

# Cats are top dog in the home

**Anne Boston** welcomes the increasing popularity of *felis domesticus*, which fell from god to symbol of devilry and rose to a special place in British hearts.

THE British are batty about cats. A quarter of all British families — 5.4 million households — own at least one cat, and the Cats Protection League claims they are fast replacing the dog as our most popular pet. To mark the trend, the League is launching Britain's first National Cat Week on 20 September, when we will be invited to celebrate the allure of these charismatic creatures.

Cats were first domesticated by the Egyptians, who revered them as gods. Such was their status that a Roman soldier who drove his chariot over a cat in Alexandria was stoned to death by an enraged mob. It was in Roman times that the first domesticated felines arrived here. Apart from an image problem in the Middle Ages, when they became associated with witchcraft and sorcery, cats have remained an integral feature of British life ever since.

According to the Cats Protection League, most people who have cats were brought up in homes where cats were kept. Six per cent of households own more than one cat, and nearly 22,000 have six or more cats.

Cats are at the heart of a lucrative industry. There are 7.6 million in Britain and last year they ate 570,000 tons of prepared catfood worth more than £533 million. According to a Whiskas survey, this is 60 per cent of the total national feline diet — the rest is accounted for by leftovers or specially bought fresh treats. The Treasury exacts 17.5 per cent VAT on every item of catfood sold, collecting £93.5m, so cats arguably pay their way in society.

Pedigree cats can be highly profitable, with kittens worth hundreds of pounds each. Add to this the ancillary businesses

— vets, pharmaceutical products, cat litter, brushes and combs, collars, toys and scratching posts, food dishes, cat doors, bedding, travelling baskets or boxes, and the hundreds of cat books and calendars published every year — and you have a respectable contribution to the economy. That's without the army of jobs they create in animal welfare charities.

Cats are a seemingly endless source of fascinating facts. They are, for example, extraordinarily prolific: in theory, one queen and her descendants could produce 20,000 offspring in five years. Their purr, produced by the vibration of blood in a large vein in the chest cavity, is believed to be a homing device to newborn kittens, which are blind and deaf. They sleep more than any other mammals — an average of 16

hours a day — but their brains are as active in deep sleep as when the cat is awake, allowing for instantaneous arousal.

But it is their tendency to slip in and out of contact with people which is most fascinating. Unique among domestic animals, it is at the heart of an ambivalent relationship. Ambivalent because, although we love them for their beauty, supple agility and air of self-containment, their caterwauling and 'cruel' games with prey have created diabolic myths.

Their fortunes fell lowest in and after the Middle Ages, when, for 300 years and more, cats were appallingly persecuted because they were believed to be the Devil's familiar. Dr Johnson was among those who helped champion the cat's return to favour; he owned several, including the famous Hodge. The first cat show in 1871 confirmed the rehabilitation of its reputation as a pet.

The Cats Protection League (motto: 'We help if we can'), has 13 shelters run by full-time

staff, plus 220 voluntary groups with 4,500 members. Through their work, 76,212 cats were 'rehomed' last year.

If you report a homeless or sick animal, the League aims to collect and take it into care. To limit the number of unwanted kittens, it also contributes to vets' fees for neutering cats where the owner cannot afford them; neuters every cat taken into its care; and insists that people adopting a kitten sign a form agreeing to have it spayed.

The popularity of cats is now such that at least one in three strays is adopted. But cruelty is still common, and the number of cats abandoned increased with the recession. Their nine lives are often used up in accidents: a survey at a north London vet's surgery showed that, after bites and road accidents, the third most common cause of injury was from High Rise Syndrome — cats falling out of windows in tall buildings.

They are also notoriously prone to disease: after cat flu and enteritis, feline leukaemia and the feline version of Aids are among the commonest killers. As yet there are no known cures. In addition, there are fanciers who breed freakish 'designer' strains with flat pug-like faces, hairless bodies and so on, causing physical disabilities.

But as long as there are rats and mice we shall need cats; and American research confirms what every cat lover knew — that stroking a cat calms the human as well as the cat, and is an ideal antidote to workplace stress. Those with high blood pressure, take note. Cats are increasingly used for therapeutic purposes in British hospitals and nursing homes.

For their part, having established the usefulness of humans 3,500 years ago, cats will doubtless continue to exploit us.

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*Stroking a cat calms people, too./Photograph by Anthea Sieveking.*

Obscure Sept '93