

The history of the famous St. Bernard dog

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The history of the famous St. Bernard Dog

The North Island St. Bernard Association Incorporated is the Kiwi connection with the majestic St. Bernard and its members, the guardians of the most famous and largest of all of the Swiss breeds of dogs.



1907 real photograph of a Monk from the St. Bernard Hospice with two dogs.

In fact, the Alpine Mastiff dog (as they were known) established its reputation as a saviour and rescuer of lost travellers in the uncompromising and perilous conditions of the Swiss Mountains about the same time that New Zealand, as a country, was first discovered by the Dutch Explorer Abel Tasman.

From Hospice records it is presumed that the first service dogs came to the Hospice in the latter half of the 17th Century, probably between 1660 and 1670. By 1695, the dogs had been bred to a certain 'type' that might well be considered the formal beginning of the breed.

While we often hear about the breed 'originating' at the Hospice, it is the researched opinion of early enthusiasts that what occurred at the Hospice, due to both the dedication of the Monks and the isolation of the location, was more the natural evolution in the perfection of 'type'. (Type being dogs of same size, body structure and shape, same physical traits and appearance).

The St Bernard dog had been well documented by their keepers, the Augustine Monks of the St Bernard de Menthon Hospice as companion animals and protecting, rescuing, guiding and working the Great St Bernard Pass in

the Western Alps between Switzerland and Italy. For more than a century, with no formal training and only instinct to guide them, the dogs had saved hundreds of lives by the time the British Explorer Captain James Cook reached New Zealand for the first time in 1769.

Following Cook's first visit, this young country was regularly visited by explorers and other sailors, missionaries, traders and adventurers but it was still extremely sparsely populated when Barry, the most famous St Bernard of them all, during his life, rescued more than 40 travellers from 'the white death' during the course of his working life 1800 - 1810.

During the harsh winters of 1816 -1818 in Switzerland, when there were increased numbers of avalanches and as a consequence, many of the breeding dogs lost their lives. To replenish the stocks, dogs were returned from lower farms where they had worked as draft animals, but this was not enough to preserve the breed and build up the population, so Newfoundland dogs were bought in from the Colony of Newfoundland, and crossed with the short-haired St Bernards, and so the long-haired or 'rough coat' St Bernard was born. The idea that the longer coat of the Newfoundland might help protect the St Bernard's from the freezing cold proved to be unfounded as the long hair the dogs inherited dangerously froze and weighed them down. Longhaired progeny was subsequently sold to farmers down the mountain or exported.

The earliest authenticated report of the breed being brought to England from its native hospice in Switzerland was in 1815 when one was brought to Leasowe Castle. The Victorians' fascination with these Alpine Mastiffs (St. Bernards) and Newfoundlands, today, still the only two breeds of dog whose sole purpose was to directly help man, was in its infancy. Some of the first dogs went to zoological societies to be on public display, to circuses that viewed their uniqueness as a major attraction, and to the very wealthy. Queen Victoria owned two in the 1840s and they were considered a popular dog with nobility.

Many names were given to the St. Bernard in the early times. The most common were 'Hospice Dogs', "Barry Dogs", "Barryhunde", or the name still often used in Switzerland today "Bernhardiner".

It wasn't until 1833 when a man by the name of Daniel Wilson suggested that the breed be referred to as the Saint Bernard Dog. Eventually that is what they became known as when the Swiss Kennel Club recognized the breed in 1880.

In 1840, the Treaty of Waitangi was signed by most of the Maori Tribes in New Zealand, bringing New Zealand into the British Empire. In 1840, the first Newfoundland St Bernard was documented arriving in New Zealand. The book "No Simple Passage" by Jenny Robins Jones, documents the journey. A young man of 20 years, Charles Empson, came to Wellington on the sailing ship LONDON which had left England on 29 December 1841 with immigrants. He came alone with only his dog, a Newfoundland St Bernard. This information is surprising given the distances that had to be covered and the harsh journey that had to be endured, but it seems the population of New Zealand was just as in love with the breed and its romantic history as the rest of the world and consequently many dogs were documented as being imported, during the time of the New Zealand Wars (or Maori Wars) until the peak at around 1880 when interest in the breed started to wane for many reasons. These reasons included problems that arose from indiscriminate breeding.



1910 real photograph of a boy with his St Bernard, 'Floss', in New Zealand. Indicates poor head type.

In Switzerland during this period, the dogs were not only being bred at the Hospice, but in the valleys below and Mr Heinrich Schumacher from Holligen is credited with maintaining and perfecting the type of the St Bernard. His kennel was active from 1855 to 1890 and he spent his life dedicated to the breed. He gifted several dogs to the Hospice and these contributed much to the improvement of the breed there in the mid 19th Century. Schumacher was the first to receive pedigrees from the Swiss Stud Books for his dogs and his quality dogs were exported widely.

