

Black Jack, Mike and the British Museum (2011)

(page checked January 2026)

There's a long history of cats at the famous [British Museum](#) in London, although many details of earlier residents are lost in the mists of time. Sir Frederick Madden, Keeper of the Manuscripts and on the staff from 1828 to 1866, had two cats, both imported from France and allowed to roam around to wherever Sir Frederick was to be found. Better documented is **Black Jack**. It's not clear that he actually belonged to anyone, but he found the museum an agreeable place and was a frequent visitor there. A very handsome fellow, with a jet-black coat apart from a white front and white paws, and with 'whiskers of great length', it was his custom to sit on the desks in the Reading Room, always asking one of the readers to open the folding doors for him when he wanted to leave.



Jack in disgrace

One Sunday, unfortunately, he was accidentally shut in one of the newspaper rooms and, becoming bored, went around sharpening his claws on the bindings of some of the newspaper volumes, causing considerable damage. Not surprisingly it didn't win him any friends; he was banned from the Library and in fact the Clerk of Works was told to get rid of him. But Jack mysteriously disappeared — because two of his supporters had spirited him away to be safely out of harm's way, and kept him supplied with food and milk. It was officially reported that he was 'presumed dead', the newspaper bindings were repaired and life moved on. However, a few weeks later he reappeared, everyone seemed pleased to see him and no questions were asked.

The arrival of Mike



Early in spring 1909 [*some accounts give 1908 or 1910*] Sir Ernest Wallis Budge, then Keeper of Egyptian Antiquities, who looked after the Egyptian cat mummies in the British Museum, was leaving his residence one morning when Black Jack appeared with an object in his mouth. Coming up the steps of the house, he deposited it at the Keeper's feet and then, solemnly and inscrutably, walked away (see *cartoon, left*). His part in history was played and nothing more is known about him. The object he had brought to Sir Ernest was a tiny kitten! The little mite was named **Mike**, taken in, cared for, and was fortunately accepted by the two cats already resident at the house.

Life at the Museum

Mike was to become the most celebrated of the Museum's cats and was to form a lifelong friendship with Sir Ernest; then, as he grew up, he also made friends with the gatekeepers at the Museum's main gate and started to frequent the lodge, where he was always made welcome, and so he effectively had two homes. With the aid of the house cat he learned a curious ritual, usually enacted on Sunday mornings, involving the numerous pigeons that hung around. Mike would 'point' like a dog, and his 'partner' would gradually drive the pigeons into a corner. Each cat would seize one of the dazed birds and carry it unharmed into the house, where the housekeeper would take it and reward its bearer with some milk and a little meat. The pigeons were put into a side room, given some maize and water, and when they had recovered their equilibrium would fly off through the open window. Neither cat liked to eat game with dirty, sooty feathers, much preferring the cooked meat provided for them!



As time went on Mike began to prefer living at the lodge, where he had free access to come and go as he pleased, day or night, and a special corner shelf, away from draughts, was made

available for him to sleep on. But he continued to patrol the Museum, and in return the Keeper of the mummified cats continued to make sure he was looked after; even during the lean years of World War I he made sure that Mike did not go without. The cat led a good life, often being given milk and scraps in the evening by the refreshment-room waitresses, and being frequently entertained in the houses of some of the resident keepers. As did his predecessor, he also liked to grace the Reading Room with his presence.

Mike retires



After some 15 years of service, Mike was officially retired and declared a 'pensioner' in 1924. Taking great interest still in all that happened in the courtyard, he was especially good at dealing with strange dogs that wandered in from time to time. Dogs that 'laughed at' policemen and gatekeepers fled in terror from Mike, who swelled himself up to twice his normal size and hurled himself at them! (*cartoon, left*) He chose his few friends carefully; did not much like strangers — especially ladies who poked him with their parasols — and woe betide anyone who thought he would like to be stroked! He had a means of escaping such unwanted attention; two leaps would take him out of reach onto the pediment above the lodge door, which over the years became worn smooth by the impact of his landings there.

Failing health

Sir Wallis Budge, when he himself retired, would come to visit his friend and every week would bring sixpence towards his keep. During Mike's last couple of years he became difficult to feed because his teeth were decaying, but the three gatekeepers, who 'treated him as a man and a brother', took it in turns to prepare tender meat and fish (on alternate days) for him. It was said he 'preferred sole to whiting, and whiting to haddock, and sardines to herring; while for cod he had no use whatsoever'. Eventually his health failed to the extent that he was unable to eat, and it was felt kinder to 'put him to sleep', and so this famous cat passed away on 15 January 1929 at the age of about 20 years. He was much missed by a host of friends and acquaintances who had appreciated a cat that knew 'how to keep himself to himself'. He had become one of the minor sights of London, and news of his passing saddened admirers around the world who had encountered him during their visits to the city.



