

CHAPTER 16

That was the start of a long process of change. I think that to spell it all out in one chapter would not only make for a very long story on one subject, but also miss out so much of our personal lives and our cats that it would change the whole meaning of what I started out to do with this book. So I will continue to try and interleave cats, family and business into the whole that our story really is. Let me once more put in a highlight based around a cat - this one is called Twinkle.

Two neighbours who Myrtle had known for many years before we met are Jack and Judy. Jack was then a master butcher and one of his assistants came to him one day asking if he would like another cat as their family had a litter to home. Jack told him that his one cat, Fred, was enough for him, but he would ask us if we had room for yet another. As the implied threat was that the kitten would be 'disposed of' if no one wanted it, then we said yes, of course. The next day Jack brought the kitten home with him that evening and to his surprise Fred accepted it without any fuss! Jack was in two minds then as to whether or not to keep it, but after he had eaten, brought it up to us anyway. That was the tiny little black and white fluffy kitten that we called Twinkle, after the phrase for his birthday in our birthday book. "The stars....."

In the end, Jack got rather more of Twinkle than he anticipated, and it was almost as good as owning him. Fred remained great friends with the new kitten until the end of his life, and they played together in our two gardens and houses. Fred even developed the habit of using our house as a shortcut to where he wanted to go, coming in one cat door and exiting by the other. The two of them delighted both our families by their chases and rough and tumbles, which often looked really rough to human eyes!

Another favourite game of the two boys was for Twink to leave our house when we unlocked the cat flaps each morning and then rush down to let himself in Fred's catflap, which was not normally locked. Having greeted each other, they would then tear up the stairs to Jack and Judy's bedroom, round and over the bed and occupants, round the bath, back down the stairs, bank off the front door and, bang, bang, out of the cat flap. Wonderfully exciting. Some years later we had a new fence erected between the gardens and that was OK for them until Fred got a bit elderly. I lifted a small panel off the ground on blocks so that Fred could get underneath, so not needing to jump, and they kept visiting each other until Fred died. Not long after that another neighbour got a ginger cat very similar to Fred, and Twink took up with Marmaduke - we guess he liked red coloured cats, although the friendship could never be so intense. By the way, Jack decided to get another cat some while later who he called Fred II. Twink never cottoned on to him though.

Before that though, while still very young, Twink got himself another friend, but that was not a cat but a rabbit! The children of a neighbour had it but were not very good at checking that it was secure in its run - the garden fences were not rabbit proof, so every now and again it would appear eating its way through our longer grass (and lush weeds!). When Twink first came across it, the rabbit jumped and ran and when trying to chase it, Twink

also tried rabbit jumps! He got very good at it. With such a large garden, and the nursery land not being looked after properly, there were always plenty of birds flying around and they knew about all our cats, so kept a few feet off the ground when passing from one place to another. Twink had obviously studied them and practiced his jumping until we saw him one day waiting for some low flying birds, whereupon he ascended high into the air right in their flight path! Crash to the ground went a bird with Twink on top. With practice he became very good at it as there were always a few newcomers who did not know that cats can fly too!

Our next cat was very different, and was probably born a few years before Twinkle, but as he was a stray, we do not know for sure. Being where we were we would often see strange cats going through our land either in front of or behind the bungalow. We either saw them again and found out that a new cat was living nearby, or just never saw them again. One was different. We first saw this grey cat in early 1981. We thought him very ugly with a head too big for his body and wondered where he lived. After only a few days it was clear that he had just arrived and did not have a home, so one night (after shutting the cat doors) I put out some food and water near the driveway to see if he needed some. Sure enough, by next morning the bowls were empty so Eric and I started to look around for the cat to see if we could find out which direction it came and went. We caught occasional glimpses of it coming from and going into the wild brambles behind the warehouse so we tried again with food and to see if we could persuade it to come closer to us, but it was too frightened. After another day or so of food it was getting a bit more confident and in going to hide, just walked instead of running. We had of course asked around and Jack said that he thought he had seen it in the road over more than a week when he was out early in the mornings on his way to work. But he wasn't all that sure as he thought it was a white cat he had seen.

