

Feline Fragments 15 (2009)

(page checked March 2026)

Nini, the Venetian Cat
The MacNab, a tragic tale from yesteryear

Nini, the Venetian Cat

A national celebrity in the 1890s

Nini was a large, white tomcat who lived in Venice, Italy in the early 1890s and frequented one of the numerous small coffee shops, a café called the Caffè del Frari off the Piazza San Marco, where his day job was that of chief mouser. After more than a century it's not quite clear why, but Nini became a national celebrity, and people would come from far and wide to the coffee shop to visit him and to sign the visitors' book that the shop kept for him. We're not talking just of minor celebrities here. The composer Giuseppe Verdi came, and wrote a few bars from his opera *La Traviata* in the book; Pope Leo XIII visited; Emperor Menelik III of Ethiopia signed the book; and Czar Alexander III of Russia visited when he came to Venice. Even the reigning Italian monarch, King Umberto I, with his wife Queen Margherita, visited the café and signed Nini's book.



It's reported that Nini also 'moonlighted' at the nearby Venetian state archives, where he liked to take a nap and would deter the mice from nibbling the papers. He also often visited the Frari church across the road — the church of Santa Maria Gloriosa del Frari — where he had many admirers. With all these many friends, numerous tributes were paid when he died in 1894, and a wake was held in his honour. He was said to have been 'a rare gem' and 'a gentleman, white of fur and affable with great and small'. Unfortunately the visitors' book disappeared somewhere over the years; but the Caffè del Frari still exists and serves good coffee in an agreeable atmosphere – and there is a depiction of Nini on one of the windows (*above*).

A delightful children's book was published in 2010, written by Mary Nethery and with charming illustrations by John Manders. While the author admits she has taken some liberties with Nini's story, it's well worth a read. For details of *The Famous Nini: A Mostly True Story of How a Plain White Cat Became a Star*, see [here](#) (June 2010 – *archived copy*).

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Today there are of course still cats in Venice; many of them are pets that tend to make their rounds at night when there are fewer dogs about on the streets. But there are also strays, particularly in the area of the San Lorenzo church, where some wooden cat shelters have been erected and local people come to feed the animals. There is an organisation called [Dingo](#) (site is in Italian, but there's a nice video about the cats) that runs the cat sanctuaries in the city. An excellent small photo gallery of Venetian cats, a couple of which we have reproduced here, is to be found at [Italy Heaven](#). The site also suggests where tourists can see cats in Venice, and where cat souvenirs can be bought.



For another article on Venetian cats see [here](#) (Jan. 2011: a hospital where cats live in the grounds; good photos); and for the reasons why there are now fewer of them see [here](#) (May 2017).

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The MacNab

A Tragic Tale from Yesteryear

The *Caledonia* was a transatlantic liner, one of several ships of that name in the history of the Anchor Line, operating out of Glasgow, Scotland. Her mascot, who had been with the ship since her maiden voyage, was a large and intelligent black cat called Duffy MacNab — or so it said on his collar, but to the members of the liner's crew he was always **The MacNab**. He was loved and respected, an integral part of the crew, and had never missed a voyage; amazingly, he had sailed over 200,000 miles on board (more than 320,000 km) and had just completed his 80th crossing of the Atlantic. 'He was an aristocrat through and

through,' said Dr Jenkins, ship's surgeon. 'He would eat only the best food, and was unusual in that he preferred tea to drink instead of milk.'



It was The MacNab's custom to be first ashore when the ship arrived in port, and then he would usually not be seen again until sailing day, when, just before the gangplank was raised, he would 'come marching aboard with all the dignity and self-importance of the king of cats that he was'. For some reason, when *Caledonia* arrived in New York early in August 1913 the cat was unusually impatient to be ashore — and it proved to be his undoing. He took up his

normal position on the foc's'le, from where he would jump to the roof of the Anchor Line pier at West 26th Street, a distance of about four feet (just over a metre). On this occasion, though, he launched himself at the pier from ten feet away (over 3 metres) — and he didn't make it. He fell straight into the water.

Quartermaster Angus MacLean, an intimate friend of The MacNab, had watched the disaster and didn't hesitate; he dived in immediately to try to save the cat. Despite swimming around and under the pier for a quarter of an hour or so, he was unable to find any trace of him; he must have been quickly carried away by the tide. It was a tragic ending to this ship's cat's illustrious career, and he was much mourned.

(Summarised from the account in the New York Times of 4 August 1913)

There's a comprehensive account of *Caledonia* and The Macnab's story at [The Hatching Cat](#) (Sept. 2016)..

