloyd-Thomas and Clifford L.B. Hubbard the Cardiganshire Welsh Corgi seems to originate from the teckel family brought to Wales from central Europe by the Celtic invaders, probably some 3000 years back. In this connection it is interesting to note that mid-Cardiganshire is particularly rich in remains of early Celtic fortifications.

Bronant, a small village in the very heart of the Cardiganshire hills appears to have been the only place in Wales where until about 1870 no other dog breed but the Corgi was to be found. And it was around Bronant the last of the full-blooded Corgi lived. Therefore, the original Corgi was sometimes also referred to as the Bronant type Corgi.

The oldest surviving references to British dogs working cattle are contained in the Ancient Welsh Laws, which were codified by Hywel Dda about 920. These laws mentioned several types of dogs, among them the watch cur, the shepherd cur and the house cur. The Concise Oxford Dictionary (1987) defines cur as a "worthless, low-bred, or snappish dog". However, in Book XIII, Chap. II, Clause 236, it is stated that the three indispensables of a herdsman's summer residence were "a bothy; a herdsman's cur; and a knife". More than a thousand years ago in Wales the herdsman's cur used with cattle (and sheep) was thus legally recognised as a valuable breed of dog and such a dog would be of the worth of an ox if efficient and over the age of one year.

The meaning of Corgi

When writing his book about the Cardiganshire Corgi, Hubbard did some extensive research on the breed, including the meaning of "Corgi". The generally accepted view is that the name is made up from "cor" (dwarf) and "ci" (dog). During his visits to the National Library of Wales and the Dictionary department of the Board of Celtic Studies Hubbard went through hundreds of volumes and manuscripts and found several references to Corgwn (the plural form of Corgi) and enough historical support that the word "Corgi" is connected with "Cur". The earliest of dictionaries, Wylliam Salesbury's *A Dictionary in Englyshe and Welshe* (London 1547), contains a reference to "Corgi or curre dogge" and in the early show days the Corgi was often referred to as Cur. See article on the separation of the breeds (http://www.cardicommentary.de/Hist.Art/separationofbreeds.htm).

The Corgi is a "heeler", one who nips the heels of cattle. When Corgis were first exhibited in Wales at the agricultural shows they were often classified as Heelers, and this name is the only English synonym for Corgi, except for Cur which is a translation of the Welsh name.

The Welsh word for the verb "to heel" is sodli, and Welshmen have for centuries called the Corgi "Ci Sodli". Sometimes the Cardiganshire Corgi is also referred to by "Ci Llathaid", Welsh for the "yard-long dog", measured from the tip of the nose to the tip of the tail, the Welsh yard being four inches longer than an English yard.

The original Corgi

Lloyd-Thomas describes the original Corgi as follows:

Long and muscular of body; very low of build; heavy of bone with inward sloping forelegs terminating in outbent forefeet; prominent breastbone; large drooping, rounded tipped ears of distinctive shape; wide forehead; comparatively deep and blunt muzzle; immensely strong neck; an odourless, smooth, close laying, wiry coat; a thick, lengthy, profusely feathered tail; possessed of a disposition normally quiet and reserved, and weighing upwards of 30 lbs., the original Corgi resembled more than anything else a bull-chested old type dachshund. The original Corgis were of three principal colours: a rich golden yellow tinged with red gold, and tending at certain seasons to become almost entirely red gold; blue and blue grey merles; and most frequently a rather indescribable kind of golden brown merle with just a hint of blue or greyness. In all cases white markings in varying degrees were present. Black and white dogs seem to have occasionally occurred.

It was, however, not in his shape that his chief charm lay, but, far more, in his character which combined wisdom, courage, devotion, honesty and obedience. These traits made him unique and can be found only in his direct descendants.

He was good with children and an excellent watch dog, but it was when coursing cattle the original Corgi showed his real talents and revealed to the full the breed's dauntless courage, unwavering tenacity, and swift obedience. It was obvious then how greatly the survival of these dogs depended upon their low, stocky build, outbent forefeet, strong skull, and long weighty tail, and thus understand why the old Hillman set such store upon their dogs being right of build as well as right of character.

