

Hodge (2006)

... a very fine cat indeed

(page checked January 2026)

Hodge was the treasured companion of Samuel Johnson (1709–84), who is remembered as an eighteenth-century man of letters, lexicographer — his most famous work is the *Dictionary of the English Language*, published in 1755 — and cat lover. Hodge loved oysters, which at the time were seen as a cheap and nutritious food rather than the luxury they've become today; and Johnson would go himself to the fish market to buy them, as he thought asking the servants to do so would make them resentful and ill-disposed towards Hodge.

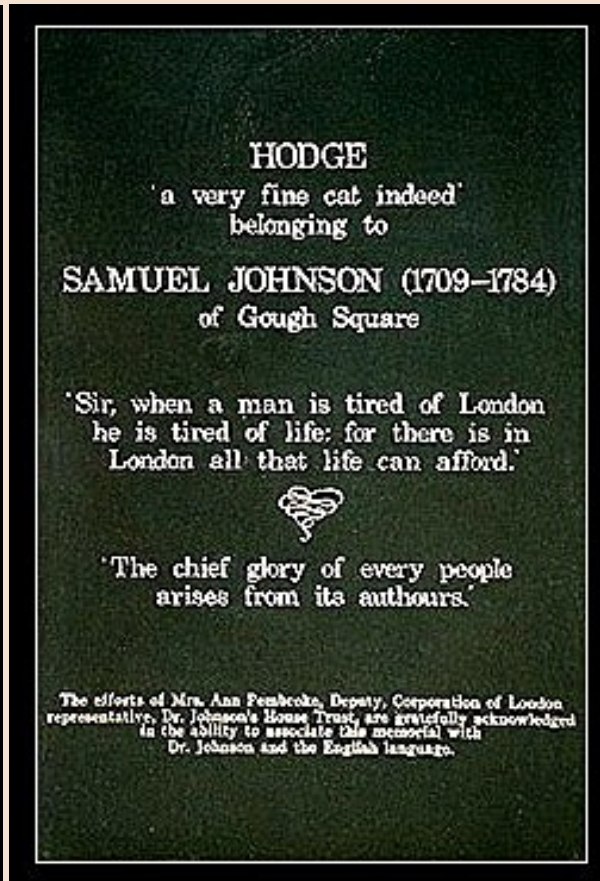
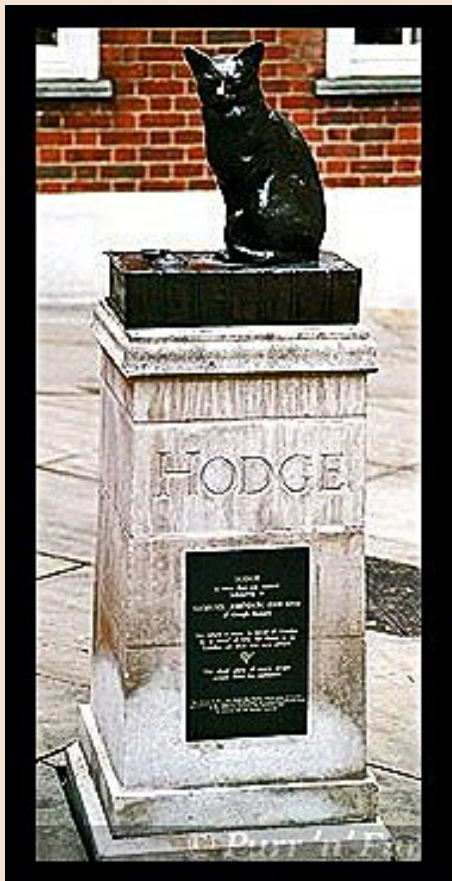
James Boswell (1740–95) became a friend and later the biographer of Johnson, but admitted that the presence of the cat when he visited sometimes made him uneasy. He confessed to being much surprised at the 'indulgence with which [Johnson] treated Hodge'. One day, though, he suggested that, as cats go, Hodge was a very fine specimen — to which Johnson replied that he was indeed, but that he had previously had cats that he had liked better. However, he noticed that his cat seemed rather put out by this remark, so Johnson added, 'But he is a very fine cat; a very fine cat indeed.' Hence the inscription on Hodge's memorial.

Dr Johnson lived for 11 years at 17 Gough Square, just off London's Fleet Street, and it was there that he did much of the work on the dictionary. Gough Square is very small, so to take up less space a statue of Hodge, rather than one of the great man himself, has been placed there. The cat is seated on a large book representing the dictionary, and there are a couple of oyster shells too. A statue of Johnson can be seen not far away, outside the church of St Clement Dane's that he often attended.





Hodge's sculpture was created by Jon Bickley, an English-born sculptor who is fond of cats, dogs and most other four-legged creatures. The photo (*above left*) shows him (on the right) at the unveiling of the sculpture in September 1997, with the then Lord Mayor of London, Sir Roger Cook (at the left) and Lord Harmsworth. Bickley used his own cat **Thomas Henry** (*above right*) as a model when creating the likeness of Hodge.



It isn't known when Hodge went to live with Johnson, but he's first mentioned in the late 1760s. The name 'Hodge' is a variation of Roger and was a traditional name for an English countryman, so possibly the cat came as a youngster from one of Johnson's many trips to the countryside at around that time. We don't know when Hodge died, but it is known that when he was near to death his master went out to obtain some valerian for him, to make his last hours as pleasant as possible. (Valerian is a plant that cats like, similar to catnip.) It is thought that he was a black cat.

Little is known of Samuel Johnson's other cats, although he and his wife Elizabeth had some during their married life in London. It's suggested that the series of felines with whom he later shared his

rooms gave him companionship, and an outlet for his love, in the isolated life of a hard-working scholar, following the early death of Elizabeth in 1752. In a letter of 1783 he mentions one called Lily as 'the white kitling now at full growth and very well behaved', so she must have been with him for a year or 18 months by then.



To bring the tale more up to date, in September 1997 a new **Lily**, an all-black kitten described as 'decidedly mischievous', was taken on at 17 Gough Square, which is now a museum. Lily came from Battersea Dogs and Cats Home and was about 5 when adopted. Our thanks go to Natasha McEnroe, museum curator, for letting us know that Lily was still alive in 2006, but as befitted an 'old lady' of 14 or 15 years, she preferred to spend much of her time quietly in the curator's cottage rather than in the museum.

In early 2011 Lily was reported to be 'elderly and a bit batty', but still very much alive. She lived with the former curator of Dr Johnson's house, and her principal occupations were described as following patches of sunlight across the floor, and being worshipped by the family's twin children! Unfortunately Lily eventually died and there are now no cats in the Johnson house.

Note: The poet Percival Stockdale wrote *An Elegy on the Death of Dr Johnson's Favourite Cat*; it's in quite flowery language, but you can find the text a little way down the page [here](#).

[Wikipedia](#) | [Dr Johnson's House](#) (undated)

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