

# Queen and her corgis The end of a very special relationship

As Willow, the last of the Queen's beloved corgi companions, passes away, Gyles Brandreth looks back at their 85-year history

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And then, sadly, there were none. After more than eight decades of companionship, loyalty and mischievous scurrying, the last of the Queen's beloved corgis has passed away. The reported death of Willow, a 14-year-old Pembroke Welsh corgi put down at Windsor Castle on Sunday after a short illness, brings a heartrending but inevitable close to a quite extraordinary relationship between our monarch and her favourite pet breed. It is no great hyperbole to call it the end of an era. After all, the Queen's lifelong passion for her animals, chiefly horses and dogs, began when she was barely taller than a corgi herself.



She was given her first horse, a Shetland pony called Peggy, when she was just four, and fell in love with these funny-looking Welsh working dogs a little more than two years later. The young Elizabeth and her sister, Margaret Rose, were invited to play with the children of Viscount Weymouth, who had a young corgi at home. The girls became infatuated, and soon begged their parents, the Duke and Duchess of York, for one, which is how Dookie – a chestnut red corgi puppy provided by Rozavel kennel in Pirbright, Surrey – came into the family in 1933. By the time the parents had become King George VI and Queen Elizabeth, the young princesses had several to play with.

Willow was the 14th generation of corgi descended from Susan, a twomonth-old puppy the then Princess Elizabeth was given as a gift on her 18th birthday. As the first dog owned personally by the future Queen (as opposed to her parents), Susan – officially registered

with the terrific name Hickathrift Pippa – became an instant favourite. She was such a close companion, in fact, that she would hide under blankets accompanying her mistress in the carriage as she rode through London with the young Duke of Edinburgh on their way to their honeymoon three years later.

In the coming years, Susan's legacy took over. She became the mother of Sugar, officially Prince Charles's dog, and Honey, a favourite of the Queen Mother. Sugar produced boozy siblings, Whisky and Sherry; Honey, in a reversal of logic, created Bee. And so on. Corgis became inextricably linked to the Royal family, and to the image of the Queen in particular. Rarely was she photographed in a domestic setting without a calf-high furry friend in attendance, and rarely did a world leader meet her without also having to meet her canine entourage. In all, she has owned scores, almost all of whom were bred from a programme of corgi breeding based in the grounds of Windsor Castle. No puppy from her kennel was ever sold, only gifted, and none has been entered into a show. It's said the Queen was the only corgi breeder whose pets went back to her foundation bitch: 14 generations is indeed an astonishing record, yet Willow was the last. Quite understandably, three years ago it was reported that the Queen had stopped breeding because she doesn't wish to leave any corgis behind when she dies.

But what a career Willow had. Two years ago, when Annie Leibovitz photographed the Queen for Vanity Fair ahead of her 90th birthday, Willow was there, at her feet. Four years earlier, the happy little creature was one of the stars of the James Bond sketch the Queen and Daniel Craig starred in for the 2012 London Olympics opening ceremony (incidentally, James Bond is another of the Queen's enthusiasms; when she had the Royal Yacht Britannia, showing a Bond film to the family in the on-board cinema was a highlight of her summer cruise around the Scottish Islands).

Willow, along with two of the Queen's other late dogs, Monty and Holly, greeted Bond at Buckingham Palace, then performed tummy rolls as a helicopter carrying 007 and a stunt double of their mistress took off for the Olympic Stadium.

"My corgis are family," the Queen once said. Their contribution to her life has been very special. A corgi does not know about royalty; it does not pass judgment on matters of national interest; and it does not let you down. As a lady-in-waiting once said to me: "Dogs and horses have tails, they don't tell them..."

In the midst of the Queen's busy life, caring for her dogs provided useful escape. If the Duke of Edinburgh has been her "strength and stay", the corgis have been her recreation and routine. Every day, where possible, she would take the time to feed them, walk them after lunch, and often groom them herself. They accompanied her almost everywhere, up and down aeroplane steps, on trains, out in the country and at official state banquets. When present at the latter, Willow and chums were especially useful: across all cultures and in any language, nothing breaks the ice quite like the presence of a dog.

There are tales (and tails) aplenty about corgi misbehaviours over the years – Susan bit several palace staff; one of the Queen Mother's attacked a policeman; and they were forever getting caught under Prince Philip's feet – but when it came to it, they knew who was boss.

For example, in December 1994, while Her Majesty was filming the annual Christmas message in her study at Sandringham, a door was left open for a lighting cable, giving the perfect opportunity for an interruption.

“The Queen was speaking to camera absolutely flawlessly when this corgi suddenly walked past me,” a BBC producer, Philip Gilbert, recalled.

“It started nuzzling the Queen’s leg. Without anything showing on camera, she put her hand down and held the dog still, while continuing with the final third of her speech as if nothing had happened.”

Some years ago, I worked with Dr Anthony Clare, the late Irish psychiatrist and broadcaster. He had conducted some research on “the wellsprings of happiness” and concluded that “having a sustaining passion in your life” other than your work is a central tenet. It seems true. Somebody like Margaret Thatcher, who was almost exactly the same age as the Queen, found her life empty and unhappy when she left office, yet Her Majesty has remained happy because of her passion for her dogs and her horses.

The Queen has always been driven by duty and sustained by faith, but what really brings joy to her life are her animals. It’s what makes Willow’s death all the more upsetting. There are plenty of four-legged friends in the family, of course, but the corgi obsession hasn’t quite proven hereditary. The Duke and Duchess of Cambridge have Lupo, a delightful English cocker spaniel; Prince Charles owns Jack Russells; and Princess Anne prefers terriers – though the latter may be a sore subject, given one of Anne’s dogs fatally savaged one of her mother’s corgis in 2002.

Fortunately, the Queen hasn’t outlived the entirety of her own canine company either. Willow may have passed on, but Her Majesty still has Whisper, a corgi unrelated to Susan that she adopted last year after the death of his owner, a former Sandringham gamekeeper; and there are two remaining “dorgis” (corgi-dachshund crosses) named Vulcan and Candy padding around the palace. As bringers of happiness to Her Majesty, long may they live.