

Featured Felines: Cats in Wartime

(page checked July 2026)

The PDSA Animal Cemetery at Ilford (2008)

Final resting place of twelve Dickin Medal recipients



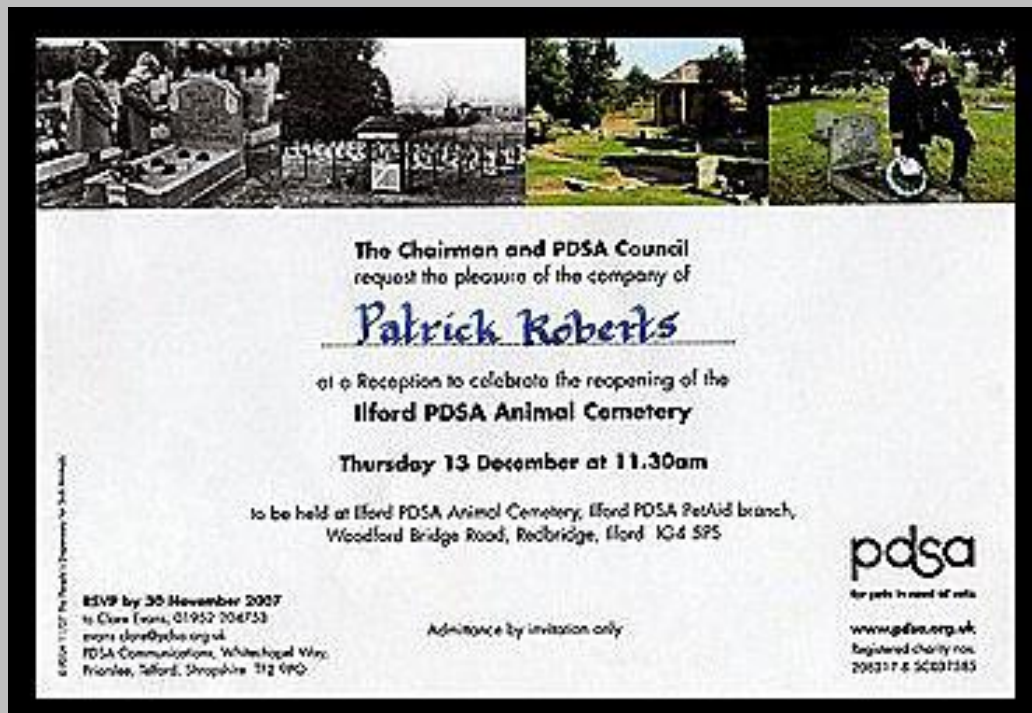
The cemetery in 2007



In earlier days



As mentioned elsewhere, in late 2006 the [PDSA](#) (People's Dispensary for Sick Animals, one of Britain's leading animal charities) was successful in obtaining a lottery grant of £50,000 (some 100,000 US dollars at the time) to refurbish and upgrade the Animal Cemetery at Ilford in north-east London. The work was carried out during 2007 and on 13 December that year there was an official opening ceremony. I was pleased and honoured to be among the 100 or so invited guests.



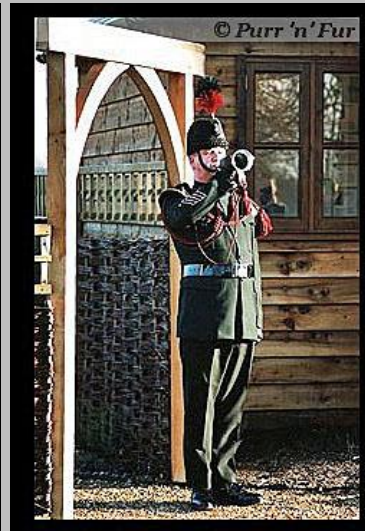
It was a crisp but pleasantly sunny day as we moved into the cemetery in late morning. It was immediately obvious that the lych-gate entrance, with its evocative inscription 'They are ever in our thoughts. Love never dies' had been nicely cleaned up and restored (*below right*), and — importantly — a gravelled pathway now makes the main areas of the cemetery much more accessible to the public, including wheelchair users. A small covered information and display booth had been set up for visitors, and next to it is a garden of remembrance, designed by well-known television gardening presenter Bob Flowerdew. I hoped to revisit in summer when the plants would be growing and flowering.



There was a short but apt ceremony; a bugler in suitable attire sounded the Last Post, following which wreaths were laid and the customary silence was observed. 'Reveille' was then played, and we dispersed to wander around and see the restored graves, many with new headstones. It's hard to believe that after its original opening in 1949, with the Bishop of Chelmsford officiating, some 3,000 animals were buried here, but the archive photo (*at the top, left*) gives an idea of how densely packed were the graves. Among them are 12 recipients of the Dickin Medal (the Animals' VC), and their memorials in particular have been renovated, as would be expected. But so have some others, too, and finally there is a memorial for [Peter](#), the Home Office cat.



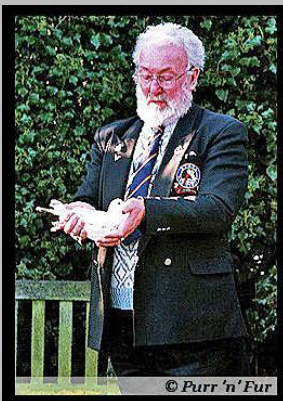
Lt Cdr Hett talks to Pearly Queen Doris Golding. Pearly Kings & Queens have a long association with the PDSA



The Last Post



There was a further ceremony when a number of homing pigeons were released to fly off into the clear, blue sky as a tribute to all the pigeons that served in wartime and particularly the 32 that were awarded the Dickin Medal — including 'Mary of Exeter', whose memorial is to be found here. The first bird was released by actress Jenny Seagrove. She was not the only celebrity present, though; there was a real-life Dickin Medal winner in the shape of black Labrador dog [Sadie](#), complete with medal and ribbon gained for gallantry and devotion to duty as an explosives search dog in the Afghanistan conflict during 2005 and accompanied by her handler, L/Cpl Karen Yardley. Also present were spaniel [Jake](#) and his handler; Jake was an explosives search dog serving with London's Metropolitan Police and gave valuable service during the terrorist attacks of 7 July 2005. He is a PDSA Gold Medal recipient (for 'civilian' animals), as was the third dog present, golden Labrador [Endal](#), who saved his disabled owner's life.