Tributes

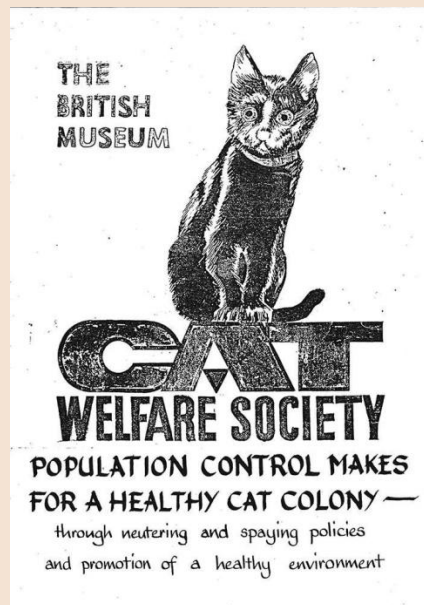
There was a report that an inscribed tombstone had been erected not far from the Museum entrance to commemorate Mike's life, but no trace of it has been found today, despite extensive searches and enquiries, and general opinion is that it was misreported and never actually existed. This is a little strange in view of specific details given shortly after Mike's death, which describe a 'small tombstone, near the Great Russell Street entrance to the Museum' bearing the inscription, 'He assisted in keeping the main gate of the British Museum from February 1909 to January 1929.' It seems more likely that the stone was indeed erected but was later removed or destroyed, or perhaps concealed by subsequent alterations. However, the person reported to be responsible for it, F.C.W. Hiley, Assistant Keeper in the Museum's Department of Printed Books, also composed a splendid Memorial Poem. Below is its ending, and the whole work is at the end of this article.

*Old Mike! Farewell! We all regret you,
Although you would not let us pet you;
Of cats the wisest, oldest, best cat,
This be your motto — Requiescat!*

In 1979, fifty years after Mike's death, a short, limited-edition 'Jubilee Reminiscence' was prepared by R. B. Shaberman and reprised Mike's life. Acknowledging the author and the publisher Arthur Page of The Bookshop, Bloomsbury, London, the two cartoons are taken from it.

Later cats

Other cats followed Mike, although most remain anonymous. The number of cats multiplied, and they began to become a nuisance. In particular, during WW2 the number of cats in London had burgeoned out of control, with so many having lost their homes in the Blitz and being forced onto the streets. They tended to group into colonies, one of which 'invaded' the museum and its grounds. They weren't friendly mascots as Black Jack and Mike had been, but mean and dirty animals eking out an existence as best they could. For some 15 years the authorities tried various methods to control the population, without much success, so that by about 1960 there were as many as 100, untamed and unneutered. Kittens were reported as being born in the loading docks and running around the bookshelves! Eventually the museum authorities had had enough, and the cats were set to be exterminated. They were saved by cleaner Rex Shepherd who, with a group of anonymous staff members, convinced those in charge to try a more humane approach. They set up the Cat Welfare Society, had the cats neutered and cleaned up at the Royal Veterinary Society, and with the aid of donations set up feeding stations and a shelter away from museum exhibits. Then they looked for suitable owners to adopt the cats. The strategy worked well, so that within a matter of months the population had been reduced to the more manageable number of just six.



These were featured in newspaper articles and became quite well-known. There was **Belinda**, an odd name for a ginger tom; he is remembered as 'a strong character, given to keeping warm on motor cars'. **Suzie** succeeded him; she was a black-and-white female who moved in with the warders and never missed a patrol of the buildings. She was able to catch pigeons from the air. Unlike Mike she liked people and became a familiar sight to visitors and staff alike; she died in May 1982 at the age of 16, prompting the Museum to print a short obituary in its Bulletin. Later there were **Maisie** and her offspring **Pippin**, **Puppet** (who were trained to roll over on command) and **Pinkie**, and **Suzie the Second**, who spent much of her time with workmen in the Control Room. When she became too old for life there she was retired to a private home.



(l. to r.) Pippin, Maisie and Poppet

By 1985 there were no longer any cats at the museum, and the Cat Welfare Society was disbanded. The British Museum joined many former feline domains that are today cat-less. See [Working / London Working Cats of Yesteryear](#).
[Mental Floss](#) (Jan. 2024) | [British Museum blog](#) (2017)



In 1995 the artist **Frances Broomfield** created a charming painting depicting Mike as a kitten, and has kindly given permission for the image to be displayed here. It shows Mike's arrival at the museum, with Black Jack sloping off in the background having done his good deed. The image is copyright © Frances Broomfield, and may not be copied or reproduced elsewhere without her permission.

The above account of Mike is adapted from a pamphlet written in February 1929 'at the request of many friends of Mike' by his champion, Sir Ernest Wallis Budge, to commemorate the famous cat's life. It is entitled MIKE — the CAT who assisted in keeping the Main Gate of the British Museum from February 1909 to January 1929, and it was published by Richard Clay & Sons of Bungay, Suffolk. Time magazine evidently considered Mike's passing worthy of note, publishing an [obituary](#) in April 1929, and in January of the following year it also carried [news of Budge's pamphlet](#) (note that both links go to previews consisting of the first couple of paragraphs in each case; subscribers to Time can read the pieces in full by logging in).

Grateful thanks go to the British Museum and especially to Dr Patricia Usick, Honorary Archivist, Department of Ancient Egypt and Sudan, for providing a copy of the pamphlet. Also to Dr Elizabeth Chase, City of London and Parliamentary Guide, for her valued help in trying to track down Mike's apparently non-existent tombstone.