The English had imported hospice dogs in significant numbers since 1820, and the breed had quickly risen in popularity, but breeders had been less conscientious in their breeding practices than the Monks or the dedicated Swiss breeders. Because the English Saint Bernard was noticeably different from the hospice or Swiss valley dogs, the English wrote their own standard in 1887. The English Saint Bernards had been crossed with the English Mastiff and were thinner and taller than their Swiss counterparts, and they were affected by the pressures of popularity beginning in 1863. Little resemblance to the original hospice type remained. Saint Bernards from both England and Switzerland were being exported around the world, and two different breed types existed with the same name. As a result, there arose a controversy regarding which country had the correct type and was the true breed authority. In 1886, an international congress was called in Brussels to decide the matter, but it was unable to reach a consensus. Another international congress was called the next year, in 1887, in Zurich, and it concluded that the Swiss standard would be used in all countries except England.

In 1882, the English St Bernard Club was established and they attracted a massive entry of nearly 400 dogs at one of their first breed shows held in the late 1880's.

The Swiss St. Bernard Club was founded in Basel on March 15, 1884. The St. Bernard was the very first breed entered into the Swiss Stud Book in 1884, and the breed standard was finally approved in 1888. Since then, the breed has been the Swiss national dog.

During the three centuries for which the Hospice has records, St Bernards were credited with saving more than 2,000 lives.

In the United States, a Saint Bernard named Plinlimmon became well known in 1883. Plinlimmon was owned by an actor and became the top-winning Saint Bernard show dog of his time. His owner took him across the country, exhibiting him at theatres. In 1888, the Saint Bernard Club of America (SBCA) was founded, and the club accepted the breed standard written by the Swiss.

Little did anyone know when the breed was at its most popular, that less than a quarter of a century later war would overtake the world and the breed numbers would decline alarmingly. Thankfully they were kept safe due to a few dedicated and resourceful breeders.

Since the early 20th Century the breed has remained popular but in lesser numbers internationally. The changing times meant the Hospice no longer used the dogs for rescue. The instinct to dig for people buried beneath snow and to rouse those lying in snow is still evident in the breed. Today, Saint Bernards can be seen in homes, on the big screen, and at dog shows.

There are still Saint Bernards at the Saint Bernard Hospice in Switzerland. They no longer seek out travellers in need but instead serve as living representatives of hospice history.

The North Island St Bernard Association Inc of New Zealand, by comparison with overseas clubs, is relatively new. Our club was formed in 1981, with a zone of influence being the North Island, following the St Bernard Club Inc.'s (formed in 1979 and based in Christchurch) reluctance to acknowledge the enthusiasm of North Island St Bernard owners and to allow any shows to be held in the North Island.

We established our annual Battle of the Giants event the following year and this match between the St Bernards,

Newfoundlands, Bernese Mountain Dogs, Leonbergers and Pyrenean Mountain Dogs is still going strong, all these years on. Our membership base has always been stable and as a single breed club, unlike many, we are still strong and have not faltered. At the club's peak, in the 1990s we had more than 70 St Bernards attend our Championship Shows, but the change of lifestyle and the poor economy has resulted in the St Bernard experiencing another dip in its popularity.

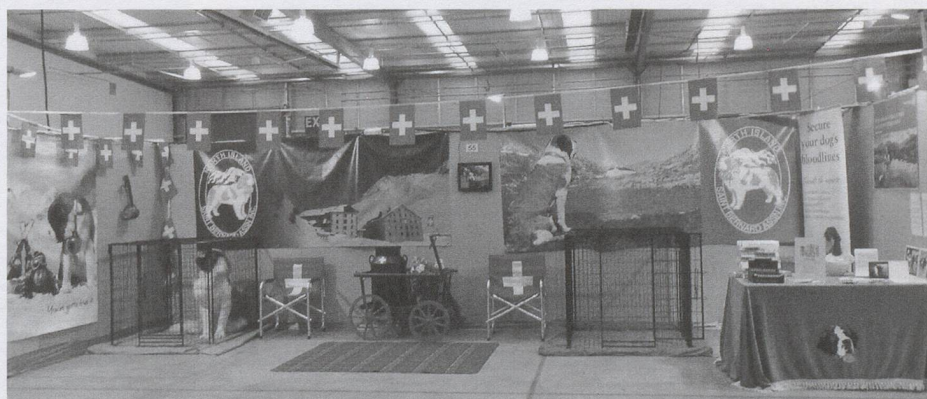
This year, for our 30th Championship Show Anniversary, we are holding a very special show called The Swiss Show 2015 and it will include the 7th Championship Show for the only other recognized Swiss breed of dog in New Zealand, the Bernese Mountain Dog. This show is being held at a 4-star resort in Rotorua in October and will be presided over by knowledgeable breed judges, a husband and wife team from the USA. We hope to make this a very special Swiss weekend with Swiss decoration and food, and of course Swiss dogs. I might mention that unfortunately not one of our club members is Swiss so we are 'winging' it a little.

We are currently fund raising and seeking product and financial sponsorship for this very special event.

We will again be at the Swiss Market Day in Auckland this year. Please come and say 'hi' and meet the dogs. We loved it last year, and we were touched by how many of you had St Bernards or Bernese as pets when you were children.

Our club produces an e-magazine five times per year. If you would like to receive a complementary copy or any information on our club, please email us on nisbainc@gmail.com

Uf Widerluege, Charmaine Kendrick



NISBA Inc stall at 2013 Pet Expo - before the crowds.