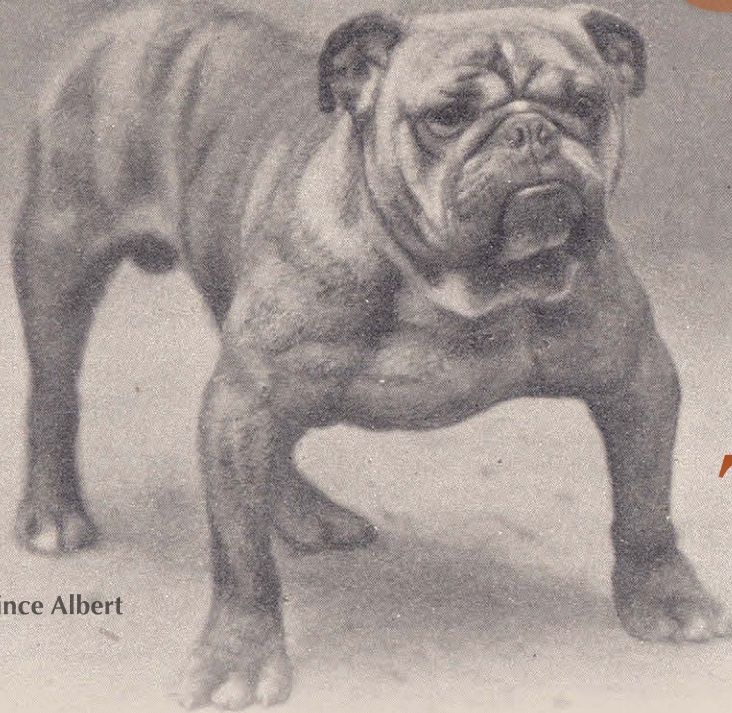
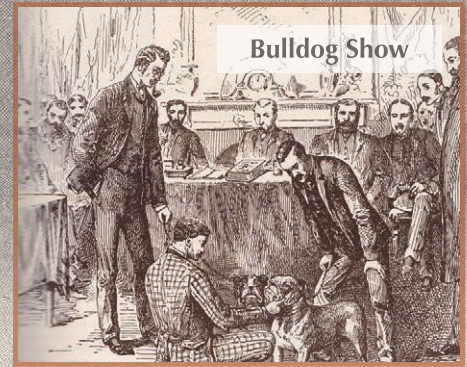
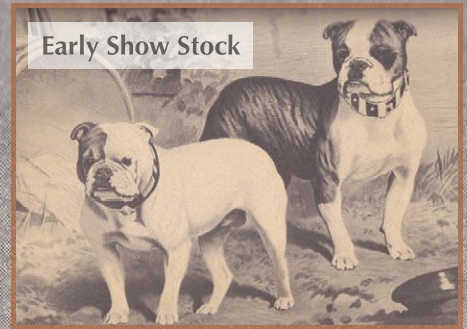


# The Bulldog



Ch. Prince Albert



## Then and Now

By Amy Fernandez

Uniformity and predictability are familiar allegations leveled at our sport by purebred detractors. Among the breeds frequently targeted to illustrate the detrimental impact of that objective is, rather ironically, the Bulldog.

Admittedly, consistent type is the bedrock of purebred ideology. But like most lofty aspirations, getting there is another story. Some breeds face an especially tortuous road to stabilized type. Bulldogs may top that list. Detours, derailments, and dead ends marked every step of its evolution. Possibly the strangest period of its interesting history spanned the late 18<sup>th</sup> to the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century. It opened with the Bulldog's farewell after centuries as a working/fighting dog and led to one of the most remarkable restyles in purebred development.

In *Dogs: Their History and Development*, Edward Ash cited the primary catalyst for this incredible metamorphosis. He wrote, "Probably more attention has been given to breeding the perfect Bulldog, than has been lavished on any other breed. Some men have pursued the quest for the better part of their lives, and never produced

a champion; whilst others, almost at the outset of their career, have succeeded." That obsession/addiction to Bulldog perfection long predated his observations. It's characterized every phase of the breed's existence and ever-changing definitions of ideal type.

