

Britons at war over dog fouling

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In Edinburgh, they use CCTV van. In Lincolnshire, it's enforcement agents on 650cc motorbikes. Kennet in Wiltshire has dished out half a million bags for free. Liverpool got council officials to pose undercover as courting couples in its parks. And Hinckley in Leicestershire hired a team of private detectives. In Cheltenham, for a while, operatives from the local authority painted pretty colored circles — one red, one yellow, one white — around every bit they found.

Abroad, the struggle has reached a higher plane. In their search for incontrovertible scientific proof, Germany's Cologne and Dresden, Vercelli in Piedmont, Italy, and Petah Tikva, near Tel Aviv in Israel, have resorted to DNA testing. Paris has adopted shock tactics in the shape of some truly revolting posters. Geneva, being Swiss, simply fines first-time offenders US\$2,500. Then US\$12,000 if they do it again.

Dog mess. It's war out there.

two open spaces, and oblige owners to keep them on a leash in the other. As is now the case in most public areas in Britain, Ottery's dog owners are already obliged by law to pick up their pets' mess ("Bag it and bin it," exhort a myriad stickers), and to keep the animals clear of the swings and slides and climbing frames of the children's play areas.

Now, if East Devon district council gives the go-ahead — and over the last 12 months, 50-plus parish, town and district councils have enacted similar orders denying dogs access to open land — walks and the attendant business will have to be performed on the town's streets; on a rough and unwelcoming patch of ground on the edge of town; or a car journey away in the countryside.

Quite right too, thinks Claire Gunningham, mother of two children at the school. "I know lots of responsible dog owners, people who pick up every time," she says. "But I'm sorry, it's just not compatible, is it, to have dogs pooping on the ground and then kids coming along and playing on it? It's horrible, absolutely horrible. Really



of pet dogs are infected, mostly puppies and pregnant bitches, but the eggs — which become infectious only when they mature, about two or three weeks after being deposited — can lie dormant in soil for up to three years, and are highly resistant to temperature changes or chemical disinfectants.

If you (or, more likely, your child) swallows these microscopic eggs, for example after touching infected soil or a shoe or a buggy wheel and putting their hands to their mouths, they can contract toxocarasis. The symptoms include aches, dizziness, nausea, asthma, epileptic fits and eye disorders that can occasionally culminate in blindness. Up to 100 cases a year are reported in Britain, mostly in children under 5.

When I was growing up, and until maybe 15 years ago, dog mess was more or less a fact of life. Unpleasant, but kind of accepted. You watched out for it, swore if you stepped in it, and that was about it. Dog owners would no more have considered cleaning up after their pets than, say, drivers would have felt constrained to forego that last pint for the road, or smokers to stub their fag out in a restaurant.

Times, and attitudes, change. The UK's Litter (Animal Droppings) Order 1991 of the Environmental Protection Act 1990 obliged local councils to keep public walkways, pleasure grounds, gardens, recreational areas and popular parts of the seashore clear of fouling. The Dogs (Fouling of Land) Act 1996 made failing to clear up dog poo an offense punishable by a fixed penalty of £50 (US\$72) or, in court, a fine of up to £1,000 (US\$1,442).

LESS SOCIALLY ACCEPTABLE

Under the Clean Neighborhoods and Environment Act 2005, councils can designate land to be covered by Dog Control Orders, which can oblige owners to clear up dog mess, require dogs to be kept on leashes, restrict the number of dogs any one person may take on the land, or simply ban the animals altogether (as the East Devon district council is now proposing, at the request of the town council in Ottery St Mary). Keep Britain Tidy, which carries out regular national dog fouling surveys, reckons 91 percent of local councils in Britain now employ at least one dog warden and 86 percent run active anti-dog mess campaigns. Between them, the 50 percent-odd of councils that responded to the charity's last survey, in 2006, issued nearly 5,500 verbal and written warnings to dog owners, handed out 2,400 fixed penalty notices, and took more than 600 recalcitrants to court.

As a result of all this, and of its own nationwide publicity campaign in 2003, Keep Britain Tidy says its studies of sites around the country show the incidence of dog fouling has probably fallen by 40 percent over the last five years.

