

# ISHERWOOD ENGLISH SETTERS



A quick glimpse of some English Setters on Blue Peter TV programme was all it took to convert Val Isherwood. “As soon as I saw them, I thought “that’s the breed for me” says Mrs. Isherwood, who was after a replacement for her Sheltie. She now has six Setters and one English Pointer. “These dogs can read your mind and your body language,” she enthuses, as we watch her setters bound around the garden of her hilltop cottage, overlooking Weardale. “However, they’ve got a special temperament” she cautions. “They’re not at all aggressive and you can’t be hard on them – they would fold before they would retaliate. I won’t say they’re not naughty, but they do want to please.”

Although Mrs Isherwood’s first setter Ben was a show dog (generally larger than their working counterparts, with deeper chests and domed head), it wasn’t long before the breed’s natural hunting ability led her to a field trial. “ I saw this hunting trait coming out, even in the show dogs,” she explains. “We lived in Wiltshire then, and I used to stand on Salisbury Plain whistling when the dogs were quartering miles away. The first time I went to a breed stake and watched those dogs working on the hill, my throat was raw with emotion.” Mrs. Isherwood’s husband, Les, began training the couple’s own field trial champion Upperwood Jan The Jewel of Laverstoke.

Both competed with her, winning five open stakes on partridge, pheasant and grouse and 20 years on from that first field trial, the handsome dogs in the couple’s smart duck-egg-blue-painted kennels are all descended from Jan and, as honorary treasurer of the English Setter Club ([www.englishsetterclub.co.uk](http://www.englishsetterclub.co.uk)) the oldest gundog club running under Kennel Club (KC) rules – Mrs. Isherwood is fully immersed in the world of the working setters. With its flecked, flowing coat (the flecking is known as Belton, in blue, orange or lemon), long feathered tail and fluent action, the graceful English

Setter is widely regarded as the gentleman of the shooting field. One of our oldest breeds of gundog, whose history can be traced back to the 14<sup>th</sup> century, a setter's sporting prowess is demonstrated by its ability to range freely over open terrain in search of game, abruptly coming to a halt on air-scenting its quarry, crouching (or setting) and remaining motionless, to indicate a bird.

These qualities were first described in print by John Caius, who wrote of *Englishe Dogges*: 'These attend diligently upon theyr Master..... when he hath founde the byrde, he keepeth sure and fast silence, he stayeth his steppes and will proceede no further, and with a close, couert, watching eye layeth his belly to the grounde and so creepeth forward like a worme.' In Tudor times, setters, then known as setting spaniels were used to locate game birds, which were then caught in nets or by falcons. By the 18<sup>th</sup> century when muzzle-loading guns replaced the net, the dogs became more commonly known as setters. There are four types of setter, English, Irish, Irish red and white and Gordon (a black-and-tan setter established by the Duke of Gordon). Thought to be descended from spaniels, setters didn't separate into the breeds we know today until the 19<sup>th</sup> century, although there were various strains named after the aristocratic families who kept them (such as Lord Lovat, The Earl of Seafield and the Earl of Derby). Today's English setter, a registered KC breed since 1873, owes much to Edward Laverack (1800-1877) and Richard Purcell Llewellyn (1840-1925) who developed showing and working strains of the dog. For Bettie Town, president of the English Setter Club, the breed's appeal lies in the dog's kindly nature, elegance and quick brain. "English setters are the cleverest of all the pointing breeds; they make great pets and are superb with children," she says. Despite being in her eighties she's lost none of her enthusiasm for the dogs she's worked and shot over for more than 50 years.

With such an enviable reputation for being glamorous, yet hard-working, intelligent yet gentle, it came as a surprise when the Kennel Club announced earlier this year (2012) that the English setter is at risk of extinction. With only 234 puppy registrations in 2011, the setter joined 24 other dogs on the club's list of native vulnerable breeds. In part celebrity taste, popular culture and fashion are to blame. 'Unfortunately, dogs are not immune from our fickle tastes,' comments KC secretary Caroline Kisko. 'The latest victim is the English setter, a wonderful and loyal breed.' In contrast, more 'exotic' breeds are on the up: the number of Siberian huskies has more than trebled in 4 years and 6,000-plus chihuahuas were registered last year.' Mrs. Kisko adds "Continental breeds, such as Hungarian Vizlas – with 1,588 registrations last year and German Shorthaired Pointers with 1,424 – called HPRs because they hunt, point and, unlike our setters, retrieve, are becoming more popular.'

Although KC's announcement came as a shock to all setter clubs, Mrs. Isherwood admits there are issues that need to be addressed. 'I do think the breed is in trouble particularly on the show side, where the gene pool has reduced over the years. There's such a small band of us on the working side that we've always been aware of our gene pool and tried not to let old lines go

This is something that's sneaked up on the show world.' When lifestyles changed after the Second World War, many setters were exported to Norway, Sweden, Denmark, Italy, America and New Zealand. In recent years, working setter enthusiasts have been tracking down these invaluable breeding lines in order to expand the UK gene pool. Setters reached the height of their popularity in the late 1960s, 1970s and 1980s, with an all-time high of 1,344 registered puppies in 1974.

This was thanks, in part, to successful show dogs such as Sh. Ch Silbury Soames of Madavale (Best in show at Crufts in 1964) Sh. Ch Bournehouse Dancing Master (Best in Show 1977) and Sh Ch. Starlite Express at Valsett (Best in show in 1988). After the advent of the breech-loading gun in the 1860s, driven-game shooting became more popular and grouse moors were managed for this sport, rather than walked-up shooting using pointers and setters. However, English setters still play a part in falconry and on grouse moors. They're also used to count grouse in March and July, and compete in pointer and setter field trials which are held in spring and summer on grouse and partridge. Despite differences between today's showing and working strains, all the English setter clubs are collaborating to investigate why some litters only produce one or two puppies and some bitches are barren. 'We all want what's best for our beautiful breed,' says Mrs. Isherwood. Also, looking at KC record that date back to 1882, it would seem that the high figures recorded in the 1980 are an aberration and that today's figures are closer to the historical norm. 'Someone said recently that you don't see English setters walking around the streets anymore,' adds Mrs. Isherwood. 'I replied that's because people who have them don't walk round streets, they walk around the countryside.'

For many, part of the magic lies in the dogs' graceful gallop ' An Italian gentleman once told me that you ought to be able to balance a glass of Champagne on the back of an English setter when its galloping,' says Mrs. Town and superlative hunting ability. 'When I walk up to a "staunch point", I still get a thrill, even after all these years, she admits. 'I never cease to be amazed at the way they gallop flat out and stop straight away when they wind a bird. How they can scent a grouse when the heather is in flower, I shall never know. I can remember getting home at night with our clothes smelling of honey and the dogs' noses caked with pollen.' And Mrs. Isherwood muses 'They've got a lovely flow to them – it's as if they're riding the heather. The bird is the drug for the dog and the dog is your drug.' And yet for dogs that are happy to work independently, yards ahead of their handler, they also crave intimacy. 'They love people and like to be near you, to touch you and to know you're there.' Says Mrs. Isherwood. 'The breeder I got my first setter from said "You won't stop at one." And she was right – you don't!

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**Note:** Mrs. Isherwood judged English Setters at Crufts this year, 2018 The above article was published in Country Life magazine under the title Save our English Setter on 30.08.2012