

# From Pests to Pets: social and cultural perceptions of animals in England's urban environments

## Investigating the Urban Animal

In the medieval period, animals were prominent features of urban life and lived in close proximity to people. How people utilised these animals as well as their perceptions was continually changing. During the medieval period, common urban animals such as cats, dogs, chickens and pigs were viewed in terms of their functional affordances; however, this attitude has changed.

Today, it is clear that human-animal relationships have shifted, as people are detached from animals like chickens and pigs, but have developed closer bonds with other animals like cats and dogs. Part of my research involves trying to understand the complex relationships between humans and animals and trajectory of this change. Through the use of archaeological and historical evidence I have begun investigating the factors that may have contributed to this altered perception during the 16<sup>th</sup> to 19<sup>th</sup> century in England.

## Urban Pests

During the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> century animal cruelty was prevalent, particularly towards cats and dogs. They were both tortured on a daily basis and were skinned for their fur. Stray cats and dogs were considered a nuisance and were regularly mass slaughtered (fig. 1), particularly during famines and outbreaks of plague, as they were considered to be culpable.



Figure 1: 17<sup>th</sup> century dog atlas with cut marks

## Animal Cruelty and Morality

During the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> century, cruel treatment towards domestic and wild animals continued to be the norm. They were not only exploited for their meat and by-products but provided a source of entertainment. However, it was spectacles such as animal baiting and fighting contests which brought on a rise in moral concerns and discussions about the treatment of animals. This led to people using the printed media to voice their opinions (fig. 2).

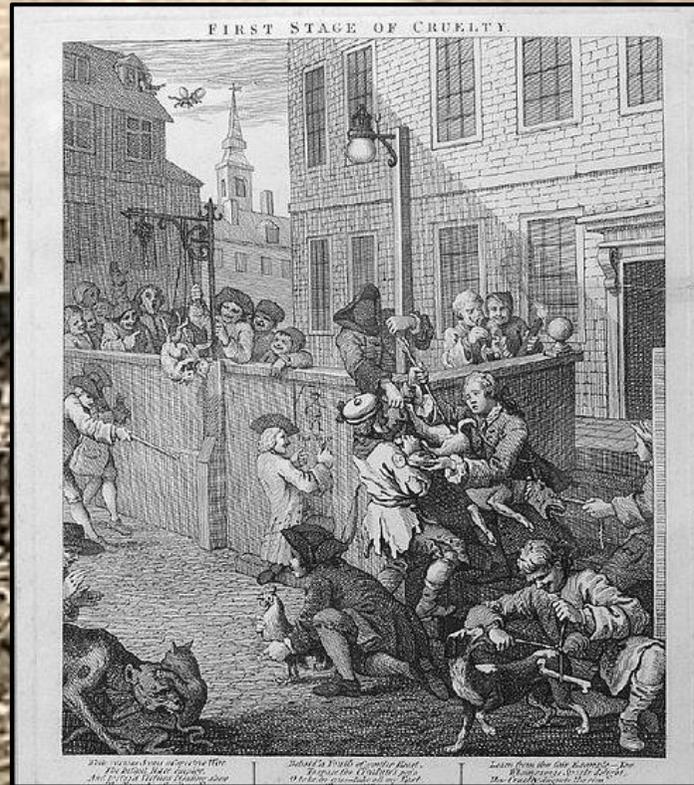


Figure 2: William Hogarth's printed engraving depicting animal cruelty

Image sources:

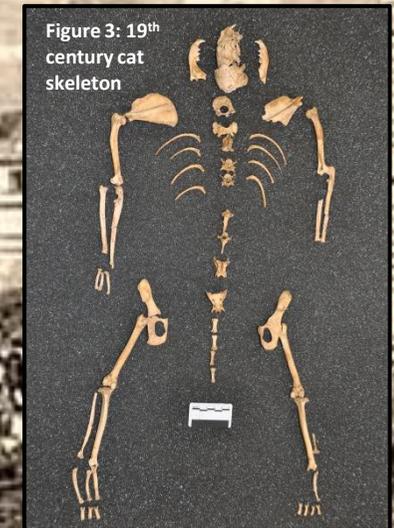
Background picture

[http://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/5/51/Smithfield\\_Last\\_day\\_of\\_Old\\_Smithfield\\_U.K.1955.jpg](http://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/5/51/Smithfield_Last_day_of_Old_Smithfield_U.K.1955.jpg)

## The Rise of the Companion Animal

Historical evidence shows that there was a substantial increase in the keeping of companion animals by the 18<sup>th</sup> century. Exotic animals were particularly fashionable with the elite and the importation of these animals increased with the exploration of the New World. Some of these animals, such as parrots, guinea pigs, monkeys and tortoises, found their way into the archaeological record.

Figure 3: 19<sup>th</sup> century cat skeleton



## Victorian Sentiments

The Victorian period appears to be the time when most of our contemporary ideas about 'pet-keeping' and concerns about animal treatment became wide-spread. Archaeological evidence of animal burials in garden plots reflects this change in attitude (fig.3). Objections began to be raised about the keeping of livestock animals in urban areas and health risks they caused which prompted their removal. However, the bond created between companion animals and humans allowed them to remain in the city.