

## Nancy Laughton and the Claverdon Flatcoats

– by Brenda Phillips

Dr Nancy Laughton passed away on Christmas Day 2002 at the age of 95. She was one of the last of the founders who re-established and revitalised the breed after the Second World War.

Sometime ago I asked leading owners and breeders for their personal opinion on the breed, Dr Nancy kindly replied, I personally feel her own words are a tribute to her.

Dr Laughton. "Claverdon": Her prefix "Claverdon" was her telephone exchange at the time. Dr Nancy was always a sporting person whose main interest was in the shooting field, she began as many of us rough shooting in her teens working her family's spaniel. She always wanted her own gundog, but it wasn't till just after the war she was able to fulfil this ambition. In 1944 she met Will Simms, (called Young Simms as his father was Old Simms, being the gamekeeper to Mr.S.E. Shirley of Flatcoat fame at Ettington). She was so impressed by his Flatcoat 'Revival of Ettington', a strong rugged type with plenty of substance that she decided that this was the breed for her.

Dr Nancy acquired Revival, and was also told of a litter of Will Phizacklea's [Atherbram]. She bought Claverdon Jet, sired by Atherbram Gunner out of Cemlyn, at ten weeks of age. Her dam came from Welsh working stock. Jet was a great character, she became a champion and also won well in field trials and became the 'Claverdon' kennel foundation bitch. No better bitch could she have bought, especially Post-war when the breed was at such a low ebb. From then onwards she developed her female line using often outside males of proven working ability in each generation.

Almost without exception her Flatcoats won field trial awards, but apart from the pleasure of training them at home Dr Nancy enjoyed and gained most satisfaction personally shooting over them and 'picking-up'. She preferred blacks to livers

Having always preferred working Flatcoats to showing them her interest in showing gradually waned over the years. She said "She enjoyed and valued all her Flatcoats, but the very special ones were Ch Claverdon Jet and Ch Claverdon Powderbox. The most well-known male was Ch Claverdon Jorrocks of Lilling. He was the son of Ch. Claverdon Powderbox and grandson of Jet. He won the Game Fair retriever working test in 1961.

In 1939 Colin Wells had to abandon his Flatcoat kennel to enter the armed services. When the war ended he came to Dr Nancy for Claverdon Faith (Revival of Ettington/Ch. Claverdon Jet) and with Ch Waterman from Mr Phizacklea he re-established his well-known 'Woodland' kennel.

Dr Nancy was introduced to "picking up" at Packington Hall by Sir John Spencer in the fifties and there she and Gwen Knight enjoyed themselves working their dogs and the social side of the Shoot. Many dogs impressed her over the years in the field, in particular, Claverdon Turtle dove, Rhapsody, Fantasia, Kiss and Ladybird, also the males Ch Claverdon Jorrocks of Lilling, Gaff, Lysander and Defender, all the above mentioned have been successful in field trials. Claverdon Ladybird was perhaps outstanding, but unfortunately never had any puppies (her litter sister C. Lucretia was the dam of Tarncourt Noteable).

During her association with the breed she has held office in the Flatcoated Retriever Society as Secretary, Field Trial Secretary President and Patron from 1985 until her death in 2002.

Dr Nancy wrote an authoritative book on the breed "A Review of the Flat-Coated Retriever", which no serious student of the breed would be without, it went into a second edition, unfortunately is now out of print. She thought that sound temperament, physical soundness and type are all

desirable but the list should be headed by working ability. She deplores the mushrooming in numbers of the breed since the 1970's bringing with it careless breeding and commercialism with little regard for the essential working retriever of old.

The working Flatcoated Retriever Group (now disbanded) had in her opinion, gone some way to revive this interest having searched out all over the country and tested dogs for working ability which have then become available at stud. The future of the breed is doubtful in her opinion. She felt that there would always be a minority of really dedicated breeders who will continue to support the welfare of the breed unselfishly.

Her great concern and sadness over the years, was the rise in Flatcoat popularity as a show dog, she considered this had taken precedence over work. She felt this has led too much breeding among show stock with little account of working ability as in other Gundogs breeds. Although through her former years she had been a great supporter of dual-purpose concept. She considered too much reliance on a dual-purpose concept had been made. Unless working ability is tested for at each generation, dilution of this character inevitably accrues. She felt selective breeding to maintain and improve working ability should be made. Dr Nancy has judged both Trials and Championship shows in the past. When judging in the ring, it was type according to the breed standard that was of greatest importance.

A point she makes is: Most Flatcoats at work use their noses in a higher position than Labradors and Spaniels, which is not always understood by the judges so it could be a disadvantage. Sadly, many Flatcoats entered for field trials are not trained sufficiently to field trial standards. She considers the breed lacks a sufficient number of skilled trainers and handlers. The dogs themselves can have plenty of natural ability but they are allowed to think too much for themselves. Those who have more discipline over their dogs do well but are often up against breed antagonism and professionalism.

She said she has been influenced over the years by, H. Reginald Cook's gamekeeper, Bill Tansey: S.E. Shirley's keeper, Will Simms: Colin Wells: Will Phizacklea: Stanley O'Neill: Joan Marsden: Gwen Knight and Major Harry Wilson.

During her career as a bacteriologist and Senior Lecturer at Birmingham University, she carried out some canine research work with local Vets and with Dr Larin of the Animal Research Trust at Kennett and published a number of scientific papers on the role of streptococci in fading puppy syndrome and also on the classification of canine strains of streptococci.

Dr Nancy had a long and valuable association with her friend and companion Gwen Knight who particularly liked the Golden retriever. But also trained and worked the Flatcoats.

I am sure we all send Gwen our sincere condolences on the passing of Nancy.

Possibly our own tribute to Dr Nancy is to understand her concern and love for the breed and continue the working ability of our dogs to the best of our ability.

Brenda Phillips