

Greyhounds in Post-Conquest England

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hile greyhounds are cute, cuddly couch-potatoes to us, that was not the case a millennium ago in Medieval England. Greyhounds held an important place in medieval recreation for the nobility and royalty. Our beloved companions used their impressive sight and chase instincts to chase down or round-up prey for hunters on horseback.

King William II, son of the famed William the Conqueror, ruled for thirteen years from 1087 to his death in a hunting accident in 1100. This accident was almost a comical mishap. While hunting in the New Forest, a deer ran in-between a huntsman, Walter Tirel, and the King. Tirel shot an arrow at the deer, missed, and struck the King in the chest, piercing his lung and killing him in an instant.

Whether this was indeed merely an accident, an act of God, or a cleverly executed assassination is unknown. However, interestingly for us greyhound lovers, there would have been a pack of greyhounds present during this catastrophic hunt.



William paid the upkeep on three separate packs of hunting hounds at great expense. One pack alone cost the King twenty pennies a day, roughly £1300 (\$2400 AUD) in today's money. That comes to £475,000 (\$874,000 AUD) for the whole year! This included the wages of eight men, food for eight greyhounds and twenty-four other wolfhounds, and uniforms for all of them. Multiply these figures by three and you can see that keeping greyhounds was quite a burden on the royal treasury.

In these hunts, greyhounds were kept close to the King and used only on the fiercest and strongest game. A handler would be deployed on the expected route of the chase with two or three greyhounds. These handlers were called 'fewterers'. The position was considered the most prestigious amongst all the dog-handlers in the royal employment and received the highest pay of all the dogmen. The fewterer's job would be to release their hounds after the main pack of hunters and hounds had passed them by and to care for the greyhounds in-between hunts.

Source: William Rufus, Frank Barlow (Yale University Press, 1983)



A fowterer with two greyhounds, illustration in the Luttrell Psalter circa 1320-1340, Northern England