

THE MASTIFF

The Mastiff is one of the oldest breeds of dogs, most probably originating in the mountains of Asia. It is the ancestor of the giant breeds. Bas relief's of the Babylonian era depict Mastiffs hunting lions and horses. Phoenician traders probably introduced the Mastiff to England where the Romans found them and brought them back to fight in the arena. Marco Polo wrote of the court of Kublai Khan who kept a kennel of 5,000 Mastiffs used for hunting and dogs of war. Hannibal, when he crossed the Alps, left Mastiffs behind which crossed with local native breeds to produce St. Bernards, once called the Alpine Mastiff, and all the massive mountain dogs of Spain, France, Turkey, and the Balkans have Mastiff blood in their ancestry. Even the Chow carries his blood as does the Pug, which was originally a form of a dwarf Mastiff.

Of all the countries who used the Mastiff, it was the British who kept him to his purest form, and it is to them that we owe the Mastiff of today. They kept it to guard their castles and estates, releasing them at night to ward off intruders. Henry the VIII is said to have presented Charles the VI of Spain a gift of 400 Mastiffs to be used in battle. The Legh family of Lyme Hall, Cheshire, who were given their estate by Richard the II (1377-1399), kept and bred Mastiffs for many years, and reference is found in Stowe's Annual which shows that James the I (1603-1625) sent a gift of two Lyme Mastiffs to Phillip the III of Spain.

The first conclusive evidence of the Mastiff in the United States comes in the early 1880's when they began to appear at bench shows. World War I saw the decline of the Mastiff in the United States and England. World War II almost eliminated the breed in England altogether. At the end of the war, dogs were imported to England from Canada and the United States to re-establish the breed. Slowly but surely, as time passed, the breed became popular again.