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FGeline Fragments 16 (2009+) *(page checked March 2026)*

**Dr Salter's Daydream
The Catford Cat
Sam, who belonged to Patricia Penn
The London Leopard**

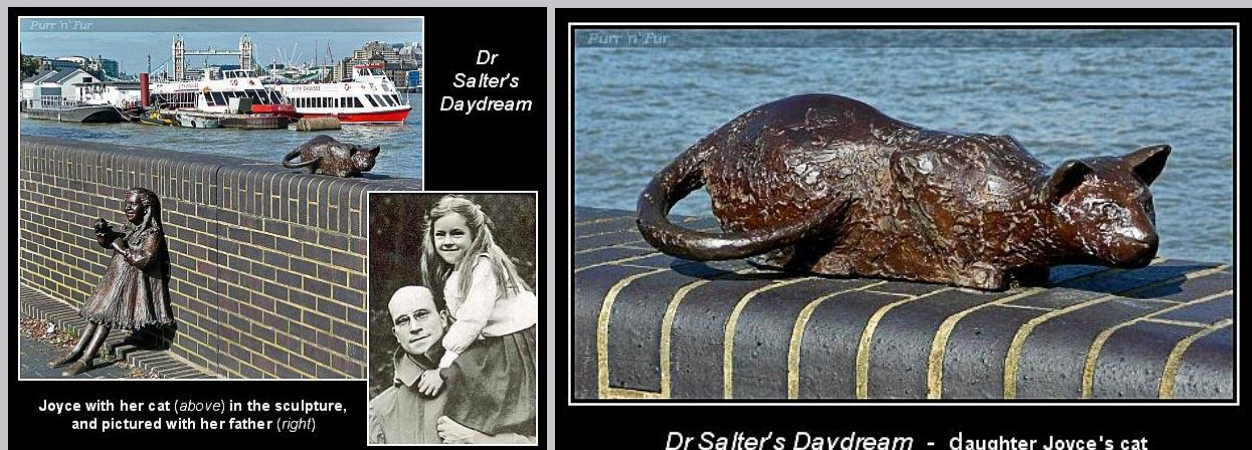
Elsewhere on the site are accounts of two of London's best-known historical cats, Samuel Johnson's [Hodge](#) and [Dick Whittington's \(fictional\) cat](#). Here are four other, more contemporary ones; and see also **Purr 'n' Fur / Featuring / Statues and Monuments 5**.

Dr Salter's Daydream

Dr Alfred Salter was a local philanthropist and social reformer in the district of Rotherhithe and Bermondsey, which was one of the poorest and least healthy parts of the city of London early in the twentieth century. He did much to improve people's dreadful living conditions, amongst other things setting up a community health service years before the National Health Service existed, and in order to help his patients better he went to live in the area with his family. This had the sad result that his daughter and only child, Joyce, contracted scarlet fever; twice she recovered from it, but when she caught it for the third time, in 1910, she died. She was just eight years old.

Alongside and upon Bermondsey Wall East on the Thames Path, by the river near Cherry Garden Pier on the border between Rotherhithe and Bermondsey, sculptor

Diane Gorvin created *Dr Salter's Daydream*, a three-part sculpture group commissioned by the London Docklands Development Corporation and unveiled in 1991. It showed a kindly Dr Salter in old age, sitting on a seat and waving to his daughter Joyce, who leaned against the Thames wall with her cat nearby. It represented the daydream of an old man remembering happier times when his 'sunshine' was still alive.