Bob Reeves, pigeon fancier who knew Mary of Exeter's owner



Jenny Seagrove with first pigeon to be released



The pigeons fly off!



Jenny Seagrove with Sadie DM, Endal GM & Jake GM
[Endal died in March 2009, but had a successor, EJ (Endal Junior).]



Police dog Jake, GM and his handler



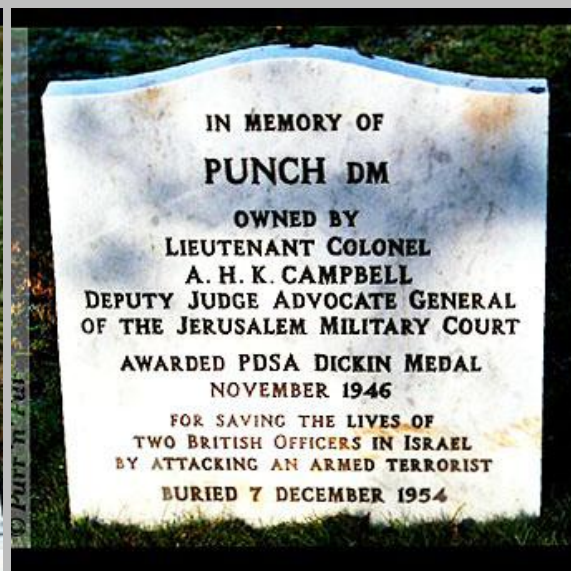
Lt Cdr Hett at Simon's grave

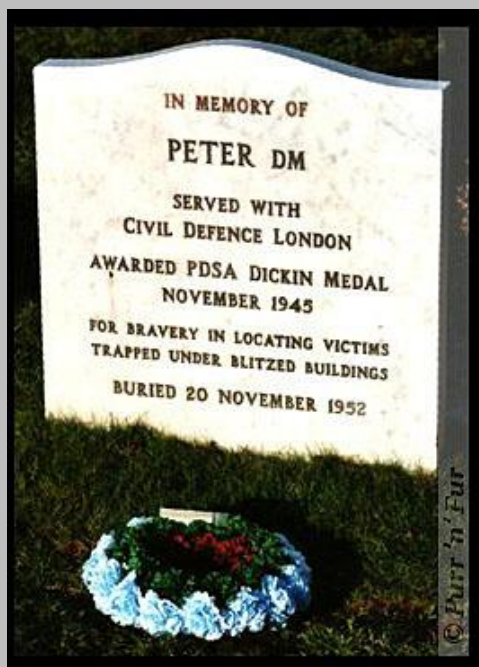
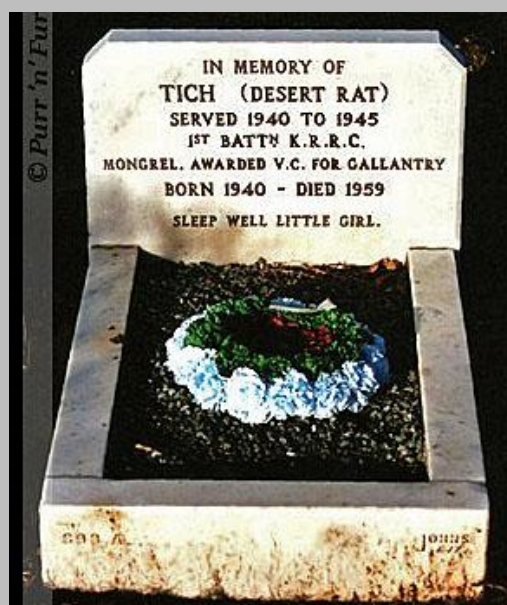
Probably the best-known animal buried at Ilford is [Simon](#), cat mascot of HMS Amethyst, and his newly cleaned memorial was a focus of attention — especially with the distinguished presence of Lt Cdr Stewart Hett, RN (retd), former crew member and 'cat officer' of the ship. He was very patient with the numerous requests for photo-calls by Simon's grave. The Sea Cadets from the Welwyn Garden City unit were also represented.

When all the business in the cemetery had been concluded and people had seen all they wished, we withdrew to a marquee set up behind the animal hospital, to be regaled with a glass of mulled wine and a snack lunch. All in all it had been a memorable occasion. I hope that with its new lease of life the cemetery at Ilford will become better-known and receive many more visitors, so that the stories of the animals laid to rest there will become more widely known and appreciated.

[Location map](#) for the cemetery

Memorials for Simon and other Dickin Medal recipients at Ilford:





[NB: photos of a few pet memorials at the cemetery are included in the [Quest for Simon](#) article.]

The page for the [Animals in War Memorial](#) in London may also be of interest.

Also in the Cats in Wartime series: [On Land and in the Air](#) :: [At Sea](#)

You may also like to read about an animal cemetery in the suburbs of Paris, opened in 1899 and thought to be the oldest public pet cemetery in the world: see [Le cimetière des chiens](#)

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