

Don't Worry, He Doesn't Bite

Above are the five simple words that have increased my anxiety levels over the years tenfold. Never a claim made by most dog owners, inevitably they are uttered by an innocent customer who truly believes what he or she is saying, namely that their dog:

- a) Can do no wrong at all
- b) Is as obedient and intelligent as Lassie
- c) Can be controlled by said owner via voice alone

Only once in his career does a postman believe this claim – and that is the first time he hears it. Never again will those five little words bring him any other feelings except terror.

These words ‘Don’t worry, he doesn’t bite,’ are the opening salvo to which two further sentences will then be added.

Swiftly follows the most incredulous, shocked voice you will ever hear in your life, stating:

‘Well, he’s never done that before!’

Which then leads, as night follows day, to the third line which is delivered smoothly and glibly,

‘You must have done something to upset him.’

When faced with any unknown dog, I wish to assure the world on behalf of all Posties everywhere: it is a dead cert that none of us has the least intention of upsetting anything that has teeth.

Most dogs are friendly whenever you meet them and that’s in the nature of things. However, we do understand certain principles a dog must abide by. He is after all a pack animal by nature; and territorial and protective, he will defend his home and his pack if he feels there is danger.

The female can be even worse if she believes the young of the pack are being threatened; no sane Postie will get between a mother and her young: that’s suicidal.

But in the cases of the ‘biters’, I look at the owners and ask myself: is it just possible the fault of the aggressive dog could lie with someone else, perhaps?

Royal Mail Shorts

One of the most frequent questions I'm asked as a postman is: 'Why are you wearing shorts?'

In fairness, this question is normally put to me in the depths of winter when it is raining, snowing, or blowing a hoolie.

Normally, before I have time to answer, I am thrown a few suggestions that the questioner thinks might be my reasons, namely:

Is it for a bet?

Is it for charity?

Has something happened to your normal trousers?

or – the most popular one –

Are you mad?

I don't recall ever being asked any of these questions as a young schoolboy back in the Fifties and Sixties when I wore exactly the same basic ensemble, as part of my school uniform. Nobody seemed in the least concerned about me getting cold in the depths of winter then.

The reality for me (and I expect a lot of other Posties as well) is very simple: wearing shorts is the most comfortable way of doing the job. We work a very physical day which is different from most other physical jobs in that we are constantly moving from A to B. From the moment I leave the office, I am walking; from the moment I leave my van, I am hurrying. I walk up hill and down dale, climb steps and walk paths; I am moving all the time.

Shorts keep my legs cool and stop me overheating; and most of us don't feel the cold when the blood is pumping through the old veins.

Of course, sometimes it's really cold. An east wind blowing snowflakes up the leg of your shorts is not a fun way of working, believe me. However, when it rains, I would sooner have bare legs than have cold, sopping wet trousers flapping around and clinging to me. Amazingly, bare legs stay warmer and they certainly do dry off quicker.

I learnt that as a schoolboy. Try it yourself – it works.

Surprise Visitor

There is a strict rule in Royal Mail that ‘no unauthorised passengers’ are allowed in the mail vans. I had one in mine the other day... and he came through the window!! The van was parked in somebody’s driveway, I returned and climbed in, and there he was.

Sitting quietly in my mail tray on the front passenger seat, and looking like he owned the place, was a small Robin Redbreast. Did he know that postmen were called ‘Robins’ in earlier times because of their red jacketed uniforms?

Unafraid and seeming at ease in his surroundings, he watched me across the gear stick, and cocked his head on one side. I gazed spellbound at him for a moment and then grinned.

‘I can’t drive this thing with you sitting there.’

Unconcerned by this revelation he cocked his head on the other side before hopping around the edge of my post tray and getting closer to me. He then turned his head and his sharp eyes seemed to peer into every part of the van.

Obviously used to being in close proximity to humans, he happily hopped and fluttered around the van before flying up and standing on top of the steering wheel. He was barely an inch away from my hand.

Warm black eyes stared brightly at me from above a smart red breast, as each of us quietly regarded the other.

It was a magical moment.

