

It's a dog's life for house sitters.

My wife started the ball rolling around 2012 after her retirement from the NHS. Caring for other people's pets, in other people's homes seemed like a perfect way to supplement our income with a flexible work load. The agency we hoped to join supplied specially selected, mature and experienced house sitters to clients throughout the UK. Looking after dogs primarily but chickens, sheep, fish and sometimes horses as well. Cats tend to look after themselves. The initial interview took place in Portakabin in Hampshire, also referred to as Head Office. The business owner, her P.A. and a couple of four legged scrutineers put us through our paces. Applicants were required to commit to a minimum number of deployments per annum. Entertaining visitors or friends in a client's home was forbidden and sitters were required to leave the premises clean and sparkling. The more bookings you accepted the more you'd be offered, subject to positive feedback. We opted for assignments within a 100 miles radius of home. Properties were not to be left unattended for more than three hours each day. CCTV was often in situ to monitor compliance. Once the essential background checks were complete the phone began to ring. Prior to any contract being confirmed potential sitters visit the customer's residence and meet family members. This tea and biscuits interrogation lasted about one hour for which we received £25 plus mileage. Some clients made unexpected requests. One awful couple with a terribly ill dog showed me where I should bury the body if the creature expired during their holiday. Another couple forbade meat products in their home. One client invited us to squeeze and cleanse the anal glands of his two chocolate Labradors. We graciously declined. We needed to know about WIFI access, the whereabouts of the stopcock, the alarm system, the pet's quirks and foibles, where the animals slept, where they exercised, if the grounds were secure, the address of the vets, the location of poo bags, the date and time of departure and return and whether their waggy tailed loved ones socialised well with other canines. Within about six months we were rarely at home. Sometimes I'd sitting at one location and my wife at another. Trust and treats play a massive part. Most owners adore their animals. They want them to be safe and secure. People imagine their four legged companions will be distraught if they spot mummy and daddy tip toeing towards a taxi with suitcases. Careful plans may be organised to minimise such trauma. Most dogs respond well to a chewy bone or a biscuit or a freshly cooked, organic chicken breast with a sprinkling of broccoli and a bowl of spring water served at 15 degrees Celsius. The truth is, dogs have no concept of time. After a couple minutes they focus on the ones they're with, rather than those traitors in the taxi.

Our work was mainly in Sussex, Surrey and Hampshire. We also spent time in sought after London suburbs such as Hampstead. Ricky Gervais lived next door but one. Boy George had a place around the corner and whilst out shopping in the High Street, we doffed our caps to Richard and Judy. The client was an American artist and her husband a professor at London School of Economics. They had two designer mutts that liked nothing better than bounding up the steps of their stately home after a leisurely stroll on the Heath and peeing copiously on a Persian carpet or two. The property was opulent with picturesque surroundings and a guide price in the region of twenty million. As lowly dog sitters we were required to provide our own bedding and allocated a camp bed in the bowels of the building. The only other client to supply us with a 'put-you-up' was a white witch on the outskirts of Kent who displayed a Neighbourhood Witch sticker on her front door. The premise were tiny with red brick flooring downstairs and a full sized vintage motor cycle in the lounge. Apart from two dogs of mixed heritage there was a pond full of Koi and a chicken coop housing six virtuous hens and one

obstreperous cockerel. Feeding the chickens was a nightmare. Every evening I'd open the door to the pen brandishing a broom and a dustbin lid to fend off the furious rooster.

Another strange encounter occurred near the village of Wickham. A former submarine commander and his wife owned a historic pile with considerable grounds which they proudly opened to the public once a year. There was a lake, a maze, an open air swimming pool and beautifully manicured gardens discreetly tucked away. They also kept a handful of geriatric sheep. Deer would appear at dusk and consume rare and delicate blooms much to the gardeners chagrin. Following our initial chat the commander escorted me to the pasture where the mutton roamed and a nearby shed containing fortified fodder. I was instructed to give his woolly friends a generous portion each afternoon about 4pm. One or two, he said, would kneel when taking of supper and afterwards be unable to rise so I was to standby and resurrect them. Later in the week, over a cup of tea and a Garibaldi biscuit the gardener spilled the beans about Georgina, the Commander's daughter. She'd worked for seven years as Trevor Eve's dresser and whilst on location in Cape Town a photo of her had emerged on the balcony of Trevor's hotel suite. Clad only in a black G string. The actor's wife of 26 years had spotted the picture in the tabloids and immediately flown out to South Africa to share her thoughts with hubby. The first time the commander got wind of the story was when a couple of journalists banged on his door asking for a comment.

