

## So You Want to Keep a Guinea Pig.

They came to us on a misty, April morning in 2002, and for want of a better name that was what we called them. 'April' and 'Miss T'; two guinea pigs and sisters from a recent litter, and yet as different as chalk and cheese. Although only a few months old they already had the signs of what would be their adult shape and physique. April had silky white fur with a splash of orange chestnut and was just a little over weight. Miss T on the other hand resembled a spiky ball of dark grey wool and looked more like a hedgehog than a guinea pig. Mrs. Tiggywinkle came to mind the moment we saw her. They were the fourth pair of guinea pigs that we had adopted in a period of about twelve years, and they were to prove to be the longest living.



The pet shop owner had remembered us from previous visits and was well aware how much we loved all our pets, but still he went through all the do's and don'ts of looking after these timid, but delightful creatures. Neither Jacky, nor I had ever had guinea pigs until our son Alex fell in love with them, almost twenty years ago. By chance our friends, Andy and Penny Pedley had two guinea pigs (Parker and Dandy) that had just had a litter. Having offered to look after them whilst the family were on holiday, we were more than happy to have two of them, namely Rachael and Rebecca, for our very own pets. Now, some twelve years on, we were still smitten by these funny, sociable creatures and about to acquire two more, having raised a further five piggies along the way.

Although guinea pigs, as pets, did not come to Britain until about 1750, they were probably descended from the wild *cui* that the Incas kept some 500 years ago. The Spanish conquistadors referred to them as "tiny pigs" when they saw them in South America and the prefix 'guinea' was probably added from the fact that they took them to Guiana before they then spread into Europe. Guinea pigs are rodents, "a group of mammals containing over 1700 species" and they are often confused with the smaller hamsters. My step-father always used to refer to our two as hamsters, no matter how many times we showed him the difference between them.

There are all sorts of guinea pigs to choose from. Some are long-haired, some are short. Some have a silky, smooth fur, some a more course coat, and some are fluff. They also come in a variety of colours, just to make it even more difficult when deciding which one to choose. Of course, the long-haired variety need to be groomed and although this is an extra chore, it can be very relaxing for both the guinea pig and its owner. You can always tell when a guinea pig is happy, because it will make a delightful gurgling sound at the back of its throat. I'm convinced that Tesco's in Greenford have got guinea pigs working for them in their self-service check out area. Next time you are in the store just take a moment or two to listen as shoppers put items through and you will be sure to hear this distinct sound coming from within the machines!!

If you are deciding to buy two guinea pigs, it is best to make sure they are of the same sex and ideally they should be about 6 to 8 weeks old. Guinea pigs also go from newly born to adults in a very short space of time, and only live for 4 to 5 years old, on average. On three occasions we have also had the problem of one dying and the other living on for some time. Thinking that the surviving guinea pig might welcome another mate we attempted to place another adult piggy in to the hutch, but unfortunately the newcomer was not well received by the now elderly incumbent, and so we ended up with two guinea pigs in separate hutches.

Guinea pigs are relatively easy to look after although they cannot be left to fend for themselves. You need a good neighbour or friend to look after them if you are going on holiday. Having said that, we used to always take them with us in the car when visiting Jacky's mum in Selsey. They appeared to love the journey and the sound of the engine, and Jacky's mum even bought a second hand hutch with built on grazing area for them.

With regards to food guinea pigs too have their very own 5 a day requirements, namely:- guinea pig mix or crushed oats, greens and roots, hay and water. They should be fed twice a day and a large handful (about 42g/ 1 ½ half ounces) of mix or oats is about right. Having said that, April would eat whatever you put down for her and at whatever time of day. One of her's and Miss T's favourites was the peel from green cooking apples. Wednesday quickly became their favourite day of the week because of all the vegetable and fruit cuttings left over from the Holy Cross Lunch Club.

April and Miss T also had tremendous hearing, and could hear a fridge door closing from well over a hundred feet away. But the act that would turn them on more than any other, was someone pulling up their grass. As natural grazing animals they were addicted to this rich treasure and would literally squeal to be allowed to come out and devour it. When left to graze on the grass in the back garden, they could reduce the height of the grass in their run area almost as quickly as with an electric mower. If you have the space for a large number of guinea pigs, you need never have to buy a mower. Just leave them to graze all day in the growing season and you'll have an immaculate lawn in no time. Of course you will incur the cost of so many hutches to house them all in, unless you can come up with some kind of communal living quarters.

Just as with all our previous piggies, April and Miss T gave us countless hours of fun.

One of their favourite games was to play a kind of touch 'had' game that had them going round their pen in rapid short bursts, and often doing helicopter movements to change direction as quickly as possible. They would also follow our movements outside the pen as if copying our footsteps. Our two cats during their time with us were very protective to them. One of



them, Bevee by name, would sit for hours guarding their run and their hutch for any unwelcome intruders. On one occasion we put the guinea pigs back in to their hutch, only to find out a few hours later, that Bevee had sneaked in to their hutch and was fast asleep in their sleeping quarters!

On another day we had a real fright when we discovered that April had gone missing. Jacky and I ran here there and everywhere looking for her but with no success. We were about to give up the search when suddenly we saw her sitting with her 'minder' Bevee in the flower beds right next to her hutch. She looked as if she couldn't see what all the fuss was about, as she had needless to say been sitting there quietly all the time.

Last year April and Miss T achieved fame by being the stars of a picture quiz in Magna. For those who can recall it, the magazine showed photos of what looked like crop circles, and asked its readers to try and find out who had made these strange but perfect circles on the ground. In addition to this, once a year the request would go out from Mrs. Whittingham, for Jacky to bring in a pet to show the children in her class and for them to learn something new about these creatures. April notched up seven visits for this special class and was always spoken about with great affection. Even though when the children did paintings of them their furry coats miraculously turned from white, brown and black to blue, yellow and even green in some instances!

Sadly, just over a year ago, Miss T passed away quietly in her sleep. It was a shock for both of us and no doubt April too, since she had seemed quite well up until the last few days. In the weeks and months that followed, April clearly showed signs of missing her sister, but strong character that she was; she bounced back and seemed content with her own company. Although clearly a bit more over weight, she could still move at a fast pace when she wanted to. Remarkably she lived on right until just after her eighth birthday and died very peacefully at the end of April. Even then she managed to take a slice of cucumber from my hand before finally falling asleep inside her hutch.

No doubt Miss T is now reunited with her sister in God's animal heaven, and I'd like to think that they are entertaining the Lord Almighty with some of their playful antics. If so, they might like to know that I am writing a little story about them, as a kind of thank you for all the good times they gave us. Who knows, perhaps Magna might even put it into print before it becomes a block- buster movie! Dream on.

Alan Kingshott

