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My day with the Bernese mountain dogs

By UK Alphorn player Frances Jones

‘We have recently been asked about the possibility of a main ring appearance at Crufts. We thought it would be nice to have the accompaniment of an Alpine horn to play us into the arena. Would this be something you would like to do?’

As a classical orchestral horn player, happily minding my own business with a circuit of orchestras, recitals and a keen (mostly) band of students to keep me busy, this was a rather unexpected request to appear among my emails one morning.

Admittedly I'm a dog owner, and I've occasionally even watched some of Crufts on TV, but our Bella, though we love her to bits, is a rescued mongrel, and so was her predecessor, so I've never had any

contact with the clubs of individual breeds before. I was about to be invited into the select world of the magnificent Bernese Mountain Dog and the even more rarified inner circle of carting by Wendy Murray of the Bernese Working Cart Group.

What an exciting new world has opened up for me! Well, the Crufts date fell through in the end. But Wendy said that if I ever wanted to come along to a Bernese carting weekend, I'd be most welcome. She told me that the Bernese Mountain Dogs were a working breed, like their larger compatriots the St Bernards.

Whereas the St Bernard dogs were very strong and tenacious, and excellent rescue dogs in the mountains for sniffing out people trapped in avalanches, the Bernese were used for pulling carts, or the stretchers for injured people. Slightly smaller, they are more agile with a

better strength to weight ratio. For a long time they have not been allowed to be used for work any more, but they love pulling carts and so the Bernese Carting Group keeps their skills alive and introduces their traditional heritage to the world at large.

It sounded like a good idea to see how the dogs would respond to the sound of the alphorn before such public (and televised) exposure in fact, just as cows are attracted to the sound.

So when Wendy told me that there was a Bernese Working Weekend coming up at Wellington Country Park, close to where we live, we came home from our holiday a day early to see what it was all about.

I was invited to come and meet the group at their Saturday evening barbecue, then if the dogs were happy about it, maybe I might play for the display on the Sunday.

What an amazing experience it was. What gorgeous dogs!

They all looked absolutely identical to me – all big, with the same markings, and soft and gentle and affectionate and beautiful!

I discovered that there isn't just one Bernese Mountain Dog Club: there are five regional groups in the UK, and that events like this happen up and down the country on many weekends every year.

There is generally an opportunity for Bernese owners to try their dogs in a cart harness for the first time and take them round a specially designed obstacle course.

I spoke to a number of owners who were delighted to discover that their dogs enjoyed pulling a cart when they had never done so before.

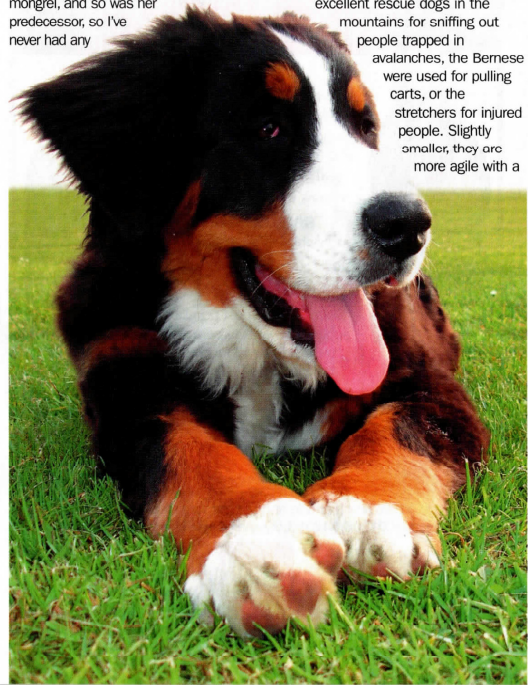
Having said hello to a couple of dozen dogs, I went a little way away, assembled my horn, and played a few notes. Some dogs near me instantly turned and looked intently at the source of the sound.

A pair pulling a cart nearby were intrigued, and they both cocked their heads to the right in one synchronised movement to listen to the sounds emerging.

Then they went on their way – just another harmless event that they accepted without any worry at all.



Bernese mountain dog meets alphorn – at Wellington Country Park near Reading



Bells tinkling, harnesses clinking, adorable dogs and magnificent costumes...it was magical!

All was looking good for the display on the Sunday afternoon.

I turned up – feeling slightly overdressed in my Swiss costume – to find some dogs harnessed to carts being taken round the obstacle course, others snoozing, others pottering about as their owners did the same.

I talked to them all, dogs and owners, and then it was time to walk through a practice routine.

I stood in the middle of the ring playing 'How Much is that Doggy in the Window' and other sort-of relevant tunes.

Then they decided that they wouldn't parade like that but just do what felt right on arrival.

Soon Swiss outfits emerged from tents and caravans, carts were transformed with beautiful displays of flowers, flags, cheeses and milk chums, tinkling with cowbells, each spectacular.

It was a truly magnificent sight and sound. Some carts were pulled by one dog, some by two, and although I still couldn't work out one

Bernese from the next, I did begin to pick up that some were slightly sleeker, some had marginally more white between the eyes, some sported slightly longer caramel-coloured socks, and one was called Henry. I walked into the centre of the arena with Wendy and after she had introduced the event to the crowds who had gathered to watch, she invited me to start playing.

As soon as I began, the bells started tinkling, the harnesses clinking, the parade entered the ring and I was slowly encircled with handlers, dogs and carts in the most gorgeous sight you ever saw.

I played a number of traditional Swiss alphorn melodies and the dogs were not distracted at all – they walked round their circle steadily and purposefully until, when all were arrived, they stopped in a line either side of Wendy and me.

It was a magical feeling, playing the instrument I love, the music that is so evocative of the Swiss mountains, and being surrounded by these adorable

dogs with a magnificent display of costumes and carts in attendance.

The dogs were then invited to show off their carting skills, all requirements if working in a crowded mountain village market, like stopping and staying still on command, reversing with their carts, going either gently or fast when requested to do so, and weaving carefully in a zig-zag through a line of volunteer children.

When the display was finished, the delighted children had each helped themselves to a lollipop out of one of the milk chums, and I was again invited to play some Swiss melodies while the dogs and tinkling carts were led away out of the display ring.

Lots of people commented on the beautiful sound of the alphorn and the magical experience of the whole display.

So look out next time Crufts is on, because you might just see Henry the Bernese Mountain Dog and his mates showing the world how the ancient Swiss tradition of carting used to be done.