



Nick Mays, NFRS Archivist

Miss Mary Douglas — the 'Mother' of the Rat Fancy

Mary Douglas was described by her contemporaries as 'something of a phenomenon'. Just a quick glance at one of the few photographs of her will bear this out. She was very masculine in appearance, dress and manner. This was confirmed some years ago by veteran mouse and rat fancier, Roger Edmondson, who told me during an interview for *Pro-Rat-A* (issue 18, Nov/Dec 1983) '... she looked very — mature. If she'd been alive today, she'd have had an operation or something.' Also, elderly residents of her home town of St Veep, near Lostwithiel, in Cornwall, remember her very well from their childhood. She was 'the strange lady with the rats', and was often to be seen driving into town in her pony and trap, dressed in breeches, leggings and straw hat, puffing away on a pipe! Yes, she was indeed a phenomenon, especially in those far off days ... but who was Mary Douglas and how did she become known as the 'Mother of the Rat Fancy'?

Mary Anne Douglas was born in the village of Hanbury, near Worcester, in 1856. Her father was Henry Douglas, second son of the Scottish Earl of Morton, and Dean of Worcester Cathedral. Henry Douglas himself was an extremely interesting character in many respects. As a member of the landed gentry, and as a clergyman, the world was his oyster in those days. However, he was a true Christian soul, as he threw up the opportunity

of a position in one of the best areas of Worcester with a generous £1,000 a year stipend, to become the vicar of St Pauls in the Blockhouse, the poorest parish in Worcester. Douglas was a fervent campaigner for better relief and aid for the poor and raised many large sums of money for this purpose, largely out of his own pocket. He was still active in his charitable work right up until his death in 1907. He was aided in his Christian work by Mary, herself a devout Christian.

Early interest

Mary Douglas' association with rats began when she was a young girl, living in Hanbury. Mary had a keen interest in nature and was fascinated by the creatures that lived in or around a large pond near her home. One day she captured a 'water rat', a water vole, who bit her so hard and deeply that she carried the scar for the rest of her life. In time, Mary moved to Worcester with her family and was one day presented with two black and white rats by a friend. She started breeding rats as a hobby and advertised any surplus offspring. Through this she came into contact with other rat lovers. Eventually this small band of rat lovers decided that a formal Rat Fancy would be a good idea. Thus it was that Mary wrote to Walter Maxey, Hon Secretary of the National Mouse Club, asking that rats be catered for at mouse shows. As we have seen (issue 65, page 8)

Maxey was in favour of this and rat classes were staged at the Aylesbury Show on 24 October 1901. From then on, the Rat Fancy was incorporated into the Mouse Fancy, and the movement grew. Needless to say, Mary Douglas was the prime mover in all of this and wrote well over 500 articles in *Fur & Feather* about rats over the next twenty years.

Although she was, of course, primarily a rat fancier — the rat fancier in fact — she did have other strings to her bow. She was an accomplished rabbit fancier, and had a keen interest in English rabbits and bred many show winners. She was also a member of the English Rabbit Club committee for many years.

Devout and kind

Miss Douglas was, above all else, a devout and kind Christian. She frequently made donations to charity — especially animal charities. During the First World War, she arranged Blue Cross charity shows in aid of injured war horses from the Front. She was also a great believer in youth and adored children, although she had none of her own. This led to her penning a regular column in *Fur & Feather* for young fanciers almost every week for ten years, under her pen-name of 'Virgornian' (also her stud name). Through her efforts, the *Fur & Feather* Young Pet Stock Society was founded, whereby many fanciers from all fancies willingly gave an animal free of charge to a deserving youngster who wrote to Miss Douglas asking for one. In this way, many poorer children who could not afford to buy a pet of their own were started off in the fancy by the kindness and willingness of fanciers who held Miss Douglas in great esteem. However, she found out that some unscrupulous fanciers were using children to acquire good, free stock. She wrote a furious article for *Fur & Feather*, 'Cheating the

Miss Mary Douglas

Hon Secretary, National Mouse & Rat Club:
1907/8, 1913/14, 1919/20
President, National Mouse & Rat Club:
1920/21
Committee member, English Rabbit Club:
1907/10
Born June 1856. Died 26 November 1921

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Kiddies', and let rip into the cheats, feeling, quite rightly, that her noble venture had been sullied by human greed.

All this hard work took its toll, however, and from about 1917 onwards, Miss Douglas took a less active role in things, moving in with her sister, Dorothy, and her husband, the Rev Findlay, vicar of St Veep, Cornwall. Her health recovered later on and she was back in her usual active position within the Rat and Mouse Fancy. Her last show was at Gloucester, on 5 November 1921, when, busy to the last, she was acting as scrutineer of voting papers at the NMRC AGM. She fell ill again after this and died on 26 November 1921, aged 65. She was buried at St Veep, her burial service being conducted by her brother-in-law and attended by many fanciers. *Fur & Feather* was full of tributes to her for many weeks after her death, with the editor, J W Watmough himself, writing a leader obituary in her honour.

A typical eulogy to her was that written by her fellow rat fancier, famed breeder of coloured *Rattus rattus*, H C Brooke. On 9 December 1921 he wrote:

'I feel sure that there will be few fanciers in any branch who will not be moved at hearing that my dear friend, Miss M Douglas passed away on 26 November ... In her, we have lost one of the best and truest Christians, and one of the best and truest fanciers that ever walked the earth. Also many of us (myself included) have lost the best and truest friend ...

The building up of the Rat Fancy was almost regarded as a life work by our departed friend. If we want to erect a memorial to her after her own heart, let us keep the Rat Fancy going, and thus keep her memory green in the Fancy, as it always must be in our hearts.'