



Stephen Pearle

Her Majesty's Ratcatcher

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When considering the venerable history of the fancy rat, various names often crop up: Geoff Izzard, founder of the NFRS, Eddie Gay, 'rat revivalist' of the 1950s, Ralph Blake, the 'rat dynamo' of the early 1920s and, of course, before him, Miss Mary Douglas, the 'mother of the Rat Fancy' who started the organised fancy in 1901.

But going further back, another name crops up, that of a man about whom so much yet, perversely, so little is known. A man who, it could be fairly said, was one of the earliest originators of the fancy rat. His name? Jack Black, ratcatcher by appointment to Her Majesty, Queen Victoria.

What we know of Jack Black is, in the main, garnered from volume 3 of *London Labour and the London Poor*, written by Henry Mayhew, and published in 1861. Mayhew, a journalist and philanthropist, tramped hundreds of miles of London streets in the 1840s and '50s, interviewing countless of the city's inhabitants about their lives. His findings were originally published in weekly newspaper format in the early 1850s, before his four volume magnum opus was published in 1861.

Mayhew devoted a whole section of volume 3 to vermin and their exterminators. Jack Black was one of the main subjects, along with publican Jimmy Shaw and 'The Sewerman'. Mayhew introduces Black as follows: 'As I wished to

obtain the best information about rat and vermin destroying, I thought I could not do better now than to apply to that eminent authority, 'the Queen's ratcatcher ... Mr "Jack" Black'. Mayhew describes how Black could be seen on street corners, with a handcart decorated with painted rats, demonstrating to a crowd of onlookers his ability to dip his hand into a cage full of freshly caught wild rats and hold some aloft without being bitten. He would also be selling various jars and bottles of rat poison and his own 'rat bite composition'.

Mayhew visited Black at his 'country' house in Battersea. He describes Black's parlour as 'more like a shop than a family apartment', being filled with cages of rats, sparrows and ferrets. Black also plied a trade as a taxidermist, so numerous stuffed animals, birds and fish could be seen in cases round the room.

One thing becomes apparent from Mayhew's detailed description of life in the Black household and that is that, eccentric though he may have been, Jack Black was a family man, with at least one daughter.

One other thing also becomes apparent, Jack Black loved an audience; he relates numerous tales of how he catches fish with no lines or tackle, of how he bred the country's best terrier of the day, Billy, a great 'ratter' who was to be found in the rat pits of London. He also relates at some

length and gory description his worst rat bites and how he nearly died from them. Of course, Black is best known from the engraving (taken from a photograph) of him in his 'official rat-ketcher's uniform'. He says: 'I used to wear a costume of white leather breeches, and a green coat and scarlet waistkit (sic), and had a goold (sic) band around my hat and a belt across my shoulder. I used to make a first-rate appearance, such as was becoming the uniform of the Queen's rat-ketcher.' Black continues in great detail as to how he made his special rat belt. Having decided to cast the rats on the belt in metal, he says, 'I was nights and days at it ... by my own ingenuity and persewariance I succeeded ... I took a mould from a dead rat in plaster, and then I got some of my wife's sarsepans ... and I casted 'em with some of my own pewter pots.'

'Thousands of moulders used to come to see me do the casting of the rats, and they kept saying, "You'll never do it, Jack." The difficulty, you see, was casting the heye - which is a black bead - into the metal.' However, the tenacious vermin killer managed it, and the belt was completed. Despite being so famous and having such a lot of business, he regretted that he couldn't 'make an appearance' in costume for Mayhew, as his fine uniform was pledged!

On this theme, Black tells Mayhew that he used to manage a public house in Regent Street, named 'The Ratketcher's daughter'. His daughter used to dress up in her own costume of red velvet bodice, embroidered with silver lace. Mrs Black says: 'With a muslin skirt, and her hair down her back, she looked very genteel.'

Jack Black pointed out that (like many of his other business ventures) the pub flopped because, 'it was a brewer's house, and they ruined me.'