Original Bulldog type derived from bull baiting, a barbaric convention based equally on myth and practicality. However, the gaming aspect of this custom rapidly vaulted it from a public health

**Bull baiting evolved from a medieval belief that prolonged exertion improved meat quality.** Perhaps the premise was flawed, but it also served as a primitive public health measure. Staging the slaughter as a public spectacle was an effective means of preventing the sale of diseased or tainted meat. At a time when contaminated food was a daily hazard, the policy was not without merit.

Soon after the Norman Conquest, bull baiting expanded from a focal point of market days to required entertainment for every important holiday or celebration. It was backed by strictly defined rules, historic tradition, and generous patronage. Many aspects of the business became coveted royal appointments and generations of families earned respectable livings from it in one way or another.

measure to the status of a standalone sport. Owners paid to enter their dogs, spectators paid to watch, and both of those income streams paled in comparison to the high stakes wagering that increasingly defined the business.

Early on, Mastiffs and Bulldogs were virtually interchangeable, basically larger and smaller versions of the same mongrelized type utilized for a range of dirty, dangerous jobs. Larger dogs were preferred for guarding, boar hunting and bear baiting. For driving and holding cattle, the Mastiff's typical 90-120 pounds of size and substance was pared down to a formidable concentration of strength, stamina, and grit, variously as the Beast Dog, Bull Baiting Dog, or Butcher's Bull Dog. As the

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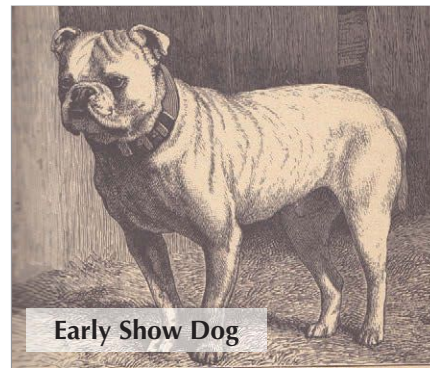
basis of many successful breeds. From an objective standpoint, their ascendancy confirmed that the traditional Bulldog concept was finished. In terms of the breed's gestalt, that probably qualified as its closest brush with death.

But you can't keep a good dog down. That wasn't the only thing brewing that pivotal year of 1835. Bill George may exemplify that fine line separating insanity and genius. Like most Bulldog fans, George grew up in the business, beginning as an apprentice to one of those steadfast Bulldog disciples who, as Ash notes, spent a lifetime in the trade. He wrote, "Such a man was Ben White, who had a trial ground in Harper's Field where clients could try the dogs

either on some unfortunate badger or in combat with each other." White's 1835 death symbolically and legally marked the end of an era. "After the

**Charles Dickens made his contribution to the Bulldog's nefarious rep in his 1838 serialized blockbuster *Oliver Twist*. Bulls Eye, the ferocious Bulldog, was the ideal literary prop to highlight the story's primary villain, Bill Sikes.**

death of Ben White, Bill George took over, altered the name to the Canine Castle, and changed the tone of the place. ...Dog dealing was his business, times had changed, and the dog show era was starting," he concluded.



**Early Show Dog**

walked over to George's taking us with him, and it was with fear and trembling we crept between the rows of furiously barking and chain tugging dogs."

This rebranding strategy not only tapped into centuries of ingrained love for this iconic British symbol, it also tapped into the resultant cache of expertise underlying Bulldog development. Shows became the ideal platform to harness both of those dormant forces to reestablish the breed's mainstream support.

