

Letter from Tokyo
By David Watts

TOUCHING TRIBUTE TO CANINE LOYALTY

Every dog has his day but few spend it as a station master. Next month, a Japanese dog will become station master at Shibuya, one of Tokyo's busiest commuter stations.

He will spend the day with his human counterpart doing everything with the conscientiousness for which both are renowned.

The dog, White Treasure, will be marking not only the fiftieth anniversary of the death of Japan's most famous canine but a national affection for dogs which is becoming almost British in its intensity.

Outside Shibuya station stands a statue of Hachiko, a small sturdy dog that used to accompany Dr Eizaburo Ueno to the station every day when he went off to Tokyo's Imperial University. When Dr Ueno died suddenly in 1925 Hachiko met his master's evening train each day for the next nine years hoping he would return.

A local milkman fed him until he became so well known among commuters that he was never lacking for either food or attention.

Hachiko came to represent all the qualities most highly valued by the Japanese - loyalty and endurance - and as a result it was mentioned in one of the pre-war school textbooks in a essay on ethics entitled "don't forget gratitude".

Once White Treasure has completed his rounds of the ticket barriers, platforms and the travel centre, all spruced up to celebrate the station's centenary, he will go out on to the tiled plaza in front of the station to inspect the statue of his famous ancestor of the Akita breed.

Dogs in Japan have never had it so good since the late 17th century, when Shogun Tsunayoshi, known as the Dog Shogun, passed a law that all dogs must be treated kindly and addressed in only the most polite terms. He took the law to such extremes that he ended up caring for 100,000 dogs, which got the Exchequer into trouble, caused inflation and resulted in an unpopular new tax on farmers.

Tsunayoshi would be proud of his present-day countrymen. Today scarcely a house in the better-off suburbs of Tokyo is without a pampered little Taro-chan. The law however, has gone some way to reverse the shogun's liberalism: dogs must be regularly exercised but must also be kept strictly under control. Many of them can be seen out daily with their mistresses, straining at the lead to get at some of the ~~more~~ more interesting passers-by, looking exceedingly well fed.