

Peter

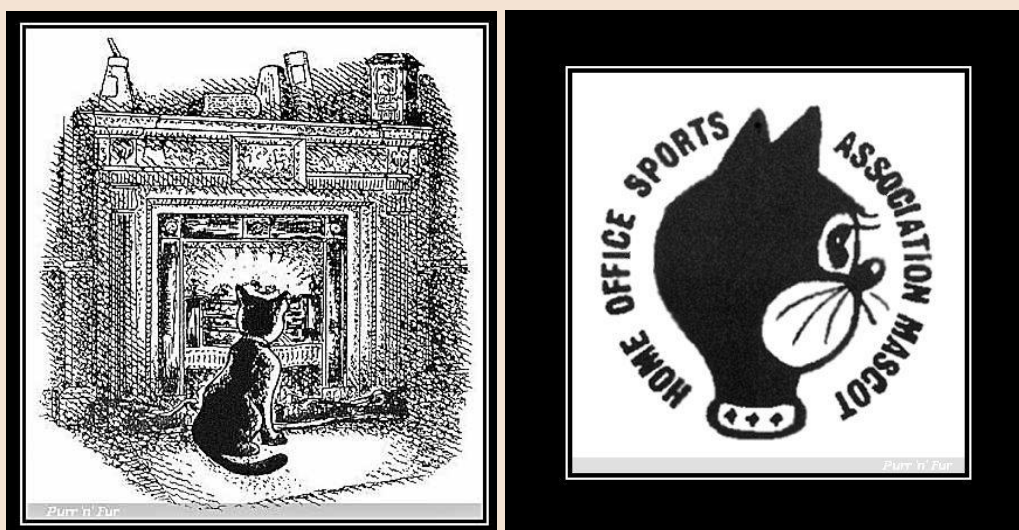
the British Home Office Cat(s) (2006)

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At the start of 2005 the *Freedom of Information Act* meant that some 50,000 government files were delivered to the British National Archives. Among them were files relating to the history of cats that have been officially kept by the Home Office; 'officially' because it wasn't until 1929 that a request was made for one (pre-decimal) penny a day to be found from petty cash to provide food for the office cat.

Mouse control begins

The tradition of keeping a cat at the Home Office in London began in 1883, when the department occupied mouse-infested premises and official permission was obtained to employ a cat to deal with the problem. A favourite sleeping spot — apart from in front of office fires (*below left*), while the business of the nation was being discussed! — was on a stone plinth by the stairs in the entrance hall (*see cartoon at foot of page*); this was near a display case holding trophies won by the Home Office Sports Association, so it rather looked as though the cat was keeping watch over the trophies. The Sports Association in time therefore adopted the resident official mouser as its mascot (*below right*).



There was a minor furore in April 1922, reported by the *New York Times*, when an American visitor with business at the Home Office took such a liking to the resident mouser of the time, a large black cat called **Sam**, that she pleaded very hard to be allowed to take him back to the States. She almost got officials to agree — but then the Home Secretary himself, Edward Shortt, in whose office Sam spent much of his time, got to hear of the plan and quickly put a stop to it, so Sam remained in his post.



An official allowance for food

Food for the cat was paid for out of his own wages by the office keeper of the main building in Whitehall; but maybe by 1929 the animal's unclear status — neither personnel nor equipment — offended the bureaucrats' tidy minds to the point that they decided to regularise the situation. At any rate, the first letter in the newly released records starts 'Dear Crapper' — this was from the Treasury — and continues, 'I see no objection to your office keeper being allowed 1d a day from petty cash towards the maintenance of an efficient office cat.' It seems that the money was requested not because the cat was underfed, but rather that it was overfed because of all the titbits that staff provided! It was felt that this 'interfered with the mousing', so if food was provided officially, the office keeper could tell staff not to give the animal any further food.