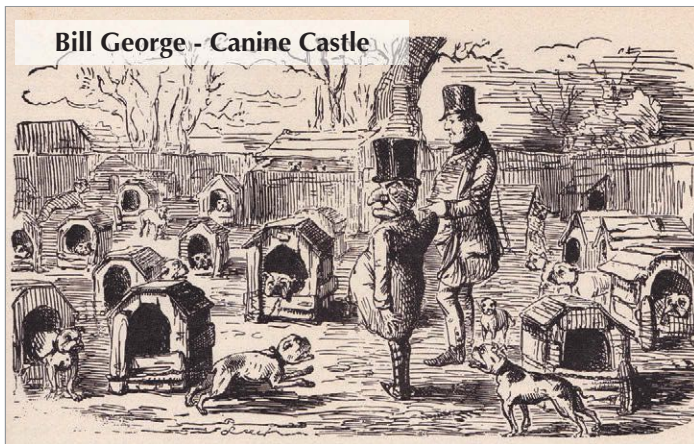
Maybe it was a different sort of competition, but as always, Bulldog people were in it to win it. From 1860 onwards, Bulldog classes were packed at major shows and specialty entries frequently exceeded 100. Needless to say, support was enhanced by high stakes wagering, which by then seemed like an obligatory feature of anything involving Bulldogs. Red hot competition certainly confirmed that a new era had dawned for the breed. On the other hand, the Bulldog became the litmus test for that dangerous juncture where type is cut loose from the form/function dynamic.

Exaggerating type to gain a competitive edge remains a pervasive affliction of this sport. Not only was the breed entering unexplored territory in that respect, those misdirected efforts were exacerbated by a class-conscious desire to disavow the Bulldog's socially tarnished past. That was particularly illogical since the new crop of show winners sprang from the same bloodlines that had produced generations of contenders for the Westminster pit.

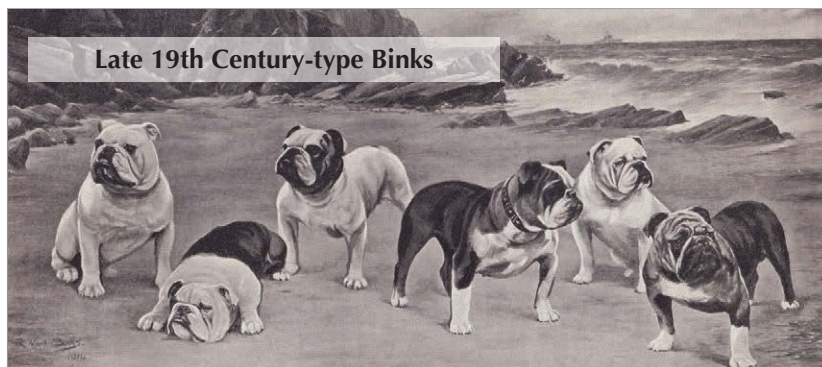
In a distinctly unremarkable coincidence, the same unsavory neighborhoods previously noted for baiting and fighting dogs suddenly emerged as prime sources of top quality show stock. "Dog shows were inaugurated in about 1859 and the chief entries for Bulldogs were London, Birmingham, and Sheffield." Emphasizing the point *Hutchinson's Dog Encyclopedia* added, "During the latter part of Bill George's career his kennel not only produced winners on the show bench but dogs which are to a great extent the foundation of the modern Bulldog."

Bill George and his fellow Bulldog veterans were elevated to the status of revered authorities. They must have enjoyed the consequent financial success and professional respect. But we can only speculate on their reaction as their beloved breed was completely redesigned. Watson was among the canine experts who witnessed this rapid transformation. He wrote, "The Bulldog of 1855-60 was totally unlike the dog of today. He was only moderately low on leg, and stood closer in front than our exaggerations. His tail more frequently than not was a plain whip tail, and he lacked the massiveness of head. In this speaking of past dogs

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Officially that wouldn't happen for two decades, but it was trending. That's when Bill George set out to reinvent this failing business via an outrageously counterintuitive strategy, confirming the maxim "no publicity is bad publicity". He decided to capitalize on that media saturation and market his dogs as devoted



**Late 19th Century-type Binks**

## THE BULLDOG – THEN AND NOW

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centuries wore on, this ragtag canine amalgamation was refined into an object of national adoration. “The finest strains were assiduously cultivated, and quotations ran high in the canine market.” As this genteel overview in the 1896 *Ladies Kennel Journal* explains, sustained popularity created tremendous incentive to improve functionality.