Mid-Cardiganshire country

Prior to about 1875 the hills about Bronant consisted mainly of Crown or Common land thickly sprinkled with small holdings made up of only a few acres of enclosed ground. The occupants of such holdings possessed equal rights to graze their cattle upon the common lands surrounding them. In actual practice each family had come, in the course of generations, to regard certain areas as their own special territory and other family's stock coming thereon as trespassers.

To this fact the original Corgi owed not only his existence and the high esteem in which he was held but also, in all probability, the remarkable degree of similarity of character and racial purity he showed at that time.

To the family owning him, the Corgi was an indispensable necessity upon whose efficiency or otherwise the fortunes of the household very largely depended. Those who owned a good Corgi could always be sure of securing an ample grazing area and, accordingly, the means of maintaining a comparatively large head of stock which in turn represented a good income.

Therefore a good Corgi figured among a family's most treasured possessions, and every effort was made to keep the strain. None but the most favoured specimens were retained and the greatest care exercised in preventing promiscuous matings between the bitches and unsuitable dogs, in other words all the principles of selective breeding were assiduously upheld.

How the Corgi worked

Founded on the Corgi's inborn instinct to heel, the method by which these dogs were brought into action against "trespassing" cattle was both simple and effective. At the first hint that a neighbour's stock was about to invade his self-apportioned territory the crofter, calling his dog, would hurry forth and take his stand usually close to his own gate and seldom less than 500 yards from the trespassers. There was no need to go closer because the Corgi could be depended upon, if necessary, to work effectively a mile or more away from its handler.

Cardiganshire scenery

From the chosen post, the cattle might be well in sight of the man, but, owing to the dog's low build and the gentle rolling nature of the land, to the Corgi in most cases, at this stage, the beasts would be invisible. Accordingly, it was necessary for the master to give his dog the direction by facing it the way it was to head. This done the crofter would commence to softly whistle, alternating over and over again, the same two notes; one high, one low, and off the Corgi would canter.

So long as that whistle could reach his amazingly sensitive ears, the Corgi would continue to run straight in the set direction. Presently, this would bring the trespassers within his view immediately ahead. For just a second, the dog would check and crouch as though to gather himself together for the onslaught. The next moment with a grim ferocity, almost incredible in a creature otherwise so gentle and good natured, he would hurtle forward at the nearest pair of hocks. Regardless of lashing kicks and lowered threatening horns, he charges into the attack. And no sooner in, than back and out and in again at another victim, and yet another and another.

Almost too quick for the eye to follow he works, dancing forelegs spread wide, their peculiar shape used to bring low the head and balance the forward half of the body as it rolls, like lightning, from side to side, dodging by a hair's breadth those murderous hooves. The strong white teeth flash as the powerful jaws drive them home here, there everywhere.

The deft footwork, the weaving body, the perfect timing, somehow remind of a perfectly trained and highly skilled light-weight boxer. One holds one's breath. The dog must be killed. But no, already the cattle are on the move. In another second they are stampeding wildly for home, a panic stricken, bucking, kicking, thundering mob, and streaking behind them, despite the shortness of his legs, easily keeping pace, goes a tiny, golden speck, still dodging, still nipping.

Now the watching crofter slowly lifts his fingers to his lips. A shrill long drawn out whistle cuts the air. That rushing speck slows, hesitates, stops, wheels about, and an instant later is racing back. As it comes tearing, like a speedboat through the high, coarse, upland grass one notices that its amazing speed is largely derived from the peculiar way in which the body length is utilised.

From what has been said it will have been gathered that the Corgi was not maintained as is sometimes entirely erroneously stated, to fetch home stock, but, on the contrary, to drive it further afield. In fact the original Corgi completely lacked the rounding up instinct of a herding dog. And it was this lack of herding instinct which eventually brought about his undoing.

