

## A Beautiful Life

**S**HE NEEDED NO SECOND invitation. The door opened and in she came. Smiles were exchanged and there were those big soulful eyes, moist with attraction. It was love at first sight. Within seconds, greetings truncated, her nose was in the kitchen bin. There should have been no surprise about this as a labrador's stomach is, apparently, extremely close to its eyes and even closer to its nose. The owners of the house came a poor second to the contents of that bin.

Urgent calls from her master had little effect, well, actually, no effect at all. Her nose and head had disappeared into the plastic bin, accompanied by a series of grunts and snuffles signifying a combination of delight and anticipation. That was our first view of Bess; no head, intense black sides plus a thick and joyous tail. She often came to stay after that initial visit. It was the canine equivalent of respite care from her owners, allowing the portcullis into their pantry to be raised.

Preparations for the visit were always the same: remove the tray of chocolate biscuits from beside the piano, elevate the chocolates off the television, banish the fruit bowl and hide the walnuts from the hearth, although the latter were the objects of play and a bit of light teeth rattling rather than a serious attempt at eating, but we never felt quite the same about cracking nuts that had been halfway to her tonsils and back again.

## The SAD Jobber

Preparations completed, the door could be opened and in she hurtled, kitchen first stop. Having sniffed all round the bins and beside cupboard doors she cast a lustful eye upwards, where, by now, her dog food lay on Shipton's highest and most inaccessible shelf. Reaching her paws onto the kitchen unit she looked firstly at the food, secondly, and reproachfully, at us. No labrador likes waiting for mealtimes.

Eventually, when all hopes of an early feast had disappeared, she would settle down, head on her paws, usually on the rug. Turn your back, however, and a large black shape filled the sofa. These periods of complete calm were rare.

Any movement, simply reaching for a pen for the crossword, and two eyelids would lift, those eyes would open in expectation of a four letter word starting with f, ending with d.

If she was bored she turned on her back, legs in the air and squirmed her spine to left and right in an ecstasy of massage, all the while grunting or sneezing. One final sneeze then it was back to a bit of serious resting just to fill the time before dinner. Any move towards the kitchen by anybody at any time of day was inevitably followed by a quivering black shadow.

As mealtimes approached, she grew more and more restless, but her attempts at hastening the moment lacked guile or any semblance of subtlety.

First it was paws on the armchair then with a lurch and a close encounter from the canine Xpelair she was on your lap or gently persuading you to leave your chair. One large labrador on one small wife gets the latter out of sight, if not out of mind.

Eventually, the labrador's *raison d'être* arrives: dinner.

Barely concealing her dribbles she stands beside the work surface, almost motionless or occasionally pawing the ground, her nose lifted upwards as those last moments seem endless. A squirt of water transforms the dry unpalatable mess into a wet unpalatable mess, then holding her back, the bowl is lowered onto a large piece of newspaper in the middle of the most unvisited part of the utility room and the very unequal struggle between dog and mess ensues. In barely half a minute the battle is over, her tongue strokes longingly around the bowl and then she sniffs the newspaper, just in case.

A belch would not be out of place.

Taking her for a walk was a real pleasure, apart, that is, from the distractions. We walked down to the petrol station, Bess straining at the lead, then across past the garage and into the field. Once off the lead she lumbered forward into a heavy gallop, nose skimming the ground that magic four letter word never far from her snout. Old cow pancakes were a special favourite. Preoccupied with such delicacies she usually fell way behind but then chased back up, ears flapping like the sides of a poorly co-ordinated deerstalker, tail swaying and a welcoming grin utterly devoid of guilt.

Over time that run became more cumbersome, her nose more grey. While her eyes glazed, her sense of smell never faltered; chocolate wrappers kept their attention. But last week's walk was her last. Down the drive and then she lay, panting, exhausted but still wagging her tail.

And so ended a beautiful life, a life remembered with mellow photos and a gentle crinkle of the eyes.

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### **'THROUGH THE GARDEN GATE'**

This is the title of Dorothy Pavey's next exhibition which will begin Spring Bank Holiday weekend in Churchill Village Hall.

As the title suggests you will be led through garden gates into many delightful garden scenes, ranging from the grandeur of borders at Dean Manor to cameos from tiny gardens in the local villages. Cotswold landscapes and wild flowers add to the variety and interest.

### **DATES AND OPENING TIMES**

Sunday 26th May 1.00 p.m. - 8.00 p.m. Monday 27th May 10.00 a.m. - 8.00 p.m.

Tuesday 28th May to Saturday 1st June 10.00 a.m. - 5.00 p.m.

Sunday 2nd June 1.00 p.m. - 5.00 p.m.