### **Its pervasive national popularity is illustrated by the ubiquity of bullrings.**

Ranging from an iron ring staked into the ground to magnificent arenas, they were a mandatory fixture of English towns large and small. Many still exist. The Birmingham Bullring, established in 1154, is now a shopping mall.

The definitive English bullring was Paris Garden in Southwark, steps away from Shakespeare’s Globe theatre. Along with an impressive assortment of brothels, casinos, and seedy bars, Southwark’s infamous amusements included two baiting rings, each accommodating 1000 spectators with shows every Thursday and Sunday. In 1591, stage plays were banned on Thursdays because they conflicted with baiting at Paris Garden.

James Watson wrote, “Selection by man soon separated very widely the sheepdog or shepherd’s mastiff and the mastiff that was specially bred for the bull ring.” As Watson explains, the evolving parameters of this work dictated a very clear concept of ideal type. “A powerfully built dog, not too long on the legs, so that he could have good command of his movements and be able to spring from his position in the event of a sudden charge of the bull, as he crept forward on his chest with head down to spring at the nose. Loose, widely placed shoulders permitted this creep, and the cut up loin allowed the dog to use his hind legs to advantage,” he wrote.

Bulldog authority Barrett Fowler’s 1923 history *Bulldogs and All About Them* emphasized that the final result was considered a lethal superdog. He penned, “The extraordinary courage possessed by these dogs is hardly believable. Bred from a long line of fighting ancestors, a dog was at length arrived at of such ferocity and courage as to seem almost insensible to pain.”

Perfecting type had its downside. Promoters were forced to ramp up the scope of these gory spectacles to maintain shock

value. On June 16, 1670 diarist John Evelyn captured this increasingly jaded public attitude, “I was forced to accompany some friends to the Bear Garden...it being a famous day for all these butcherly sports or rather barbarous cruelties. The bulls did exceedingly well... One of the bulls tossed a dog full into a lady’s lap as she sat in one of the boxes at a considerable height from the arena. ...I am most heartily weary of this rude and dirty pastime, which I had not seen I think in twenty years.”

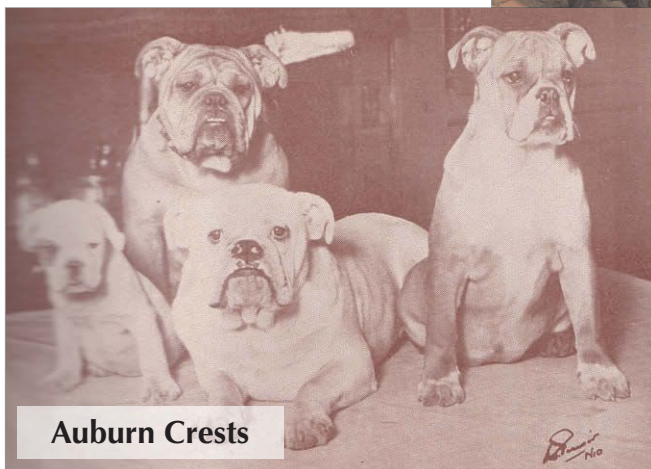
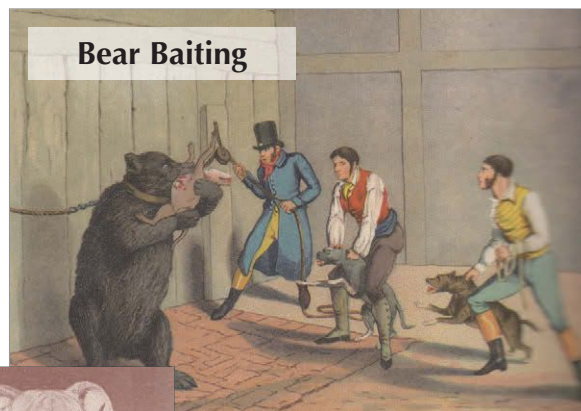
Formerly considered the epitome of wholesome community fun, bull baiting was also magnet for petty crime and public mayhem. By the 1700s its increasingly ghetto reputation made it a target of local anti-crime ordinances. Celebrity endorsements and sponsorship deals dried up. The sport became marginalized, but Bulldog popularity remained undiminished. Despite historic references to the contrary, diehard fans kept it alive although the changing nature of the business compelled modifications beginning with the dogs. Bulldogs were systematically reconfigured into smaller, more agile animals and as Ash remarks; the sport’s new incarnation surpassed all expectations. “So popular were these dog fights that to fail to know the name of a Bulldog was to prove oneself out of touch with the world’s affairs.” Fowler’s rundown of this reinvented sport confirms that old saying: follow the money. “When bull baiting went out of fashion, dog fighting pits were started in several places in London and Birmingham – which were the great centres – and during the years 1818, 1819, and 1820,