The source of this misunderstanding can be explained as follows: taking advantage of the fact that cattle with previous experience of the Corgi's efficiency as a heeler have a pronounced tendency to take fright and make for their own cow yard at the approach of one of these dogs, it was a fairly common practice, with some of the old-time squatters, to scare their own stock home by sending a Corgi towards the spot where it grazed, the dog being called off before it was near enough to attack. However, this method often had quite the contrary effect: the cattle at the approach of the Corgi stampeded in the wrong direction and the Corgi being purely a straight running courser was completely unable to bring the herd together again.

The influence of the Brindle Herder

In the past, the original Corgi was kept because he did, then, much what a fence does today. It is therefore in no way remarkable that the introduction of the wire fence about 1875, when the Government decided to break up and sell to the crofters much of the Crown Land about Bronant, had a serious effect upon the Corgis and their future.

With their land securely fenced against neighbour's stock and theirs by title, the hillmen soon discovered that the hitherto prized gifts of their Corgis were no longer of the same service or value to them. What they now required was not a dog to drive stock belonging to others away, but one capable of fetching home their own. So it was not long before the Corgis commenced to make way for the herders, the latter being dogs combining with a herding or gathering instinct a tendency to snap at stock's hindquarters. Sent out after cattle such dogs tend to circle to the far side and then by barking and nipping endeavour to drive the stock towards the homestead. Their nipping, however, is done in a totally different way to the heeling of the Corgi; the herder's method being the much less effective one of dashing backwards and forwards across the rear of the herd while it administers swift, light pinches to the beasts as it passes them.

Fortunately, the change over from the Corgi to the herder was not completely universal. While on the majority of the lower laying farms, by the commencement of the 20th century, herders and collies had become the order of the day, on those higher up adjoining what remained of the common lands, Corgis and Corgi crosses remained.

The great majority of the herders introduced on to the newly formed farms were of two kinds: the small Red Cattle Herder (Hubbard mentions a Red Heeler!), and the Brindle Herder. Of the earlier history of the Red Herder little is known except that it was apparently a distinct species which seems to have been at one time numerously and widely distributed throughout the North and Midland counties of England, as well as along most of the Welsh Border country. The Red Herder was a fairly good, consistent worker, courageous when cattle driving and a sharp-eared watch dog, but unsociable and so not suitable as a companion.

The Brindle Herder, on the other hand, was quite a different dog. It was an animal possessed of a character as charming as that of the original Corgi itself: courageous, keenly alert, honest, kindly natured, highly intelligent and deeply devoted. Its appearance also left little to be desired. A lightly built, fairly long legged, graceful animal standing some 20 inches at shoulder, and with an air of refinement and quality alien to the majority of farm-bred dogs.

Except for its somewhat longer muzzle, more delicate moulding, and the fact that the good-sized blunt tipped ears were carried stiffly erect, the head was not very dissimilar to that of the Bronant Corgi. The tail, however, was bushy rather than feathered, resembling somewhat that of the Red Herder, although not entirely.

But perhaps the most attractive physical feature of these dogs was to be seen in the marking and colouring of their sleek, glossy, medium textured coat; a colouring probably best compared to that of a golden brindle bulldog, only darker and richer of hue.

Unlike the Red Herder, the Brindle Herder does not seem to have enjoyed a wide distribution having apparently been confined exclusively to a narrow strip of country along the Southern half of the Cardiganshire coast. From here it was brought up to the hills where it became known by the term "Labourer dog".

From the point of view of the hillmen, the Brindle Herder possessed one serious fault, namely, only about one dog in six made a thoroughly good worker with cattle. The rest failed because they lacked the fire and drive necessary for cattle herding.

An attempt was therefore made to stiffen the Brindle Herders by crossing them with some of the remaining full-blooded original Corgis. Regarded through the eyes of the present-day Corgi lover, this cross was an overwhelming success. The Corgi proved the dominant breed, and fundamentally was but little altered. The outbent forelegs, the low lengthy stocky build, and the old charm of character all remained. There was, however, a distinct gain in refinement and quality extending to both appearance and character. The head became less heavy and more finely moulded, the expression showed greater alertness reflecting a quickened mentality, the ears were erect, the body line and leg action developed a new found gracefulness, while every hint of coarseness disappeared. A new, better, and more handsome Corgi had been evolved. Nevertheless, from the farmer's point of view the cross was a failure. Instead of providing a better herder it simply gave him an improved courser, the coursing instinct having proved the dominant one.

