

Berne's bears beat the bunnies

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FRENCH novelist Alexandre Dumas wasn't exaggerating when, on his travels through Switzerland some 150 years ago, he remarked that statues of bears were to be found in Berne with the same abundance that monuments to patron saints were seen in other cities.

Even today, many are the public and private buildings and centuries-old fountains in cobbled, picturesque streets still decorated with stone and bronze figures of the capital's traditional emblem.

Visitors to this city will also find the sacred beast on the bottle of beer he drinks, the biscuits he eats and the buses he rides on.

Berne's famous bear pit itself will be the centre of attraction on Easter Sunday (April 3) when, weather permitting, the latest cuddly cubs make their traditional spring bow before the public. In Berne, in fact, the baby bears rival Switzerland's traditional Easter bunnies for popularity.

★★★

The bears – frequently of Russian, Hungarian, Yugoslav or Turkish origin – are born in January. They remain blind for about 30 days after birth, but within another month begin to walk.

They weigh a mere 10 to 12 ounces at birth, but can tip the scales at a quarter of a ton when fully grown. And a bear can often live in captivity for at least 30 years without showing any signs of old age.

Bears have been kept in Berne since the 12th century, when dashing Duke Berchtold V of Zähringen founded the city and – so the story goes – decided to name it after the first animal killed in a local hunt.

The oldest town seal, dating back to 1224, already shows a bear as a symbol, and the first authentic record of a permanent bearpit here dates back to 1480.



The baby bears of Berne make their Easter bow

In the Easter popularity parade . . .

Berne's bears beat the bunnies

By COLIN FARMER

Documents have even been found in which the city authorities went on record as having ordered several bags of acorns as fodder for the animals.

Only once has this city been without its famous beasts and that was in 1798 when the troops of Napoleon I plundered Berne, took the bears from their pit and actually carted them back to Paris.

Only one cub was left – dead – in its pit, and this same animal may still be seen today in Berne History Museum.

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The bear pits, located at the Nydeggrücke, currently house more than a dozen well cared for animals which flourish in their captivity. They are fed on a strictly

vegetarian diet of apples, figs, carrots, bread and protein-rich "bear cubes" made from a special recipe provided by Basle Zoo. The older bears drink only water, the cubs milk and Ovaltine.

There have been occasional accidents in which chickens, dogs and cats have fallen to their deaths in the bear pit, and there have also been four human victims.

The earliest on record dates back to 1861 when the *Illustrated London News* graphically recounted "the shocking manner" in which a young English army officer met his death.

A certain Captain Lorts "over-balanced himself" and "efforts were then made to extricate the unfortunate man from his

perilous position by means of hoisting him up with ropes.

"At the moment when he was being hoisted out of the pit and had reached halfway up, the bear became savage and tore him down into the pit again.

"A horrible struggle then ensued which, after nearly half an hour's duration, resulted in Captain Lorts being killed by the ferocious beast . . ."

Almost as popular these days as the bear pit itself are jokes – not always appreciated by the Bernese – which compare the capital's inhabitants with the city's sacred animals.

Some stories even point to striking similarities in physique and character between the bears and the Bernese – thick-set, the same slow ambling walk, and somewhat on the grumpy side when their habits and routine are interfered with.