

**Jen - The Story of How I Came to Own and Rehabilitate A Deaf Working
Beardie. By Charlie Morley.**



Jen

I first became aware of Jen during trips to Wales in 2014 with my Working Beardies Drift and Beryl (Beryl has earned herself the affectionate nickname of Merry because of her sunny, enthusiastic nature and love of life). My show line bred dog, Flynn, also travels with us. I go to visit a good friend, Peter Wood, a retired shepherd who had worked both Borders and Beardies and had done a great deal in raising awareness of the Working Beardie as an intelligent and extremely capable sheep and farm dog. Peter was very kindly giving his time to teach me, a complete novice, in the ways of handling sheepdogs and working sheep. As Peter is now retired we were reliant on the goodwill of friends of Peter's, farmers who allowed us to use their sheep and land for training purposes.

Jen was just over a year old when she and I first met; she was spending her days in a kennel/crate. I was told that she had been deaf from birth and was given a little of her history. Jen had come down from Scotland at around ten weeks of age and slowly, during the weeks that followed, it had become apparent from her lack of response to voice, or indeed any noise, that she couldn't hear. Whistles were tried, clapping, voice etc., no response from the little pup. If she was asleep nothing but movement would rouse her. Farmers and shepherds generally thought she was too much trouble to try to train as they didn't consider that being deaf she would be capable or useful as a working dog on livestock, and she was considered to be too much of a liability to be allowed out loose as it would be impossible to get her attention.

This attitude is perhaps understandable as they have busy work lives and dogs are their tools

as well as companions. I enquired as to why she was being kept since she was deaf and not considered viable for work. I was told that she had been given to a 'pet' home but that hadn't worked out and she was returned. As she came from such good working lines, and was one of the last direct, unbroken links to 'Woodland' lines she was now to be kept and would perhaps have a litter of pups at some point. When it was first found she was deaf, inquiries were made to the chap in Scotland who had bred her. None of her litter siblings were deaf or had hearing problems and so it was thought unlikely that her deafness was hereditary.

I always tried to see Jen on my visits to Wales, sorry for the little dog who spent so much time in the kennel. I made much of her. She was extremely excitable and pressed herself against the wire for attention. On the occasions I was able to take her out she was overly exuberant and difficult to control. I felt sad to leave her and asked if it were ever decided to rehome her could I buy her?

Upon arrival for training in January this year, we had barely got out of the truck when I was told that I should see what I could do with Jen, perhaps my dogs would be a welcome distraction for her, as she had become fixated with her own shadow and spent all her time trying to 'catch' it. If the sun wasn't out, or the light wasn't on, she would pick the point where she thought her shadow should be and focus intently on it, pawing and digging at the floor. I was dismayed by what I saw. Moving in circles getting faster and faster she would almost get to fever pitch with excitement, scuffing her paws and 'yipping' in a high pitch, sometimes she would jump and leap as if bitten by something unseen. Over the next three days nothing would distract her, not me, not my dogs, not trying to take her out for a walk, not even physically trying to hold her. She was obsessed! I was told it was thought she had gone mad and should be put to sleep.

With little understanding of canine compulsive disorders and extremely doubtful of my ability to effectively solve Jen's troubles I instinctively felt I had to try. It was thought *I was mad!* Taking her could ruin my own pack dynamic. What if the attention she would require due to her shadow chasing would upset my existing dogs and ruin my excellent relationship with them and the progress we had made in training, let alone how would I cope on a day to day basis with a deaf dog who I couldn't let off a lead. All of this was pointed out to me as I was counselled against taking her, but I couldn't walk away, I had to know I had tried my best, and if I then failed her I would have to accept that.

Jen was given to me and we travelled home, it was 21st January. During the 4 hour drive I wasn't without misgivings, Jen 'shadow danced' constantly, scuffing and yipping in the back of the truck. Drift, Merry and Flynn pressed against the sides, bewildered, and so it began. An appointment for a check-up with my vet was made. He gave Jen a thorough general check over and watched her lack of reaction as he made sudden loud noises. I asked if there were tests that could tell why she was deaf, he said there were but it would be extremely expensive and wouldn't change her being deaf. He shared his knowledge of CCD (canine compulsive disorder of which light or shadow chasing is one) and said he doubted Jen would ever be free from it but thought with enough consistent time and attention it could be brought to a manageable level. I researched everything I could find on the internet about both CCD's and living with a deaf dog. It seems that dogs most susceptible to CCD's are: 'high prey drive

dogs', that is working dogs such as sheepdogs and gun dogs etc.; deaf dogs; and dogs which spend most of their time kennelled or crated. Jen had all the odds stacked against her!