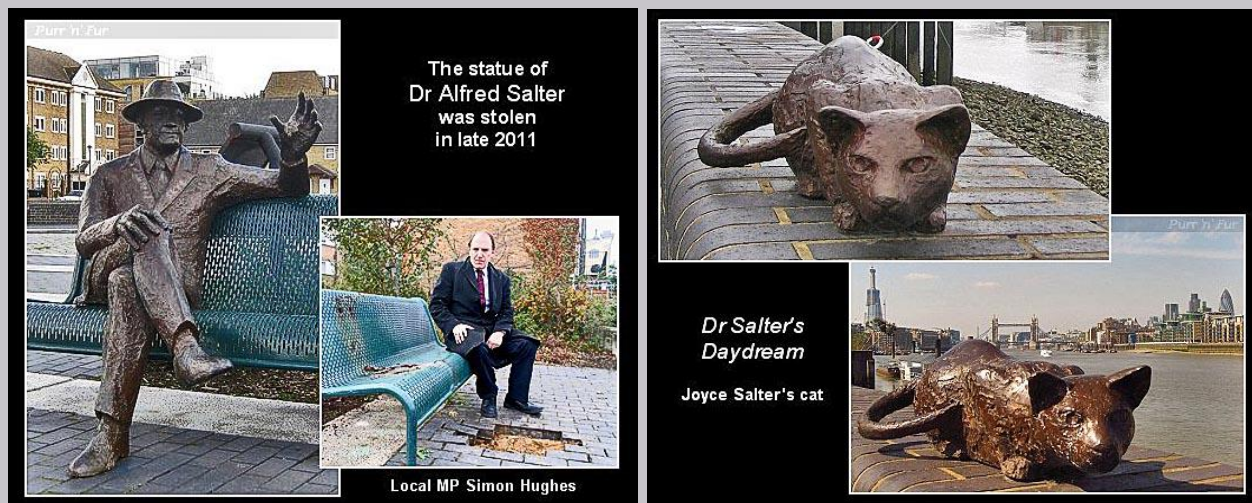
Many thanks to Malcolm Robinson for supplying the photos above.

Theft, and a campaign launched

Sadly, in November 2011 the statue of Dr Salter was stolen from its position near the river in Bermondsey — almost certainly the victim of metal thieves to sell for scrap. The little girl and the cat were removed for safe keeping by Southwark Council, and a £1000 reward was offered for information leading to the arrest of those responsible. It wasn't the first time a metal sculpture had been stolen.

A community group, along with the then local MP Simon Hughes and many others, worked with the council on plans for a replacement, and if sufficient funds could be raised it was hoped not only to replace the figure of Dr Salter but also to include Mrs Ada Salter in the sculpture group; additional security measures were also part of the plans. A website was set up with information and the means to donate. The original target of £50,000, which Southwark Council promised to

match-fund, was reached in mid-2014, but there was a setback when the estimated cost of CCTV surveillance increased substantially, meaning additional funding was needed.



New statues

The revised target of £60,000 having been reached and matched by Southwark Council, two new statues were commissioned and created by the original artist, Diane Gorvin. As well as a new depiction of Dr Salter, his wife Ada was also honoured with her own statue for the first time; she was the first female mayor in London and the Labour party's first female mayor in Britain. The new group, including the original ones of daughter Joyce and her cat replaced in their rightful positions after being in storage, was unveiled in a ceremony in November 2014 in the presence of local MPs and councillors. Dr Salter's statue was unveiled by his grandniece Johanna Crawshaw, and that of Ada by Nick Hudson and Janet Kendall, her grandnephew and grandniece. The statues are now covered by a CCTV camera installed nearby in a bid to prevent further theft. An exhibition of photographs of the Salters was displayed after the ceremony in the nearby church of St Peter & the Guardian Angels.

(Thanks to reader Anneke Dubash for drawing our attention to the new statues.)

