

# The Rat Fancy and The Great War

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Doubtless you will be aware that this year sees the centenary of the outbreak of the First World War in 1914, which lasted for four long, grim, bloody years. This global conflict duly acquired the epithet of 'The Great War' or, more ironically, 'The War To End All Wars'. There's many a lesson to learned from history, although our political leaders never seem to do so, so whatever the causes of the conflict, it's only fitting that we remember those brave souls who made the supreme sacrifice for what they thought was right.

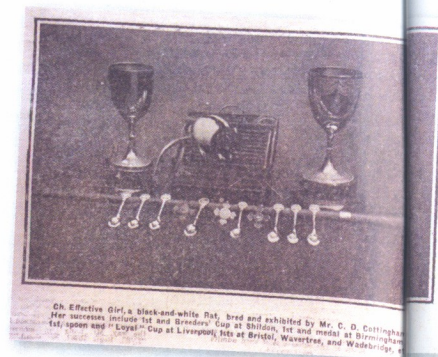
There have been scores of TV documentaries and dramas surrounding WW1 and there will no doubt be many more to come as we reach the harrowing centenaries of battles such as Mons, Ypres, The Somme and Passchendaele. However, the war affected those at home too... and this included rat fanciers.

## Rats Riding High

At the beginning of 1914, the original Rat Fancy was riding high. From a small start in 1901 as a sub section at shows staged by the newly formed National Mouse Club, the Rat Fancy had progressed. Thanks initially to the sterling efforts of Miss Mary Douglas, Fancy Rats had gained popularity and were being bred and developed in several new varieties. As photographs from the time bear out, the rats of the time were of excellent size, type and very distinct markings. One of the newest varieties at the time was the Japanese Hooded, and many of these had narrow spine-length saddles that many of today's marked enthusiasts would sell their grannies for.

Just the year before, the NMC's Annual

General Meeting had passed a proposal to change the name of the club to the National Mouse and Rat Club, reflecting the importance of the rat side of the Fancy. Miss Douglas had taken over as Hon. Secretary after the great Walter Maxey had stood down after a ten-year stint. She was to hold the post three times and later to serve as NMRC President. She also wrote a regular column for the fanciers' newspaper 'Fur & Feather', entitled 'Rat Resume', as well as being founder and patron of the Fur & Feather Young Fanciers' Club. All in all, for rats, it was a good time.



The issue of F & F dated 26th June 1914 carried a special 'Longtail' supplement, focussing on new breeds of Fancy Rat, as well as popular varieties of mice and profiles – with photographs – of the 'Leading Lights of the Longtails' ('F & F' really did love its alliteration in those days). Naturally, Miss Douglas was featured, along with an up and coming successful young fancier, Master G Sanders, whose spectacular Hooded Rat (check the saddle in the photograph!) had won the coveted Breeders' Cup and the NMRC Juvenile Cup! Also photographed with silver spoon awards was Ch Effective Girl (left), another beautiful Hooded owned by Mr C D Cottingham. (Again, check out the saddle!). There was also a lengthy, but fascinating feature on the genetics of new breeds of Fancy Rat by a Dutch geneticist Dr A L Hagerdoorn.



Two days later, on 28th June 1914 in Sarajevo, capital of Bosnia and Herzegovina, Archduke Franz Ferdinand, heir presumptive to the Austrian-Hungarian throne, was assassinated by a 19-year-old Bosnian Serb

Gavrilo Princip. Doubtless, Mary Douglas and other Rat and Mouse fanciers would have read this shocking news in their daily newspapers, but would not have remarked much upon it. After all, what possible effect could the murder of an Archduke in a far away Balkan country have on the Fancy in Britain? As it turned out, quite a lot... This was, of course, literally the shot that led to the outbreak of war.

## Keep Calm and Carry On...

In the issue of 14th August, the Editor's leader column entitled 'The War' stressed the need for everybody to keep their heads and carry on as usual. Already, it seemed, some rabbit and cavy clubs had started cancelling shows. Of course, the general feeling was that the war would be a short-lived conflict and most likely over by Christmas... but in the event it was to drag on for four more years.

F & F entered into the patriotic spirit and set about organising a National Relief Show to help the war effort. Regular leaders stressed the need to support the brave troops at the front. Soon afterwards though, the first notices began to appear in newspapers listing those soldiers who had fallen in action... and Fur & Feather was no exception, as many of the regular columns – including Rat Resume, paid tribute to the fanciers who had died or had returned home wounded, many of them horribly so. Miss Douglas' protégée, Ralph Blake, himself a proud and active rat fancier had volunteered and was soon sent to the Western Front. Such was young Blake's enthusiasm that he wrote regular letters to F & F, which was most likely his link to sanity. Blake was one of the lucky ones – he returned safely home in 1918. Meanwhile, issues of F & F were sent by fanciers in the UK to fanciers in the forces to keep them up to date with their hobbies at home. It's small gestures like these that show how war can bring out the best in human nature, even in the midst of such horror.

Miss Douglas proved herself to be every bit the stolid, no nonsense lady of high values that she was, and she set about organising