For reasons now lost in the mists of bureaucracy the cat at the time was named **Peter**, as were all its successors. They were also all black. The food allowance came up for discussion quite frequently as time went by; what also happened during the early years of World War 2, when London was being heavily bombed, was that the Home Office was dispersed to several establishments around the country outside London. These put in their own requests for 'duplicate' cats, at a cost by then of one shilling and sixpence a week each (18 times the 1929 rate). Despite some of the darkest months of the war, in 1941, one accountant retained his sense of humour and penned the following:

*Establishments approval seek
To spend, say, one-and-six per week
For beverage and food (ersatz)
On each of Bournemouth's office cats.*

*The situation is complex
Because we do not know their sex.
To pay for grub we hesitate
For 'pussies' who may propagate.*

*But if they'll give a guarantee
They won't produce a family
Of little mousers of their ilk,
We'll meet the cost of food and milk.*

By 1946 the post-war economy drive was in full swing and someone took it upon themselves to point out that the original edict had agreed to pay for 'an efficient office cat', asking whether this description applied to Peter. The office keeper at the time had to agree that as Peter was then 17, he was no longer efficient; so the poor cat was put to sleep by the RSPCA, at a cost of two shillings. That prompted more verse from the accountants:

*I note a cruel coup d'état
Deprived us of the Office Cat:
Two bob well spent, without a doubt,
To help poor Peter 'peter' out.*

Two more Peters

In 1946 a new young kitten was taken on, named **Peter II**, under Clement Attlee's government, but unfortunately he was run over when crossing Whitehall only six months later and also had to be put down as a result of his injuries.