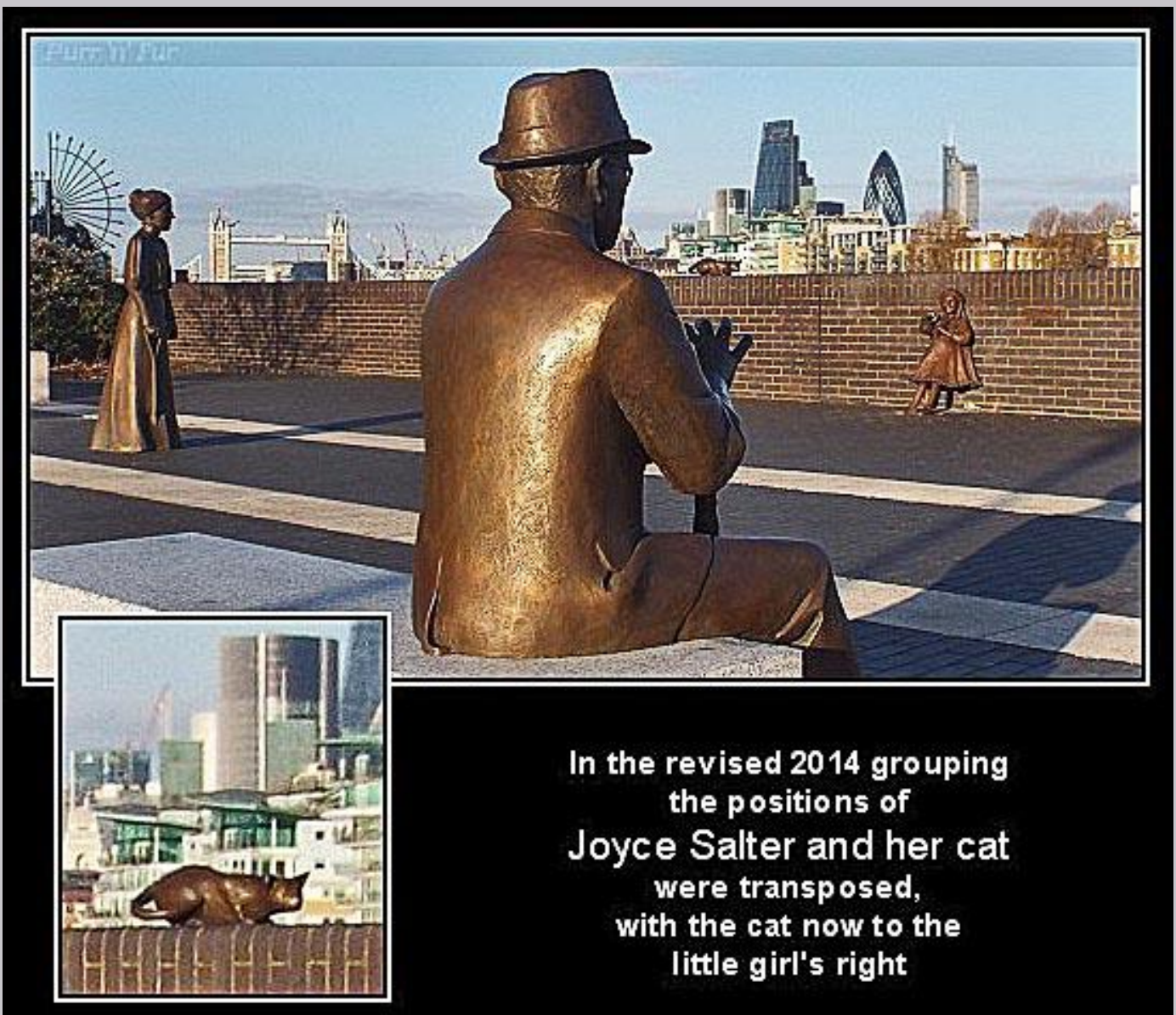


Links

- ❖ [The Salter Statues](#) website (*archived copy*)
- ❖ Facebook: [Dr Alfred Salter](#) (*not available, Dec. 2023*) and [Ada Salter](#).
- ❖ Londonist, Nov 2011: [Statue Of Dr Salter Stolen From Bermondsey](#).
- ❖ The Greenwich Phantom blog, Nov 2011: [London's Saddest Statue Gets Even Sadder](#) (*archived copy*)
- ❖ Southwark Council, Dec 2011: [Plea issued for safe return of Salter statue](#) (*archived copy*) - Council's

- offer of reward matched by Dr Salter's last remaining relative.
- ❖ SE16 Community, Feb 2013: [Dr Salter's Daydream 2013: first images](#) - sketches of the new Dr Salter and Ada Salter statues.
- ❖ London Rewind, Apr 2013: [Dr Salter's Daydream](#).
- ❖ SE16 Community, Jul 2014: [Salter statues could be unveiled this year as appeal reaches £50k target](#).
- ❖ Wikipedia: [Alfred Salter](#).
- ❖ SE16 Community, Nov 2014: [Salter statues unveiled on Bermondsey Wall East](#)
- ❖ Londonist, Dec 2014: [New Salter Statues Unveiled In Bermondsey](#)
- ❖ London cabbie and tour guide, Robert Lordan, has followed the history of the sculpture group, writing three good illustrated articles on his *View from the Mirror* blog in [Feb 2012](#), [Nov 2014](#) and [Dec 2014](#)

We acknowledge and thank Flickr users for some images here: [Amanda Oliver](#), [Bluebeart](#), [Laura Nolte](#) and [Steve James](#) — take the links to see them full-sized.



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The Catford Cat



Catford is a town in the south-east London borough of Lewisham, and it has a notable and appropriate landmark — a giant fibreglass cat guarding the entrance to a shopping centre called the Catford Centre. It was designed, produced and installed in 1974 by one Owen Luder from a company called Embassy Signs, so as to 'herald with its paw the opening to Catford Shopping Centre'.