The immediate problem was not Jen's deafness but the CCD. All advice was to consistently interrupt the behaviour. Every time she started to look for her shadow to interrupt her, but it must be done without telling her off. To increase exercise, to provide as much stimulation as possible, to change diet, to be wary of praising the dog if/when interruption was successful in order to avoid the dog performing the behaviour for attention. It seemed a difficult balance and observing Jen it was apparent that any stress or excitement exacerbated the behaviour. For weeks nothing else got done, work slid, chores remained undone, not one TV programme reached a conclusion. All this had to be done with the other three dogs in mind. Worried about Jen getting all the attention I tried to balance it out; nobody was to be or feel left out. It was exhausting but slowly, slowly, slowly I started to realise that it was getting easier to interrupt Jen, that she was now only looking for shadows, twisting and turning her head and no longer getting to fever pitch, no 'yipping', no scuffing or dancing in circles. Progress!

From the first morning of our return with Jen from Wales we walked for miles. At first I kept Jen on the lead too worried about not being able to call her back to let her off, but quickly realised that this was little stimulation for her, and not nearly as much exercise as she needed, and she wanted to run and interact with the others. Merry too wanted her to run and play.



Merry on left; Jen on right

Nothing else for it, let her off, see what happens. Across the fields, open countryside, with my heart in my mouth I watched them charge away from me at full tilt. Little specks in the distance, I whistled the recall, Merry, just out in front, turned immediately and started racing back and to my relief Jen was glued to her side, racing Merry, Drift and Flynn to get back

first. It was quickly apparent during both our walks and around the house that Jen would watch the other dogs body language for her cues, quickly reading what was required. I gave my commands vocally to the others as they are used to but started to add hand signals for Jen. Keen for affection and attention Jen, who is bright and wanting to please, very quickly started to pick up and respond to the visual signals.

One area in which problems may arise, and I'm very mindful of all signs is that Merry and Jen are fairly evenly matched in temperament and I'm aware that much of their play is dominance related. This needs to be contained and not allowed to escalate in any way. Jen displays a possessiveness around me towards the other dogs. She pushes them away and tries to get in between me and them. I refuse to let this happen and make a point. She wants to rest so that she is touching me if possible, her head against my foot or leaning against my ankle and seems reassured, probably because she can't hear if I'm there or not. On occasions when she isn't touching she appears relaxed but will look up at frequent intervals to ensure my presence. If I've gone out of the room to fetch something she starts once she realises and runs in a panic looking for me.

In addition to my herding training in Wales, I am fortunate to have the opportunity to work with another excellent sheepdog trainer in Norfolk, England, Sarah Jenkins. Sarah's approach to dog (and handler) training is inspirational. Having a training session booked for Drift and Merry soon after the arrival of Jen, whilst en route, it occurred to me that I should mention Jen to Sarah only because I thought the change in the pack dynamic may reflect in the dogs work that day. On hearing of Jen, Sarah immediately asked if I'd brought Jen with us, disappointed when I said no, she asked if I would bring her next time as she would like to see her, how she reacts generally with me and assess her working instinct. Sarah indicated that she would like to help Jen if at all possible.



I was amazed when on our second visit, she introduced Jen to sheep and instructed me in working with her. The penny dropped on something Sarah had been telling me since I had started my training with her, that dogs read body language before listening to a vocal command, often they've read your body language before you've even given a command. Working silently, albeit at this stage in a small paddock with quiet sheep, Jen's strong natural working instinct and ability to balance the sheep was immediately apparent. Sarah has given me advice which has proved invaluable...communicate with her in the language of the dog...work with the sheep, engage her brain and stimulate her natural instinct and the 'shadow chasing' will fade...and that Jen has only lost one of her senses, she doesn't know she's deaf, she is an extremely intelligent dog, treat her as you would any other dog with calm consistency and patience and she will respond.



It is very early days for Jen here with us and I realise that we have a long road to travel. I've had Beardies for 28 years but this situation is all new and I'm sure there will be stumbling blocks as yet unforeseen but I feel so much more hopeful. I'm very grateful for all the help and advice I've been given. I don't believe the 'shadow chasing' will ever be too far away and may still haunt Jen from time to time but for the moment I'm pleased to say she's enjoying life and rarely looks for that shadow.

(Editor's Note: Lest readers think that this case of early onset deafness in a working Beardedie would be a complete contraindication to ever considering introduction of working blood into other registries to increase genetic diversity, there are two other dogs with young age onset of hearing loss in BeaCon's open health registry. They are not out of working Beardedie lines. One dog's hearing loss was documented at 1 month of age; the status of littermates is not known. The other dog's hearing loss was confirmed at 5 yr 3 mo and the dog was almost totally deaf by 7 yr. It was considered genetic because two sisters were also deaf; the dam had normal hearing. Of the 27 dogs in BeaCon's open health registry with a COI < 5, 26 have working Beardedie stock in their bloodlines. The only one with deafness is Jen.)