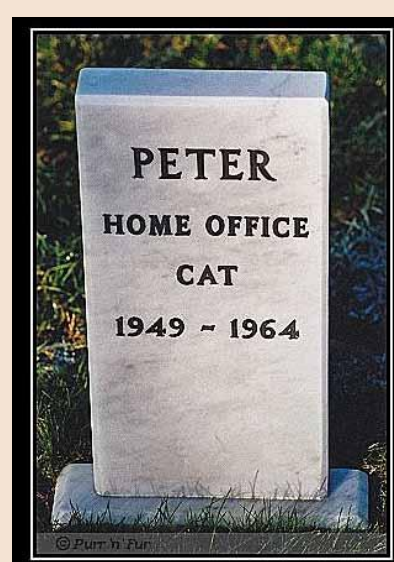
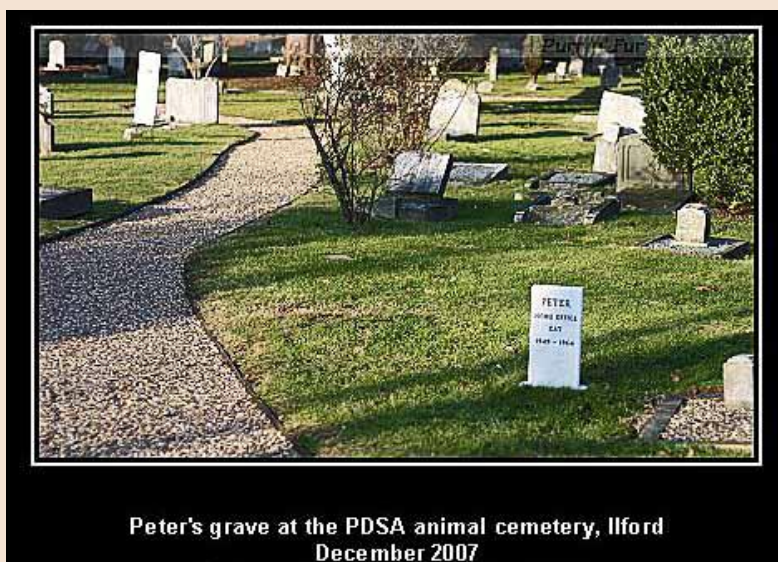
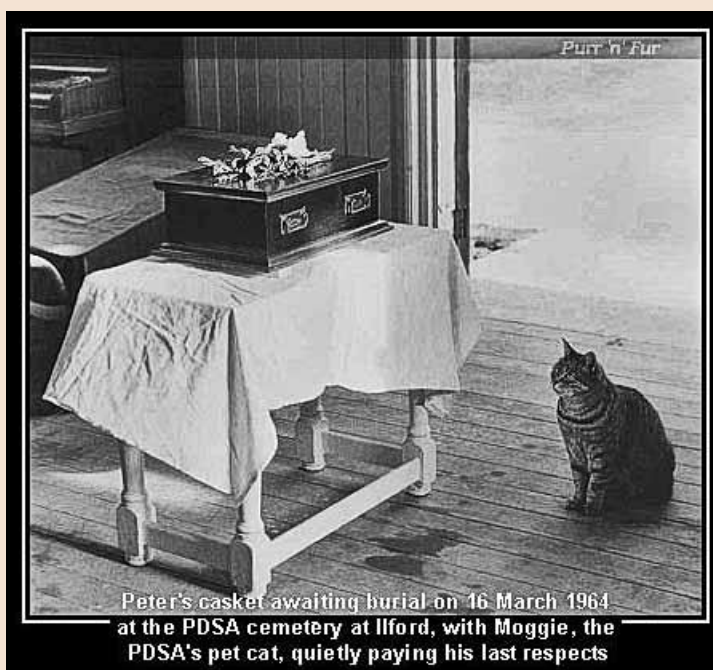
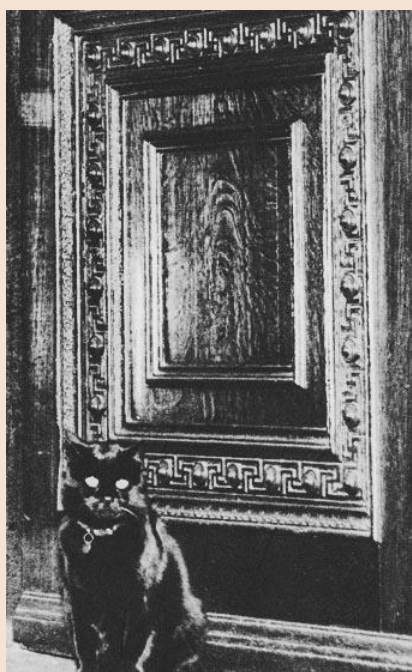
Peter III followed shortly after, in early 1947, and proved more successful, establishing himself as a firm favourite. He began to attract publicity, and in 1958 he was featured on the BBC's *Tonight* programme. This appearance resulted in a spate of letters and offers of presents from fans and well-wishers, some from as far away as Australia. However, the gifts were turned down on the grounds that 'Since Peter is an established civil servant, he could not be allowed to receive gifts.'

When this policy resulted in protests, a bureaucrat wrote that efforts to make the cat a higher-grade civil servant would be 'most embarrassing'. He went on: 'The animal's antecedents are, to say the least,

questionable, and I doubt whether even a short birth certificate could be produced. There have been no annual reports on his conduct, although no adverse comment has been made on the strong suspicion that he courts publicity and actually revels in it. Moreover, there may be a security risk, inasmuch as though there is some evidence that he has been doctored, there is none whatever that he has been vetted.'

On Remembrance Day 1960 Peter was in trouble for defecating on a doormat only moments before Her Majesty the Queen was due to step on it on her way to the Cenotaph. A catastrophe was averted only by a quick-thinking civil servant, who threw the offending mat out of a window in the nick of time! Despite this blot on his record Peter survived until March 1964, when he succumbed to a liver infection and died, still in service. He had served under no fewer than five prime ministers.