‘Nice to meet you,’ I whispered, as his head bobbed up and down, before he tilted it first one way and then the other. Time stood still for a brief moment as he bade a silent goodbye, and then, with a flutter, he turned and flew out of the window.

That close connection, wild creature and human being, touched my very soul.

The Slow Worm and the Cat

I was walking down a garden path while on a delivery and watched as a cat leapt out of the hedge and pounced on a bit of old cable sticking out of the lawn. Teeth grasping, he pulled, but seemed to slide off the end of it, before opening his mouth to try again. It was then the cable thrashed about a bit and I realised it was a slow worm.

Instinctively I jumped forward and yelled at the cat, which immediately leaped a few feet away, before turning and crouching down. Its tail lashed angrily as it hissed at me.

I couldn't leave the slow worm so I grasped it gently, yet firmly, before pulling it out of the ground. I had no idea that they burrowed underground and it was quite hard to pull it free. It curled up in my hand and seemed to look at me.

The furious cat advanced a pace at a time at me and looked so intimidating I felt it prudent to get away from the thing, so I moved off.

Once out of the gate I walked across the road but, glancing back, I saw the moggy watching me.

I am well aware that nature is 'red in tooth and claw', but I dislike the idea of a well-fed pet killing something just because it can.

It was a short while later in another road that I found a shady and slightly damp area of woodland in another large garden.

Confirming that the cat was nowhere to be seen and I hadn't been followed, I put the slow worm down on a sheltered bit of soil under the trees and left it to its own devices. Did I do the right thing? I don't know...but it did look very grateful.

Llamedos

We postmen like houses with numbers. You can swiftly count your way along a street and locate the property you are after. A house name with no number, in a road where you are delivering parcels, however, results in you creeping along, head swivelling back and forth like radar, as you try to locate the place.

Beech Cottage can be self-explanatory if you spot a large beech tree in a garden. The Pink House is easily found if it is the only pink house in a road. Thatched Cottage speaks for itself.

It's when you get a name like Mon Repose, or Fred-Dora, or Capri Sunset; that's when you struggle. Some house names are nailed to a tree, which is fine in winter but useless in summer. Some are faded, some overgrown, some are even missing altogether.

Slowly the van creeps along the road, flashers flashing... then you spot the house and slam the brakes on. The bloke behind you, already annoyed about you creeping along, has now almost rammed the back of the van. He gets even crosser as you jump out of the van and launch yourself at the house in question. It really is amazing how quickly you forget about everything else when you are just focussed on getting rid of an item of post and are trying to find the property.

House names can tell you much though. Soldiers Rest, Dunworking; these can explain the people inside. The Old Chapel, The Old School House; these explain the building's original use. St Helena or Mumbles explains either a favourite holiday place or a previous home.

Some are inexplicable like Atlantic View. Not in St Mawes it's not...that's the Channel out there.

And as for Llamedos...No, it is not a Welsh word, nor old English. Even I know that backwards it says Sod 'em All.

A Million Flies

Years ago, as a young Postie, I delivered mail to a fairly run-down property. The whole place was past its prime and in need of repair. I never saw many signs of life except for a tatty old collie who had long seen better days.

In a yard which consisted mainly of mud and dung, this dog was never clean. About him circled a million flies. His sad life consisted of sleeping in a doorway; or simply lying in the mud.

He may have been a working dog once but those days seemed long gone.

The smell off him was something else, as were the flies. Sometimes he was covered in stuff that defied description, other times he was soaking wet from the previous night's rain.

Every morning when I got there he would nose at my pocket and I would give him a dog biscuit. He always wagged his tail at me, and his sole surviving ear would prick up at my voice.

Then one day he was gone. I missed him and assumed he'd died. It was a couple of weeks later that the owner asked me had I seen the dog. Picking the sense out between the swear words, I understood that the dog had wandered away...and would not be missed.

A couple of months later, I started on another duty. This was about three or four miles away.

A small and tidy cottage on the new route had a wonderful elderly lady living in it. She had an old dog and introduced me to it. A clean, glossy-coated collie ran towards me, tail wagging, and pressed his nose up against the pocket I always carried the biscuits in.

His one ear pricked up as I gave him a biscuit. His secret was safe with me.