advertisements appeared in the daily papers concerning matches arranged. A playbill of 1819 advertises a match between two dogs, the property of a sporting nobleman, to take place at the Westminster Pit for 100 guineas.”

Every sector of the Bulldog business redirected its focus long before Britain’s 1835 Cruelty to Animals Act. That official pronouncement had no real impact in that

sense. Still, it galvanized social stigma long associated with bull baiting. Britain’s budding tabloid press had a field day dishing out those sensationalized media portrayals that continue to distort perceptions about many breeds. A decade later, *The Ladies Kennel Journal* succinctly described this impact. They wrote, “He fell beneath that most terrible of bans-disrespectability. Richardson writing in 1853 tells us, ‘he has become too notorious, from the inhuman and blackguard sports for which he has been generally used, to be suffered to follow the heel of any man who does not desire to be set down as a patron of ruffianism and infamy.’ That utterance, bitter as it was, must pass for a truth”

These socio-political/economic factors that drove the business underground also had a profound effect on Bulldog development. Type rapidly morphed into the bull/terrier blend that became the



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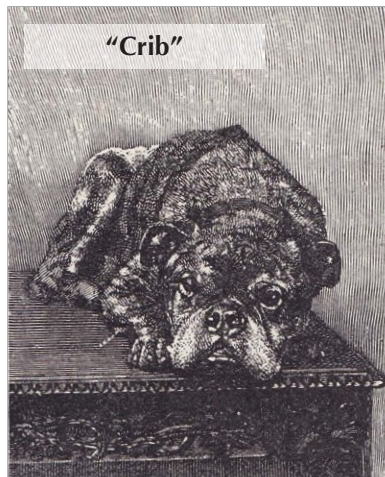


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we are not confining our opinion to school-boy recollections of visits to the Canine Castle.” In 1880, a year before Bill George died, Watson met his son, “Alfred George at the Alexandra Palace show. When looking at the Bulldogs we said something about the

alteration in them. He replied, ‘Oh, there has been a great change since you went away. You will see some of the old sort at my father’s but they don’t do for showing.’

“The Bulldog has now been lifted out of his Bill Sikes surroundings and it is now possible for the most cultured lady of the highest social position to be closely associated with his breeding and exhibition,” he concluded. As *Our Dogs* editor Theo Marples confirmed, the breed’s traditional popularity was quickly and



decisively reestablished. Of course the 800-pound elephant attached to that achievement exemplifies the multifaceted challenge of stabilizing and perpetuating breed type.