At the time of being interviewed, Black explained that it was 15 years since he had started working for the Government, 'by appointment'. He was asked by a Mr Westley, superintendent of the Royal Parks to fulfil the situation. Initially, Black's pay was £6 a year, then it was altered to so much per head of rats captured 'which is threepence'. (Who quantified the rats captured is not stated.)



Jack Black, Royal Ratcatcher 1850, resplendent in his 'rat-ketcher's' uniform, including the special rat belt

After this, he succeeded 'Newton' the 'warmint destroyer to her Majesty' and duly took charge of cleansing every royal barracks in London.

Of course, of the greatest interest to modern-day rat fanciers is Black's description of his own fancy rats: 'I've bred the finest collection of pied rats which has ever been knowed in the world. I had above eleven hundred of them - all wariegated (variegated) rats, and of a different specie and colour ... in the first instance bred from the Norwegian and the white rat, and afterwards crossed with other specie.'

'I have ris (raised) some of the largest tailed rats ever seen. I've sent them to all parts of the globe and near every town in England. When I sold 'em off, three hundred of them went to France. I ketched the first white rat I had at Hampstead; and

the black ones ... in Regent Street. I have 'em fawn and white, black and white, brown and white, red and white, blue-black and white, black-white and red.

'People come from all parts of London to see them rats and I supplied near all "happy families" with them. Burke, who had the "happy family" showing about London, has hundreds from me. They got very tame, and you could do anything with them. I've sold many to ladies for keeping in squirrel cages. Years ago I sold 'em for five and ten shillings (25p and 50p) apiece, but towards the end of my breeding them, I let 'em go for two-and-six (12½p) ...'

Behind the legend

A vivid portrait of the man emerges from Mayhew's description: boastful, egotistical, given to exaggeration, but essentially a kind and basically honest professional. A man who has great respect for rats. But what else, apart from Mayhew's treatise, do we know about Jack Black?

Almost certainly his name was not Jack, or even Black for that matter. Mayhew hints at this by saying 'Jack' Black and that 'in the sporting world and among his regular customers ... he is better known by the name of Jack Black.'

Some years ago, I conducted a great deal of research into Jack Black, and contacted the Lord Chamberlain's office in London and the Royal Archives at Windsor Castle. Eventually, the Public Records office at Kew, which holds records from all Royal Warrant holders, yielded the following information: Queen Victoria's ratcatcher was Samuel Bastick, first appointed in 1825. He was still in service in 1854, when his salary was £80 per annum. His name appears in the List of Officers and Servants in the Lord Chamberlain's Department.

The date of Bastick's appointment, 1825, accords with Black's appointment. If it was 15 years since his appointment when interviewed by Mayhew, this would put the date at 1840 - which ties in with the times when Mayhew was conducting his research. The fact that Bastick was still in service in 1854 also accords with the famous engraving of 'Jack Black, Royal

Ratcatcher, 1850'. The salary details do not fully accord with what Black tells Mayhew, but then, as we know, Black was given to exaggeration. The conclusion, therefore, is that 'Jack Black' was, most probably, Samuel Bastick.

Of course, further research is required; Census records for 1831, 1841 and 1851 may reveal a Samuel Bastick in Battersea as being a royal ratcatcher. Similarly, a street directory would also yield information, although Black's exact address is not given by Mayhew.

If anybody would like to assist me by checking these records in St Catherine's House, London, I'd love to hear from you.

So, there you have him; Jack Black, the rat legend. It would be nice to think that the young Mary Douglas, on a trip to the metropolis with her parents could have acquired a rat from him. In fact, Miss Douglas refers to Jack Black in one of her articles as 'being notable about 70 years ago'. I personally have got this vision of Jack Black offering Her Majesty Queen Victoria some Rat Bite Composition: 'Do wonders for yer 'ealth, Ma'am', to which the haughty monarch replies, 'We are not amused!'

And on that note, A Merry Christmas and a Ratty New Year to one and all!

CORRECTION

Unique Christmas gift

Life-size model rats

The telephone number of Rob Myers, whose model rats were advertised in *Pro-Rat-a* 77, page 15, is 0274 588661 and not as printed. The error is deeply regretted.

