

|| True British Blue:

or: a speculative history of the Cheshire Cat.

As a child, I once found an enormous plush grey-blue cat. It sat smiling at me from under a tree, and was the biggest cat I'd ever seen. It stayed in my house as a cherished stray for some weeks, until finally claimed by its delighted owner. The cat was revealed to be a British Blue shorthair cat, and it had - like its fine breed - the distinctive "Cheshire cat" smile.

This short and speculative article seeks the origin of this breed - and perhaps the origin of the "Cheshire cat" - and so peers deep into the mists of Ancient Britain, bulking out the known facts with some intelligent speculation.

My main speculation is that cats probably first arrived in Britain from Egypt via Phoenician traders. Between 800-300BC ocean-going Phoenician ships began to extend their coastal trade routes up the Atlantic coast of Gaul (France & Brittany). They eventually reached Kernow (Cornwall) where they traded for strategically vital metals; such as the tin needed to make the bronze swords and shields of the Ancient World, and for Irish gold.

Phoenicians were the best traders and sailors in the Ancient World, and did not overlook the value of cats as dual-purpose trade items and mouse-catchers. The Phoenician cats were descended from breeding pairs seized from Egyptian administrators centuries before - when in 1100BC the Phoenician city-states had revolted and thus become independent of Egypt. If the revolt had not happened, then the Phoenicians would have found it hard to smuggle cats from Egypt - since cats there had been sacred beings since the invention of large-scale agriculture, and the penalty for export was death.

Since Egypt would go as far as sending soldiers to recover its "stolen" cats, Phoenician traders must have had to establish secret breeding catteries far away from Egypt's sphere-of-influence. That probably meant outside the Mediterranean, although the Moroccan coastline can't be ruled out. An island off the north Atlantic coast of Brittany would have made a sensible staging-post, reachable only by Phoenician ocean-going ships. There they could raise acclimatised kittens for use as valuable short-haul trading items all along their Atlantic-coast trade-routes. (It is interesting to note, in this respect, that there are many ancient nautical terms & weather-words that refer to cats.)

There is evidence from as far afield as Scotland in the Iron Age that this was a pan-European trade: a 2006 study, by archeologist Eva Fairnell at York University, found that...

"Analysis of animal bones at [Iron Age] settlements on Scottish islands suggests that non-native species were imported and bred specifically for their pelts"

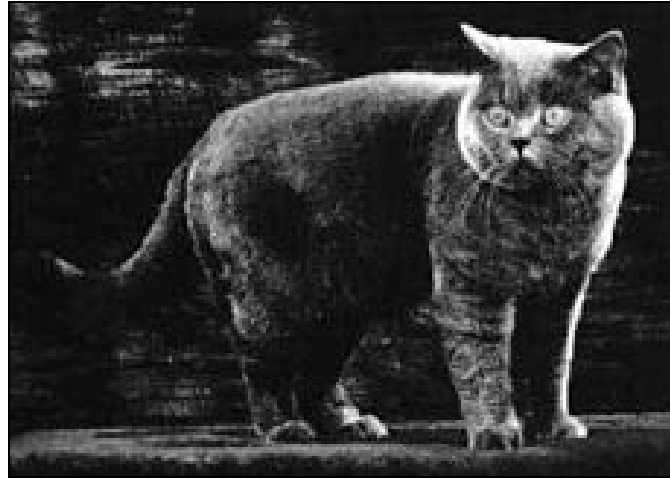
This implies wide-ranging trade routes for animals, and a consequent need to acclimatise animals as they were taken north.

Here we enter into real speculation; the clever Phoenicians were famed for their canny trading methods, so they may even have fostered the myth that cats *had* to be smuggled out of distant Egypt - thereby inflating the value of each kitten. They may also have traded only in female cats, frustrating the wish of the British tribes to breed their own.

Local Cornish tribes may have previously tried to domesticate wildcats; but trials with the modern breed suggest they are simply impossible to domesticate. Pre-Roman southern-Britain wildcats may have been very different, however - as recent research shows that the modern Scottish wildcat is genetically very mixed-up and is probably not much like the original native wildcats at all.

So; perhaps the Cornovii tried to hybridise their Phoenician cats with an older purer native English wildcat, varieties of which had been prolific in all the British Isles except Ireland since the ice-ages ended. We know that, genetically, this is possible; and also that cross-breeding is a concept that a pastoral people would have been quite familiar with. After a few generations of selective breeding a tame hybrid would appear, and would....

- 1) have had the British Blue's unique thick-set water-repellent fur, suitable for the British climate,
- 2) have the Blue's characteristic square & muscled body of large size, very different from the sleek Egyptian cats,
- 3) have the Blue's slow growth-rate compared to "modern" cats, and
- 4) have the Blue's formidable mousing and rat-catching talents.



But, but, but.... you say; the scant archeological evidence for early cats (one bone, and some footprints padding across wet clay) is from the later Romano-British period. So didn't the Romans introduce the domestic cat to Britain? Perhaps they did, in a few southern micro-climates; but we also know Romans regarded their few Abyssinian/Egyptian cats as rare and exotic pets unsuited to the cold damp British climate, and preferred the mongoose for vermin control on their ships. Even if cat ownership had not been illegal for citizens in the Roman Empire (so as to keep the peace with the Egyptians), the Ancient British would probably have laughed at the idea of the elegant sparse-haired Roman cat as a serious large-scale rat-catching solution for granaries and food-stores during a British winter. So, for these reasons it seems unlikely that the Romans were the main source of British cats.