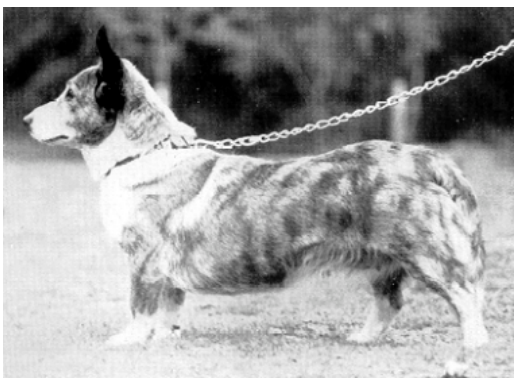
Accordingly, it was only on the high farms adjoining the Crown Land that the results of the cross survived to become, together with a handful of original Corgis, the forebears of the present-day Corgis. The pure Brindle Herder never very popular with the hillmen, in time was replaced by Red Herders, Sheepdogs of several kinds, and later Scotch Collies, and has long disappeared.

Another cross of some interest is that which occurred between the Corgi proper and the Collies that came later from Scotland to largely supersede the herders. Here again both physically and mentally the Corgi proved the dominant breed, the outcome of the cross being the Heeler an attractive natured, small, lengthy, low built, thick set animal, acknowledging its Collie blood only in its head, coat and tail. When bred back to a genuine Corgi, the offspring

was often difficult to tell from pure Corgis. Rawdon B. Lee, in Modern Dogs (Non-Sporting Division) of 1894, refers to a "Welsh heeler", describing him as "a little smooth-coated, mirled (*sic!*) or tortoiseshell-coloured, wall-eyed creature, smart and active for the work on the hills".

As far as Lloyd-Thomas remembers it was early in 1929 that the last full-blooded, original Corgi named Mon was run over by a motor van. A magnificent and typical specimen of the old Bronant breed with a family history traceable back through countless generations. But if Mon was the last pure member of his race, he was at least not the last of his line. Although quite young, shortly before his death, he had sired a good litter from an excellent Corgi/Brindle Herder bitch the members of which retained to a marked degree their sire's character as well as many of his finer physical qualities.

Mon, the last of the original Corgis



His daughter Fancy from a Corgi/Brindle Herder bitch owned by Miss D.F. Wylie

Hubbard in his book "Working Dogs of the World" writes that it was probably due in part to its isolation and in part to the scrupulous attention given by its breeders to the retention of type that the Cardiganshire Corgi is so much like the primitive herder of the ancient Celts. How careful breeding has played its part in the production of typical specimens is evidenced by the near approach of the dogs bred by Miss D.F. Wylie of the "Geler" kennels even to the very rare original type (http://www.cardicommentary.de/Kennelstories/geler.htm).

In connection with the campaigns of the British Council of Docked Breeds (CDB) to protect the "freedom to choose the tail docking option" it has sometimes been maintained that the Pembrokeshire Corgis work cattle by darting in and snapping at their heels whereas the Cardigans herded from a safe distance, more in the style of a Border Collie and that a Pembroke with a heavy, muddy tail would be hampered in darting out of reach of the inevitable kickbacks, hence the need to dock them.

Confronted with this statement, the late John Holmes, who bred Pembroke Corgis under the affix *Formakin*, was rather amused and replied that he had worked or seen working many different cattle dogs from Corgis to Australian Cattle Dogs. The difference between working cattle and sheep is that sheep will run from a dog which keeps well away from them; whereas cattle have to be made to move in the direction the dog wants them to go. This is done by "heeling" and "nosing". In other words, if the dog wants the cow to go forward, he bites it on the heel, and if he wants to stop it going forward he bites it on the nose. The dog does this in response to instinct and one cannot teach a dog where or how to bite stock. It is interesting to note how different dogs develop their own individual techniques. Bigger dogs, like the Collie types and Australian Cattle Dogs usually bite the leg just above the foot. Corgis bite very low on the soft part of the heel just above the hoof and once a cow has been bitten there it quickly develops a healthy respect for this small "predator" which seems to come from nowhere!