West Chilton was home to a crafty Cockapoo and a mischievous Labrador. Their owners travelled extensively. They owned other residences in London, Alderney and Switzerland. They'd also acquired a substantial detached property next door in West Chilton to give 'the boys' more room to chase rabbits. Facilities included a large indoor pool and sauna. A spacious home office situated in the garden with multiple screens to track tankers full of oil. There was a gymnasium, a granny annexe, and multiple garages. One of which contained a pink Cadillac. A harp, a baby grand and a cello gathered dust in the music room. Between the kitchen and the orangery sat a glass door in the floor covering a spiral staircase leading down to the wine cellar. There was a safe, numerous alarms and a panic room. The 'boys' were blessed with bespoke beds, intricately embroidered with their names but chose to sleep on top of my wife and I most nights. The Labrador was an avid Swing ball enthusiast while the Cockapoo had a passion for playing 'fetch' hour upon hour. One day he'd been presented him with an automatic ball launcher with enough power to catapult a small child halfway down the garden. All the dog had to do was retrieve the ball and drop it back into the device. But the Cockapoo wasn't impressed. He wanted his speed and dexterity rewarded by an appreciative audience and the ball launcher wasn't designed to pander to the ego of pedigree chums. Other staff included gardeners, a car washer, a personal trainer, a dog walker, one daily cleaner plus a monthly team of three ladies to thoroughly blitz the interior. After the exchange of contracts at the Lake Lucerne property the client despatched the domestic trio to do a spot of hoovering etc. Then there was the moment when the Cockapoo stuck his head out of the nearside, rear passenger window of my car. We knew he was enjoying the breeze in his face but were concerned he may see a cat and leap out of the vehicle so I decided to shut his window. Seconds later he bounded across to the opposite side, placed a paw on the appropriate button and lowered the window with a cheeky smile. Our host had once missed a flight during a business trip and the plane he was due to have been aboard, crashed. So just before a holiday when the extended family were all booked on the same flight he asked if we would care for the boys in the event of a tragedy. And we agreed. A legally binding document drawn up. Much to our surprise terms and conditions included a sum of £100,000 for the dog's welfare. We wished them all a safe journey.

The two largest characters to come our way were a Great Dane and a Pyrenean Mountain dog from the same household. Mountain dogs prefer to sleep under the stars and the Great Dane had a three seater sofa all to himself not far from the fireplace. Both these adorable creatures attracted attention when we were out and about but should either one refuse to hop back into the 4x4 after a romp on the common we were absolutely snookered. Then there was an endearingly aloof, French poodle called Titti-poo. This pretentious pooch belonged to a retired Norwegian ballet dancer who could still pirouette and perform the splits at the age of seventy seven. Sometimes Titti would race off into the depths of the Ashdown Forest and secret herself somewhere, just for the joy of hearing me yell her name at the top of my voice. Fellow dog walkers tended to give me a wide berth.

The luckiest hounds we cared for lived in Hankham. A motley crew, all shapes and sizes and all, rescued from overseas. Sometimes as many as seven. None possessed a collar or a lead. These were authentically free range. Their home was situated at the edge of woodland, and the grounds were immense. Organic vegetables were grown and distributed from a multitude of industrial greenhouses to the left and a large swathe of land to the right provided off road storage for caravans and motor homes. Then at the back of the house sat the chicken coop. These noisy creatures were let loose at 8am and returned at 6pm. A rickety dining room chair stood nearby with a weather beaten transistor radio placed upon it tuned to Radio 4. It played from breakfast to bedtime, not for the entertainment of the brood, but to deter foxes. Apparently foxes can't stand Nick Robinson. The owner was a former racing driver with business interests in Qatar. His wife was a fabulous cook, with a slightly bohemian air. She'd dedicated her life to dogs and chickens and keeping their home untidy. Just outside the boot room stood a warehouse filled with Lamborghinis, Bentleys, Aston Martin's, Rolls Royce's and other collectable vehicles wrapped in protective covers. The dogs had the run of the ground floor of the building plus the exterior for as far as the eye could see. Everyone bailed out when the back door was opened. The little ones might walk with me while the big ones simply vanished. Sometimes for hours. Our job was to look after the client's dogs but the client wanted them to be free. And so they were. The bigger lads would hunt and kill a fox occasionally but the chickens never came to harm. The owner's elderly mother lived nearby. She was a frail and feisty widow who insisted upon driving to see friends now and again even though she was visually impaired. A large sum of cash was stowed in her glove compartment to help mitigate any errors of judgement. We stayed in Hankham regularly. The family arranged their skiing holidays around our availability. One day the lady of the house took a call from a London Hospital. Years earlier her father had donated his body to medical science and now medical science had done with him.

Who is it? Shouted her husband.

It's about Daddy, she replied. Do we want what's left?

Probably not, he chuckled, then reached for a bottle of wine.

Dogs are good for the soul. They teach us about love and loss and loyalty. Sometimes they smell a bit, but so do we.