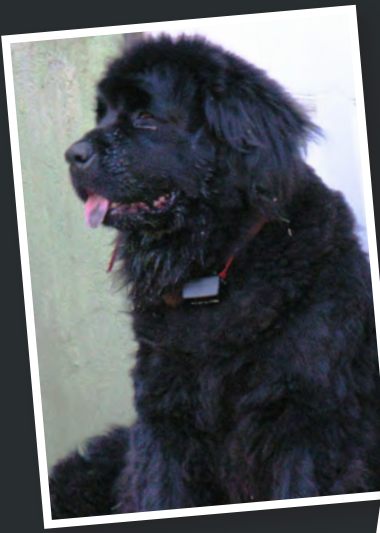


A DOG'S LIFE



A dog is a man's best friend and more, says solicitor Richard Barr as he bids farewell to his hound, Freya

We picked her up on the way back from Yorkshire one autumn. Even as a puppy she was larger than many dogs. She sat on my wife's lap during the journey and slept for most of it.

Very soon she grew and then she grew some more. She grew into the largest dog we had ever had, then grew a little more. She was larger than some of the children. People (who did not know) thought she might be a small horse.

She was called Freya (goddess of the sea) and was a Newfoundland – a dog with the same characteristics of a St Bernard, except that her speciality was water not snow and she never (to my knowledge) carried a barrel of brandy round her neck.

These dogs have a strong instinct for rescuing people and are prodigious swimmers. There is a story that a Newfoundland dog rescued several sailors from a wrecked ship off the Norfolk coast by repeatedly swimming out and dragging them back.

Freya was no exception. She lived for water and would plunge in whenever she saw it. Unfortunately (for us) we have a very dirty pond which carries the detritus of many years of leaves, corpses of fish and slimy pond weed.

This for Freya was dog heaven. She would swim around it for hours, then emerge like the beast from the deep dripping slime and wreathed in green weeds. She would often then try to get into the house (she became quite adept at opening doors).

However, her paws were the size of dinner plates and could hold more water than a sponge. She also smelt worse than anything dreamed up in Lord of the Rings (something she no doubt enjoyed but it was a little hard on the rest of us). She would drip several gallons of water onto the carpet.

Every year we bought her a paddling pool. She used it for a while then punctured it with her large claws before returning to the place she enjoyed most – her pond.

She was the most strong willed dog I have ever met. If you asked her

to do something she objected to, she would fix you with the kind of stare that, in my other world, a judge uses when he disapproves of the case you are trying to present. If you tried to force the issue she would just lie down and would not budge. She would then insist on a trail of little pieces of ham if she was to be persuaded into her den for the night.

It is a little known fact that when we were involved in running some major legal cases (like Gulf War and sheep dip cases) we were linked to an office in London, but we worked from a Portacabin in our Norfolk garden.

It was never easy to give the impression to our formidable and well resourced opponents that we were cool and high powered. For a start, it was the time when RAF Coltishall was fully active and I am convinced that they used our house for target practice. Several times a day we would be drowned out by low flying jets. It somehow did not quite project the right image to have to say repeatedly 'Excuse me, but could you repeat that again...' to the roar of a jet engine.

Freya played a part in the general cacophony. She was immensely territorial, and regarded her patch as being anywhere up to a quarter of a mile from where we lived. If she detected an intruder she would race

off, tail in the air and barking with her deep menacing voice. Several cyclists found that they could reach speeds that they had never before dreamed of when pursued by Freya.

She set up her look-out underneath the Portacabin, but being large she would bang her head against the underside of the floor every time she barked. Thus in addition to the jets we also had to contend with repeated doses of woof-bang, woof-bang.

I was once asked by one of the scary opponents what the noise was – so I had to say that I thought it was something on the line and I banged the receiver in the vain hope that I would convince her of my lie.

She never had puppies. We never attempted to breed from her and I expect that the local males took one look and ran a mile, but she was maternal.

She fell in love with a hamster and repeatedly let it out of its cage, then would bring it downstairs in her mouth (unharmful but slightly surprised) and play with it. If she was caught in the act she would adopt an air of complete innocence, despite the evidence pointing to her (large paw prints all the way upstairs, door to hamster cage open, hamster in mouth). She would just lie doggo and say (in Newfoundland) 'it wasn't me

guy.'

She did the same for the rabbit but the budgerigar was less fortunate. We found it stripped naked. It may just have died of shame.

On one occasion she vanished altogether. More than two days later we discovered her in a bramble bush where she had made a nest and was caring for a fluffy toy that had belonged to one of the children. In the same vein she would often help herself to one of my shoes and lick it affectionately. Many a time I hopped out on one leg to retrieve it.

When the sheep (see the last P&F) arrived she immediately assumed that they were white Newfoundlands, and the sheep appeared to think she was a black one of them. They struck up quite a friendship.

She was with us for nearly 14 years (well past the sell by date of most Newfoundlands). Just before Christmas her arthritis got the better of her and she could not move and did not want to eat. The end came quickly, thanks to the local vet (by the way, that's the way I would like to go – 30 seconds of injection and then it is all over). They say a dog is for life, not for Christmas. Freya certainly had a full life and we miss her lots, but if we get another dog, I am rather drawn towards a Chihuahua next time.