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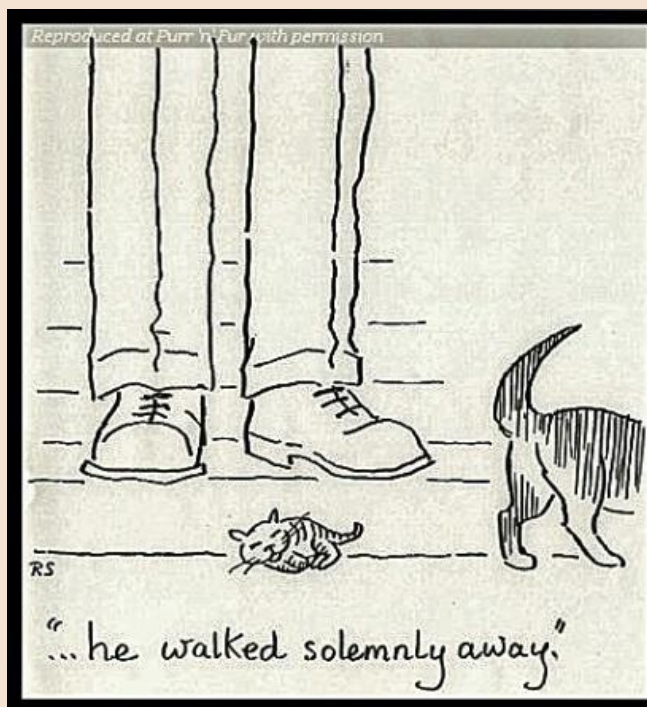
**TO THE MEMORY OF
"MIKE,"
THE MUSEUM CAT.
Died Jan. 15, 1929,
Aged Twenty Years.**

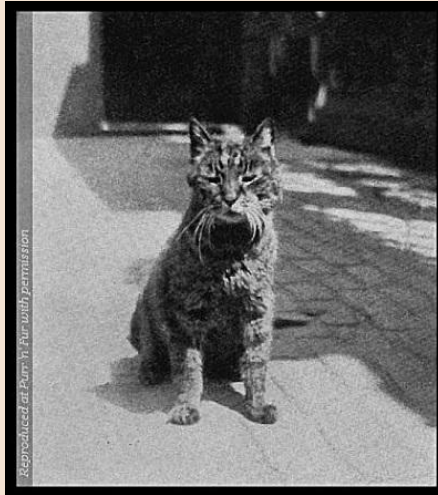
All ye that learnèd hours beguile
In the Museum's dingy pile,
And daily through its portals pass,
And marked the cat upon the grass
That sat — alas, he sits no more! —
Give ear a moment, I implore,
And mourn the fate of poor old Mike!
When shall we ever see his like?
No fate untimely snatched away
This pussy-cat Methuselah;
When Death removed him, he had near
Accomplishèd his twentieth year:
For since we are a learned crew
In the Museum — Michael knew
Of Argus, that famed hound of old
Who lived through hunger, heat and cold;
And when his lord came home at last,
When twenty years were well-nigh past,
Looked up, and wagged his tail, and died:
But Michael, stiff with feline pride,
Vowed, by a dog he'd not be beat,
And set himself to cap that feat.
He'd sit and sun himself sedately,
No Sphinx or Sekhmet¹ looked more stately;

He cared not in the very least
 For human being, bird or beast;
 He let the pigeons eat their fill,
 Nor even one was known to kill;
 But scared them if they stayed too nigh
 By the sole terror of his eye.
 To public, and officials too,
 He showed the scorn which was their due:
 And if perchance some forward minx
 Dared to go up and stroke the Sphinx —
 Her hand shot back, all marked with scores
 From the offended Michael's claws.
 And he who writes these lines, one day
 Ventured a compliment to pay,
 And for reply received a bite —
 No doubt you'll answer, "Serve him right!"
 So out of all the human crew
 He cared for none — save only two:
 For these he purred, for these he played,
 And let himself be stroked, and laid
 Aside his anti-human grudge —
 His owner — and Sir Ernest Budget!
 A master of Egyptian lore,
 No doubt Sir Ernest had a store
 Of charms and spells deciphered
 From feline mummies long since dead,
 And found a way by magic art
 To win that savage feline heart.
 Each morn Sir Ernest, without qualms,
 Would take up Michael in his arms;
 And still remained his staunchest friend,
 And comforted his latter end.
 Old Mike! Farewell! We all regret you,
 Although you would not let us pet you;
 Of cats the wisest, oldest, best cat,
 This be your motto — Requiescat!

(¹ A lion-headed Egyptian goddess)

F. C. W. Hiley





Below is a photo of Mike taken just after his fourteenth birthday.



Mike, the tabby cat of the British Museum, who has just celebrated his fourteenth birthday, has an honourable record as a law officer against thieves who break in and nibble.

See also <https://gatosyrespeto.org/2025/07/10/los-gatos-del-museo-britanico/Wikipedia>

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