"It's really been a massive reduction," says the charity's Ginette Unsworth. "Things have improved beyond all recognition. Dog fouling has become much, much more socially unacceptable than it used to be. But we need to keep hammering the message home. There are still a minority of dog owners who don't get it."

There certainly are — and while the amount of poo is getting less, public anger seems to be growing. Local authorities receive around 70,000 complaints a year about dog mess. Local newspapers are filled with civic outrage. Some citizens take matters into their own hands; Sally Nilsson, 43, of Reigate, organized a poster campaign by local children after trying in vain to persuade irresponsible dog-owners to clean up their pets' mess by drawing chalk circles round the offending piles and adding the message, "Pick this up." (The owners did so, hearteningly — then flung it into her garden).

What provokes a dog-owner to behave like that? Or to scream obscenities at anyone who dares point out to them that they are in the process of breaking the law? Difficult for a non dog-owner to understand, really. Statistically, it seems men find it rather more difficult to pick up after dogs than women. Residents of social housing, too, are apparently more likely to leave their dog mess be. And obviously, if you see someone else's lying there, you're less inclined to pick up your own.

But is it laziness? Bloody-mindedness? A sudden (and, on the whole, understandable) reluctance to slide your hand into that thin plastic bag, grasp that lump of stinking, still-warm poo, then tie the bag up and walk with it

Britain's dogs produce an estimated 1,000 tonnes of poo a day. Though studies show the incidence of dog fouling has probably fallen significantly over the past five years, public outrage seems to be growing.

PHOTOS COURTESY OF ENKAMS

to the waste bin?

Or perhaps it's the knowledge that if they're careful, keep their eyes peeled, let their pets out — as many do — under cover of darkness, they're unlikely to get caught? (At East Devon district council, the environmental health manager, Andrew Ennis, says the authority at one stage employed three uniformed dog wardens, but they "never detected much." Now, the operation is "intelligence-led. We rely on informants. It's much more effective.")

I spent several days looking for an unrepentant poo-dumper to answer these questions, but failed. What I did find was lots of angry dog owners fed up with being made to feel like criminals. "Most dog owners are responsible," protests Caroline Kisko, the Kennel Club's secretary. "There used to be embarrassment at picking up, now there's embarrassment at not picking up. It's really just a small minority, maybe 10 percent, ruining it for all the rest."

Often, Kisko believes, these are "generally irresponsible owners, youths with their Staffordshires who are never going to be interested in picking up — people who maybe shouldn't be owning dogs anyway." But like many dog owners today, she worries that the dog control pendulum in Britain is swinging a little too far the other way.

"It's all a matter of attitude," she says. "And, sadly, we're becoming increasingly intolerant of things we don't like in this country. There's a growing culture of belief that dogs just aren't welcome. You just don't see dogs out and about like you used to. They used to be part of the scene; now people keep them locked up at home. The result is poorly socialized dogs. And councils that just slap blanket dog bans on parks and beaches."

On the Winter's Lane playing field in Ottery St Mary, threatened with just such a blanket ban, half a dozen members of Ottery Dogs have braved the January squalls to put their case. In the four months since its formation, their group has organized regular poop-scoop days, in which volunteers walk round town picking up other people's dog mess (163 piles last weekend, says member Mel Turner); opened a phone hotline residents can call to report fouling; set up a Web site and Facebook page; and mounted a highly effective lobbying and letter-writing campaign.

THE ELUSIVE MIDDLE GROUND

The group points out that the physical and mental health benefits to many people of pet ownership in general, and dog walking in particular, are undisputed. It notes that some of the town's dog owners are elderly, or mothers with young children, and would have difficulty exercising their pets elsewhere. It says almost all the mess it clears up on its poop-scoop days is on Ottery's streets, not in its parks.

"We're not just a protest group," says Jeremy Bateson, its chairman and the father of two children aged 5 and 7. "We're actively proposing solutions and seeking compromises, ways forward. We totally understand where people are coming from, we completely sympathize with their concerns. Dog mess is unpleasant."