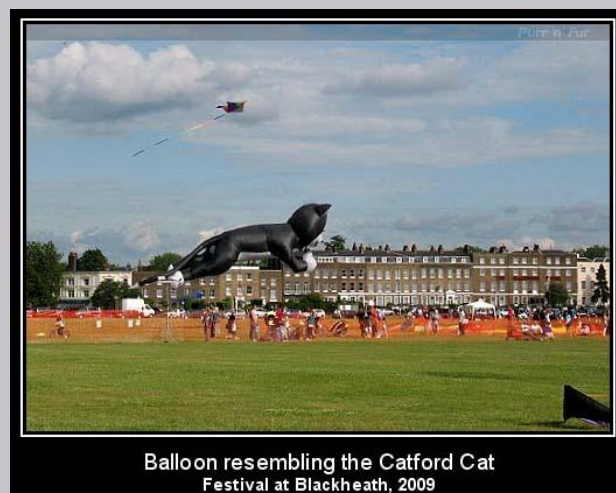
In about 2008 there seems to have been some talk that Lewisham Council was going to demolish the cat as part of a development scheme; this caused a huge outcry from local residents, many of whom remembered it from their childhood and regarded it as a local icon — it was even said that it was 'the best thing about Catford'! The cat remains in place — in fact in mid-2011 it was given a new coat of paint, which people said was long overdue. It's listed on a 2013 Lewisham Council web page as an item of Catford Public Art. The Catford Centre is scheduled for redevelopment within a year or two, but we hope its feline guardian will remain to beckon shoppers!

A balloon resembling the Catford Cat (*foot of page*) was seen at a Bike and Kite Festival in Blackheath, south London, in 2009 (*photo* © [Stephen Craven](#)).*(use Edge)*

We acknowledge and thank Flickr users for images of the cat — take the following links to see them full-sized: [Lucy Hayward](#), [David Fisher](#).

In 2017 it was reported that the Catford Cat would eternally be remaining in post! There is a Catford Cat Twitter account, <https://twitter.com/catfordcat> (last used Jan. 2025)

See [this link](#). To the best of my knowledge, the cat is still there in early 2026..



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Sam Penn (2009)

Unveiled in 1997, a bronze sculpture of **Sam** the cat honours local resident and nurse Patricia (Penny) Penn (1914–1992), a 'formidable lady' — but very popular — who had been very active in the area in the 1970s, campaigning to protect it from developers and to preserve historic buildings.

The playful statue, at Queen Square Gardens, Holborn depicts the feline about to jump off a wall onto the ground. It was donated by the local community in memory of Ms Penn, who was also a cat lover: Sam was one of her pets and, according to friends, her 'alter ego'. Sam's statue was stolen in August 2007, but in May 2009 a new Sam was unveiled, this time secured with steel rods in the bricks.



Links

London Remembers: [Patricia Penn](#).

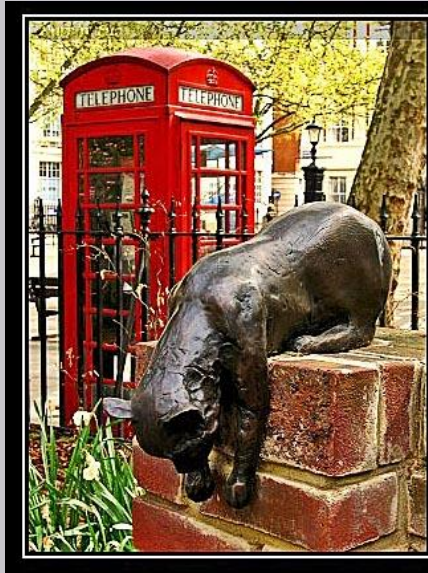
- ❖ *Camden New Journal*, Aug 2007: [Thieves snatch memorial to campaigner and her cat Sam](#).
- ❖ Silver Tiger blog, Mar 2011: [Dawdling in Bloomsbury](#) for a flavour of the area.
- ❖ London Gardens Online: [Queen Square](#). (*undated – archived copy*)

We acknowledge and thank Flickr users for some of the images here: [Laura Nolte](#), [Glyn Thomas](#), and [David Bennett](#); also Kim Stallwood's [blog](#) and [Björn Haglund](#) at a Google page for Queen Square Park & Garden — take the links to see them all full-sized.





Queen Square Gardens, Holborn, London



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London Leopard (2019)

Not a domestic cat, of course, but there's a fine sculpture of a leopard by Jonathan Kenworthy in London, too. It's situated near the Mansion House tube station, on the corner of Friday Street and Cannon Street. Erected in 1985, a plaque on a nearby building states that it was placed by the Wates group of companies – but for what reason I don't know.



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