Let us assume then that my Phoenician <-> Cornwall <-> Cornovii theory may be nearer the truth, and see if it will incidentally throw some light on the mystery of the shadowy origins of the "Cheshire Cat". For, when the Roman occupation of Britain battled its way as far north as what is now North Shropshire / Cheshire / North Staffordshire, we know they found there.... the Cornovii tribe, a large tribe whose symbol has always been thought to have been a *cat*. Some scholars suggest that this same tribe, some 500 years earlier, had been living in Cornwall and trading tin with the Phoenician ships. When the early Atlantic-coast sea-routes were replaced by efficient trans-Europe river-routes to the Mediterranean, these Cheshire Cornovii had migrated out of Cornwall. I suggest the Cornovii had taken their hybrid cats with them to Cheshire.

This North West Midlands area was later to become the heartland of the first of the great English Anglo-Saxon kingdoms - the place where Anglian settlers had mixed with the Cornovii to build the early kingdom of Mercia. These Anglo-Saxons and their immediate neighbours kept cats. Here are some examples of this:

- 1) There is a pre-Christian Anglian rite-of-healing that requires cat-skin gloves (although this may mean wildcat).
- 2) images of cats decorate the earliest Celtic manuscripts, and in an eighth-century poem an Irish monk says that....

"Hunting mice is my cat's delight; but hunting words, I sit all night."

- 3) Hywel, Prince of South Wales, passed a law on the value of a cat; a kitten was worth a penny until it opened its eyes, then tuppence until it caught the first mouse, and afterwards worth a groat.
- 4) Cats are spoken of in the divorce-laws of the Anglo-Saxons; the divorced man kept one cat while the divorced wife had the right to keep the rest.
- 5) A hamlet, to be legally defined as such on the Welsh borders in the 10th century, must contain one cat.

As we have clearly seen above, the Mercian Angles and their Welsh neighbours (with whom they had strong treaties for centuries) are known to have valued their cats greatly, and the domestic cat was firmly & fondly present on the Welsh-English border and in the North West Midlands, even before the coming of Christianity to Mercia circa AD 600.

I thus suggest that the cat breed of the Cornovii/Mercians was basically the British Blue with its large size, round eyes and distinctive 'smiling' face; and that *here* lies the origin of the large grinning 'Cheshire Cat' immortalised by Lewis Carroll.

But didn't the Cheshire-born & raised Carroll merely invent such a cat? It seems not; the Cheshire cat is first recorded grinning in a line of poetry by Pindar...

"Lo, like a Cheshire cat our court will grin."

in the 1790s, and Goss's 1811 Slang Dictionary records

"Grins like a Cheshire cat"

So the saying pre-dates Lewis Carroll by a century or more - probably more; I'm told that a large-eyed grinning cat can be seen carved on the walls of the medieval Cheshire church of Grappenhall:



Grappenhall church cat carving, possibly Tudor era?

So the grinning Cheshire cat was well-known throughout England *before* Carroll. For some reason the breed had remained distinctive & localised enough for it to be remarked upon in print. It seems likely that this distinctive and remarkable Cheshire cat was what we now call the British Blue.

Meanwhile, the smaller tabby cat - perhaps a legacy of the Crusades and/or trade with Moorish Spain - had become the familiar domestic cat throughout Britain since the 10th Century, and its unsmiling non-plussed face can be seen in numerous paintings and sketches. Ginger cats appear, from an academic study of their national distribution pattern, to have first arrived in parts of northern Britain controlled by the Vikings - a fact that seems to suggest that some of the peoples and tribes of Britain did indeed have distinctive 'totemic' cat breeds associated with them. If this was true of the Vikings, it may also have been true of the Cheshire Cornovii.

So why did Carroll come to include this particular smiling Cheshire breed in his story, accidentally saving its memory for posterity? That is really a matter for Carrollian scholars to argue, but their most plausible explanation is this; the whimsical genius of the Cheshire-born Carroll had made the breed's smile the subject of a dice-game he invented to amuse his young friends (a peg-board cat's head vanishes as the game is played, leaving only its smile - see the book *The Magic of Lewis Carroll*). The *Wonderland* story, invented to amuse the real Alice during a summer river-trip, was intended to delight by making fantastical references to things familiar to her; thus his peg-board cat game became *Alice's* Cheshire Cat. After twenty-five centuries, and in the nick of time, the remembrance of the uniquely British cat of the Cornovii had been enshrined for posterity in the pages of *Alice in Wonderland*.

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Further reading:

The Romans in Cheshire. Tom Garlick. Dalesman, 1973.

The Ancient Celts. Barry Cunliffe. Penguin, 1999.

The Magic of Lewis Carroll.

Classical Cats. Routledge, 1999.

Alice in Wonderland. Lewis Carroll. 1865.

The Domestic Cat; the biology of its behaviour. Turner & Bateson.
Cambridge University Press, 2nd Ed., 2000.

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D'Log, <http://www.d-log.info>

British Blue shorthair, profile, taken from the web:



"This cat is a strikingly large cat with a round, substantial chest, broad shoulders and hips, and a level back. Its well-muscled squarish body is supported by stoutly boned, short to medium legs that give the cat a low-slung appearance. This majestic package is wrapped in a short, dense, resilient & water-resistant coat. It is indeed 'the British Bulldog of the cat world'. Full adulthood comes over five years, far more slowly than other breeds.

A thick, bull-like neck supports the broad, massive, well-rounded head, capped with small-to-medium-size ears that are broad at the base and round at the tips. It has large, round eyes. Its nose is short but without a break (a change of direction where the forehead meets the muzzle). Ample cheeks and a well-developed muzzle give this breed the characteristic 'permanent smile on their faces'."