Holmes also mentioned that he had read on several occasions that a Corgi bites and then lies down to avoid being kicked, but that he had never observed any dog do that. On the contrary, the clever cattle dog, of whatever breed keeps his head very low and may even go down on his elbows – but he keeps moving. He bites the leg that is furthest back and at the same time moves sideways so that when the cow lashes out he simply is not there.

Corgis are more driving than herding dogs but are not fast enough to gather a herd of bullocks scattered over a big field. They are, however, exceptionally good at forcing cattle or sheep into trucks, pens etc.

Although the Corgi is no longer bred for work, many bred from generations that have never seen a sheep or a bullock, still have a strong herding instinct while many do not and there is no way of telling except by actual trial.

The drovers

It is a fairly common belief that the Cardiganshire Welsh Corgi in the early days was used in droving the herds of black Welsh cattle along the dusty roads eastwards to the markets of England. The famous Welsh drovers collected the cattle put in their charge, had them shod for the highway at various places on the route, and drove them hundreds of miles over the border to the big markets of Smithfield (London) and Barnet (Hertfordshire). This belief is probably based on Clifford L.B. Hubbard's statement in his books *Working Dogs of the World* and *Dogs in Britain*. However, in his book "The Cardiganshire Corgi" published in 1952, Hubbard writes:

> "When I wrote about the Welsh drovers' dogs in 1947 I really believed that the drovers used the old-fashioned very heavy Cardiganshire-type Corgi: I have since studied the subject closer and feel I may not have been quite right there, and that the dog they most probably used was one who combined the build of both Corgi and Sheepdog. There are a few such isolated specimens about even now in Wales (I have seen them in Llandinam, Yspytty Cynfyn, and in the Plynlimon area) and they are rather like the sort of dog the old Welsh farmers call Ci Cwrshio."

David Hancock in *Old Working Dogs* writes that cattle and sheep, and sometimes pigs, turkeys and geese, often in tens of thousands, were driven to the great markets or fairs such as St Faith's near Norwich, Great Barnet, Smithfield, Canterbury and Guildford from as far away as the Western Isles of Scotland, western Wales and Devon. The drovers brought with them their dogs, as guardians or herders or as hunters of game, or lurchers. The drovers' dogs were often huge and fierce, with the vast bobtailed sheepdogs from Sussex and Dorset having particularly fearsome reputations. "Stonehenge" (J.H. Walsh), writing in the 1860s, described these dogs as "of great size and strength" and about the same time Youatt illustrated the breed type as a very much bigger and distinctly less hairy Old English Sheepdog. In Wales, the Old Welsh Grey, the Black and Tan Sheepdog and the Welsh Hillman, a particularly handsome big red and white dog, were used but all are now lost.

Hancock does not mention the Corgi in connection with these long distance droves and Iris Combe in her book *Herding Dogs, Their Origins and Development in Britain* writes that according to most Welsh farmers who used the Corgis for stock work in the past the Corgis were never used by the long-distance drovers who undertook the journeys to the big markets, but that local drovers or butchers used them for local journeys to the slaughter houses or markets. Once they had reached the local market the dogs were often expected to find their own way home, while the drover celebrated at the local inn, then hitched a lift home in a farm cart or pony trap.

Although Corgis did take command of cattle in certain situations on farms, it was as market dogs that they excelled. Market drovers and porters had their own teams of small dogs to assist at the receiving and exit yards or bays and with putting the various livestock into the pens. And when the cattle trade from Ireland was in its heyday, the drovers at the Welsh docks found these dogs invaluable for getting the cattle from the boats and loading them into the railway wagons.

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March 2006/ANo