We made up our minds that we would see if we could catch it and check if it was healthy, and maybe keep it indoors for a while while we tried to find an owner. By a bit of stalking and outflanking, the three of us managed to get it in the brambles again, but in a spot where the growth was very dense and it had a struggle to move fast enough to escape. I grabbed it by the neck and carried it struggling in to the garage store where we could better give it food and inspect its condition. After a day or so we took it to the CPL vet for inspection and as still no owner had come forward, it was decided to check, clean and neuter it. By then the cat, a fully grown male had decided we were not so bad, and anything was better than out in the cold and wet. On bringing it home from the vet we took him in to the house away from the others, put a collar on him and inspected our new friend(?). Now we could see that he was not grey, but white, and his head was not too large, but his body was very thin from lack of food. Gradually we introduced him to the others and surprisingly they accepted his presence with very little fuss. Just to be completely conventional, what could we do but call him Snowy? (Later, after he put back the weight he had lost he became the biggest cat we had ever had at one stone. He was pure white with orange eyes and from our cat books, he appeared to be a pure bred Orange eyed British White of about 2- 3 years old. As he still a full male, we wondered if he had a stud cat that a breeder had finished with and so simply pushed out. There were never any notices around or any enquiries from the notices we put up.)

A few days later somehow a door was left open and he made a dash for freedom, straight back in to the bramble patch where he was easily caught again. That certainly switched on something in his mind as he *never* ran off again. In fact, after that we could leave any door open (he happily learnt to use the cat doors) and he only left the house for his toilet needs, and *never* went further than about twenty feet from the walls unless I was walking with him. To get him to take a bit of exercise, particularly in the summer, we used to go for family walks in the garden; the other cats would run around everywhere, but Snowy would stick to our heels on the way out and back once beyond his 20' limit! For the rest of his life, that was his habit - no way was he going to get lost again!!!

Snowy became the pivot around whom the rest of the cats revolved the catty part of their lives. He was big, gentle, soft and cuddly and never minded what they did to him. Sashkin adored him, especially as he found that his few pounds were enough to bowl Snowy over! He would charge at Snowy from the side so as to crash into his shoulder and Snowy never moved his feet fast enough to keep his balance, so over he would go. He made a show of being cross with Sash, but only in fun and soon it would happen again if Snowy did not just stay laying down. When the heating was on, then Snowy would often be found in the warm draft with a pile of cats or kittens on and around him.

Writing down these memories over twenty years later I find is not so easy as it might seem. I have all the memories, helped by the notes I have made over the years as to when each cat came, but each memory leads to so many others that I could skip all over the place. At this part in the story I am finding it particularly difficult to keep everything clear. When I started writing I had in mind to go through the years just introducing one cat after the other, but a simple catalogue of names and dates quickly became boring. In addition to that one thought led to another and quickly became mixed up with our home, our business and our life in general. This point in time is a good example. Earlier in this chapter I was thinking of Twinkle and the year he came to us was 1979 - then that thought led to the next arrival, Snowy, in 1981. Fine, no problem, except that 1977 was a very important year for us and that has been bypassed along the way. Reading back over the start of Snowy's story jogged my memory as I see that I referred to our 'garage store'. But even by 1979 that was wrong - that original garage had long been changed from just a garage for the Land Rover and the place where we stored the marquee and lighting equipment into something much more upmarket, and going back to the previous chapter where I mentioned the friends and their mobile recording studio misses out so much that was important to us in later years that I must backtrack to explain why. To make it simpler to fit in, I will give that explanation the next chapter to itself, and then I can go back to the year after Snowy's arrival where there are two more cats waiting for their place onstage.

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