New wave Bulldog fanciers successfully overcame the breed’s former notoriety, and as Fowler conceded, they ran headlong into another equally volatile situation. He wrote, “Little by little, the bulldog came back into popularity, not as a fighting dog but as a dog mainly required for exhibition purposes. Gradually the undesirable creatures of extreme ferocity were bred out and some almost equally undesirable qualities were bred in. It was the aim of some breeders to produce the most exaggerated specimens possible.”

The essential traits of every working breed emerge in response to functional demands. Bull baiting provided the impetus for the Bulldog’s unique package of characteristics: a compact, powerful animal with a broad chest, muscular shoulders, short sturdy legs, large head, and short square jaw. It also defined the practical limitations of those traits—the point where more ceased to be better. The original Bulldog was extremely efficient at its job. But overall, it was balanced, moderate and athletic.

Those revered traits became the springboard to launch its reinvention as a modern show dog. The inherent plasticity of the canine genome invited creative interpretation of Bulldog type. But this time around, no functional constraints impeded that experimentation. From the moment it emerged, the newly stylized Bulldog incited critical scorn from outside the fancy and vociferous form/function debates from within.

**The modern Bulldog remains the focal point of controversy. But from the standpoint of popular culture, that unmistakable look is a resounding success.** Britain had no monopoly on this classic symbol of fortitude. For over a century, it’s been acknowledged the definitive emblem of strength, tenacity, and triumph, inspiring countless trademarks, logos, and official mascots for over 40 American universities.

Britain bestowed this singular compliment on the Mack truck when the first American shipment arrived on World War I frontlines in 1917. Their distinctive rounded front end design and incredible durability soon inspired this Bulldog nickname. Back home, it became the company’s official logo in 1922.

type. In that respect, the Bulldog remains a work in progress. And every step toward that goal has been framed by controversy. That firestorm may never die down, but somewhere along the way, one thing did change. Apparently, the resolute Bulldog became imper-

vious to the capricious impact of collective disapproval. AKC ranked it as the fourth most popular breed last year, up from fifth a year earlier. Its worldwide popularity shows no sign of abating.

The Bulldog had defied conventional expectations throughout every phase of its thousand year history when Watson offered his warning a century ago: “Bulldog fanciers are not so ephemeral as are many others. Those who once take up the breed seem to imbibe some of the holding-on power of the dogs themselves. As a prominent fancier of the breed aptly put it ‘breeding Bulldogs is not a weak man’s game.’” Quite possibly, that may qualify as the single consistent factor in the weird, wild, and unpredictable Bulldog world.

## The Uga Dynasty

**Paradoxically, the breed’s most famous bloodline has no connection to purebred competition.** The legendary Uga dynasty of white Bulldogs began in 1956 when Uga 1 attended his first University of Georgia football game with his owners. Like all Bulldogs, the four-month-old pup immediately attracted admirers who cheered his arrival at every subsequent game. His name was soon amended to the University of Georgia abbreviation and he reigned as the official team mascot until 1966.

Since then, nine Uga descendants have served as UGA mascots, attending every home game and making personal appearances at numerous related events. Uga’s distinctive props – a spiked collar, red varsity sweater, and customized air-conditioned dog house – have become equally renowned.

Every Uga is bred and AKC registered by the Seilers and raised at their Savannah home. Rumors of an Uga’s impending retirement triggers massive speculation about potential candidates for the position. Typically six or seven months old when they take on the job, each Uga serves for approximately ten years and his retirement is marked by a wildly popular ceremony known as “passing the collar”. Past Uga’s are buried in Sanford Stadium in a marble mausoleum where a life-sized bronze Bulldog stands guard.

In 1997, *Sports Illustrated* named Uga the nation’s best college mascot but his fame long ago transcended the sports world. The Uga cult has spawned blogs, websites, articles, and books, most notably Uga’s portrayal in 1994 bestseller, *Midnight in the Garden of Good and Evil* and his cameo role in the subsequent film.