But we believe this is a cheap and easy option that is unnecessary and unfair — and it will do nothing to stop the people who are actually causing the problem." They are reasonable, responsible, sensitive people, Jeremy, Mel, Adrian, Sarah and the rest of Ottery Dogs. But I'm not convinced the non-dog-owning parents of a couple of small kids will ever truly understand them. Nor, indeed, that most dog-owners will ever really comprehend that there are people out there who believe dogs are dirty and dangerous and simply shouldn't be allowed anywhere anyone else might ever want to go.

In that sense, in the land where health and safety rules, dog mess might actually be something of a defining issue. It certainly poses awkward questions: about responsibility on the one hand and tolerance on the other, about respect, and mutual consideration. In 21st-century Britain, how do we deal with questions like that? "It's about people's perception of what a problem is, really," says Victoria Hall, East Devon's 22-year-old dog warden. "For some people, a single dog mess is one too many."



Sorry, that sounded flippant; this is a subject that invites humor. But it's actually not funny. A lot of people feel very strongly indeed about it; as a nation, according to Keep Britain Tidy, Britons write more letters to our elected representatives, locally and in Westminster, about dog fouling than we do about anything else. Questioned, we invariably rate it a top priority for council spending (which is fortunate, because they're already devoting an eye-watering US\$33 million a year to it).

Dog-do is, in short, a serious and emotive issue, doubtless in part because dogs themselves are now a serious and emotive issue. And nowhere — or at least, nowhere I've been recently — is that more evident than in the small and otherwise pretty tranquil east Devon town of Ottery St Mary in southwest England, birthplace of the poet Samuel Taylor Coleridge and home of the Night of the Flaming Tar Barrels (I hadn't heard of it either, but the photos look spectacular).

In the dog poo war, Ottery is something of a frontline town, with serious talk right now of banning dogs from its parks. Battle lines have been drawn. "We are witnessing," mutters a steely-eyed man to me in the primary-school playground, "an aggressive and thoroughly unpleasant campaign by the dog lobby. I don't want my name in the paper. But certain people in this town should be ashamed of themselves. It's got nasty. Personal. We're doing this for our children's safety. Everyone should understand that."

Rubbish, says a bitter Monica Palfrey, 74, crossing the rainswept Land of Canaan park on a mobility scooter with Kiki, Bo and Amy, her three shih tzus, perched on the front. "I've lived here all my life; I remember when this was just a field. Never, ever has there been talk of actually banning dogs. What are they even thinking of? Where else could people like me exercise their pets? It makes me sad. And very cross."

At the end of last month, public consultation ended on a proposal by Ottery town council to ban dogs completely from one of the town's

disgusting. And unfair. If it was humans there'd be uproar. Dogs we just let get away with it."

In the town council offices, a pleasing recent residence up the hill next to the church, Ottery's mayor, Glyn Dobson, has plainly heard that cry. "We have a duty of care to our children," he says. "In a city, maybe there aren't many places to take a dog. Here there are literally hundreds of walks, but there's only one park, and only one playing field. We've got nothing against dogs; half the councilors have one and one of them has four. What we are against is dogs running around with kids."

For the town's dog owners, many of them parents themselves, that is a step too far. Yes, dog owners may have a regrettable tendency to feel their pets can do no wrong. Yes, there are non dog-owners who quite simply dislike dogs. But have we really reached a point, in an English country town, where dogs and people cannot peacefully coexist? A resistance movement has been formed. The fightback has begun. And not without some early success: at the end of January, the Kennel Club's national Campaign of the Year award was won by a group called Ottery Dogs. We'll come back to them later.

Last year, according to the UK's Pet Food Manufacturers' Association, there were 7.3 million dogs in Britain. The northeast of England is home to the nation's most fervent dog lovers, with 30 percent of households owning one or more, followed closely by southwest England, with 29 percent. Southeast England, which includes London, has just 17 percent, and — odd as this may seem to anyone who regularly walks some of the capital's streets — only 7 percent of families there own dogs. Between them all, they produce an estimated 1,000 tonnes of feces a day.

Dog mess is, we know, repulsive stuff; enough, sometimes, to make even the most besotted of dog-lovers gag. It can also be dangerous: Toxocara canis is the common roundworm of the dog, and the feces of an infected animal can carry up to 1 million Toxocara eggs. Probably only about 5 percent