He was buried with due ceremony at the PDSA animal cemetery in Ilford (where [Simon of the Amethyst](#) is also buried), with a headstone paid for by his fans from three continents. One of the people attending the funeral was a lady by the name of Amy Armitage Gough, MBE, who was head librarian at the Home Office from 1945 to 1968. She remembered that Peter used to sit on her desk on her copy of *The Times*; this was at a time when the paper was promoting the idea that top people read it. Amy had planned to write to the paper to say that 'Top cats sleep on *The Times*' — but she wasn't allowed to as the information was deemed to come under the Official Secrets Act! Peter's original headstone at Ilford was replaced by a new one (*below lower right*) in 2007 [during the cemetery's refurbishment](#). I think the start date should be 1947, though.



A lady takes over

Hearing of Peter's demise, and always looking for an opportunity to publicise the Isle of Man, the Lieutenant-Governor of that island, Sir Ronald Garvey, offered the Home Office a Manx cat as a replacement. The offer was accepted and Manninagh Kate Dhu — to give her proper pedigree name — was accompanied to London by the Manx Board of Agriculture Secretary, the Board's Veterinary Officer, and a specially prepared, illuminated pedigree document. Their departure was delayed by a day owing to fog, which rather upset arrangements and perhaps gave an inauspicious start to the venture; however, she was presented to the Home Secretary, Henry Brooke, in person.

In keeping with tradition and in honour of her predecessors, the Home Office decreed that its first female, first pedigree mouser would nevertheless be known as **Peta**; and her 'wages' were to be double those of the Peter she succeeded. All did not go entirely according to plan, though; Peta had a tendency to meow loudly and persistently around the building, was said to be lazy, and alas! was not well toilet-trained either. Staff began to complain. By 1967 one grumpy civil servant had asked that she be put down, or at least banned from his area.

But a memo of 1969 said that letting her go could result in adverse publicity, as she had 'diplomatic status'; and it would have been unthinkable to have her put to sleep after all the publicity and ceremony of her arrival. 'Previous Home Office cats have been of the "alley-cat" variety,' went one statement, 'well able to fend for themselves and anonymous enough to be able to roam freely and exercise themselves in the park. The present cat, with her history and publicity, cannot be released from the confines of the building.'

She was thought to have got out on at least one occasion, though, as she was accused of getting into the garden of No. 10 Downing Street and having a set-to with [Nemo](#), the Siamese belonging to Prime Minister Harold Wilson's wife Mary. Furthermore, when Mrs Wilson intervened to protect her Siamese, Peta scratched her! It looked as though the incident would do nothing to help poor Peta's reputation; but in fact she was cleared when Mrs Wilson described the attacker as 'a long-tailed, black-and-white creature'.

Questions began to be asked in Peta's defence, asking whether it was right that a department responsible for animal-welfare legislation should itself be keeping a pedigree cat under less-than-ideal conditions. It was suggested that an area of grass could be planted in the building's inner quadrangle for Peta's use; but the need for it was forestalled when it was announced that the Home Office would be moving its location to Queen Anne's Gate. The new buildings were reckoned to be rodent-free and there would be no need for a cat to be kept at all.



Peta was given a 'golden paw-shake' and took early retirement, moving to the country house of one of the civil servants who had befriended her. It isn't clear exactly when that happened, as the public were not told until 1976 when a question from a member of the public elicited a reply to that effect.

So ended the tradition of nearly a century of Home Office cats. Peta did have her moment of glory, though, when she appeared on an official Christmas card, cleverly managed so that she appeared to be looking at her certificate of pedigree (*above right*). She died at her country home in early 1980, aged 16.

Links and credits

- ❖ *New York Times*, Apr 1922: [American Woman can't have 'Sam', Home Secretary's cat](#). *.(no longer available).*
- ❖ BBC, Jan 2005: [Home Office cat history revealed](#).
- ❖ While the close-up of Peter III's headstone is our own, the 'long shot' of the grave is by [Graham Parks](#) at Flickr - see it there full-sized. With the exception of these two shots and the photo of Peter's casket, we acknowledge the book *Tales of the Tailless* by Robert Kelly (2001) as the source of images on this page

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