

Bless you Father...

For some dog breeds, it has been members of the clergy who proved to be the saviour

By Bill Moores

A recent Kennel Club press release pointed out that a man of the cloth was largely responsible for saving the Irish Red and White Setter. Numbers of Irish Red and White Setters dropped to such a low level they were very close to extinction and could only be found in isolated areas of Ireland. They were saved by Reverend Noble Houston, a dog breeder and minister of the First Presbyterian Church at Ballynahinch, County Down.

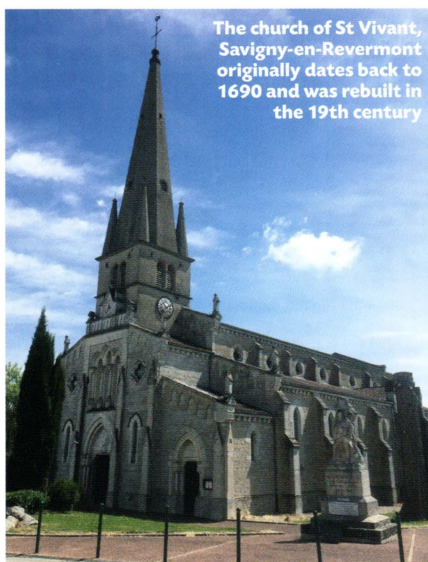
The year 1980 saw the first Irish Red and White Setters registered with the Kennel Club and over the years these annual figures sometimes topped 200. Last year only 64 were registered keeping the breed on the 'vulnerable' register.

The whole story reminded me of a conversation I had had with a 'chasseur' in France who had seen me walking three Welsh Springers down a country lane and was captivated by their style and colour. "Chiens magnifiques Monsieur," was his parting comment. We met again later in the year at an end of season meal which is a big feature in the hunting season in France. "Do you know of the spaniel which is unique to our area?" he asked. I was about to be educated.

Less than 20 miles away was the village of Saint Usuge which had given its name to l'Épagneul de Saint Usuge which had also been saved by a sporting man of the cloth. The breed origins date back to the 16th century and is typical of the spaniel breeds developed in different regions of France. After the end of the Second World War the breed was almost extinct and it was the efforts of L'Abbé Robert Billard that saved the breed. After being given the parish at Savigny-en-Revermont in the Saône et Loire region of Burgundy he began his search for a suitable dog for 'la chasse' in his area. It was 1939 and as France fell to German occupation the young cleric was imprisoned and his guns seized. After being told of l'Épagneul de Saint



L'Épagneul de Saint Usuge - saved from extinction by L'Abbé Robert Billard



The church of St Vivant, Savigny-en-Revermont originally dates back to 1690 and was rebuilt in the 19th century

Photo by williammoore.com



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Savigny-en-Revermont the small Burgundy village became the home of the l'Épagneul de Saint Usuge's saviour L'Abbé Robert Billard

Usuge, which was unique to the Bresse area he vowed that when hostilities ceased he was to track down the breed.

After the war his research found that the breed had been last shown in any numbers at nearby Louhans in 1936 when nine of the breed were judged by Dr Guillemin. After that there was no trace of the breed. His parish was huge and while visiting his 'flock' he enquired about the breed with local farmers. In nearby Le Fay in 1946 he found a young bitch which closely conformed to the breed standard.

After selling his gold watch to his brother to buy the bitch he hunted with her for several seasons and became captivated by the breed. In 1950 he acquired the son of a dog which had won at local shows before the war. Billard also set about putting together an appeal for enthusiasts with the same breed. With great patience over the next 33 years, and at great

expense to himself, he bred nearly 250 dogs many reared and cared for at his presbytery in Savigny-en-Revermont. His devotion to the breed was unstinting and he bred for working qualities and correct conformation. He also kept a careful register of each dog and its particular qualities.

Mid-programme he also introduced Small Munsterländer blood from Germany after it was clear to him that its breed standard was similar.

In April 1980 L'Abbé Billard, conscious of his advancing years, passed on full details of the breeding programme and register to fellow enthusiast M Serge Bey and it was he and other locals who formed the Club de l'Épagneul de Saint Usuge in 1990. In early 2003 the breed was recognised by the French Kennel Club (SCC) and placed in Group 7 along with other continental spaniel breeds.

Since the formation of the club, more than 1200 dogs have been bred, dispersed throughout France and also exported to Canada, USA, Switzerland, Austria and Germany where its working abilities on woodcock are especially appreciated.

Once again a hunting parson had come to the rescue! ●