

Author **James Fox** on the absurdly difficult task of trying to adopt a stray moggie from the RSPCA

# Cat of *nine* lives? You must be joking!

Ind. 9<sup>th</sup> Nov 197

ONE DAY in June this year my girlfriend, an ardent animal lover, went down to the RSPCA office in Kensal Green, northwest London, to try to adopt a cat. It had been planned, with pleasurable anticipation; discussions about how to refigure the alarm; cat flaps; breeds of choice and so on. I imagined, as many people do who go to cat and dog centres, that the rescued cat would be installed that very night and would be purring on our bed the following morning.

Five months later, no cat, despite RSPCA claims that they have been "completely overwhelmed" with stray or abandoned cats since the summer; that their system is at "breaking point" and overworked staff are looking "haggard and worn".

A few days after my girlfriend's visit, working at home, I had a visit from an inspector. We had made no appointment and I was unprepared for an hour's assessment of my life, attitudes, and the suitability of my premises. Our flat has two terraces, and adjoins low-level studios and other houses surrounded by terraces and walls of various heights, enclosing a large area without escape to a road. When we bought it I remember thinking that this was perfect cat territory – a cat could live like the Baron in the Trees without ever touching ground. I had no doubt, like all adopters, that we were the most eligible cat owners in London. We had both had them, dogs too. My girlfriend was so fanatical about animals as a child that she had raised, at the age of 10, in 1975, in a small village, the phenomenal sum of £70 for the World Wildlife Fund – the equivalent of £400 today.

I could tell immediately that this view, at least of the property, was not shared by the inspector, James Hogan, vice-chairman of the Trustees of RSPCA Mayhew Animal Home.

The first head shake was no garden. "It's more like an adventure playground out there," he said, which I took to mean danger. He pointed to the top of a standard brick wall. Dangerous: a cat could "fall off" that into the garden next door. On the top floor there are dormer windows from which a cat might get on to the sloping roof and slide down it to its death. There was a ledge outside the bathroom window, like any bathroom window. The cat would get on to that and plummet on to the terrace below. I thought if the stress of our domestic arrangements was too great for it the cat might opt to leap through the window avoiding the ledge altogether.

I said something about being as aware for animals as for children when it came to danger. I found myself offering to put gates at the top of the stairs. It seemed that the new city cat, by these rules, was to be stripped of its traditional right to nine lives, to be confined to a single one inside a domestic play pen. No walls, no sloping roofs, no territorial negotiation, no fabulous leaps and balances, no ballet. This summer a cat of exceptional charm and beauty often visited us through our terrace doors. I watched it scramble up and down walls, and once leap down, for a moment, on to a railing no wider than its paws. It had complete mastery of this playground.

A glimmer of hope in the oral exam came when Mr Hogan confided, "I will say, your partner made a very good impression at the office." But then a trick question: What would you do if we turned you down? Wrong, I realised, to say I would go to the nearest pet shop. I said I would have to look carefully again at my facilities, think more deeply. Did I deserve a cat? He said I would hear something within 48

hours. That visit left me prickling. Suddenly, having offered to save a cat, we were on the defensive; our very motives questioned, the onus on us to prove that we weren't cat-torturers. The system seemed to have gone mad.

Two weeks passed. My girlfriend called. They would look up our papers and call back. Two more passed; the same response and no call-back. Then we gave up. Meanwhile there were stories of the RSPCA having to slaughter unadopted animals because of overcrowding; and appeals for foster homes.

Other stories, from acquaintances, revealed a strange new mood of inflexible and fierce means tests when

it came to finding homes for these animals, not confined to the RSPCA. In general if you had never owned a cat you were ruled out; if you had owned one your answers were nearly always wrong. Some friends went to the Canterbury Society for Cat Adoption with their two young sons and picked out two kittens. One of them fell asleep in the arms of one of the children. They were deeply taken with the cats.

The inspection ruled out adoption on the grounds that there was a road outside their house that the kittens might be tempted to cross. An "inglenook" would have to be blocked in case they went up the chimney. They were refused, the children "in-

consolable" according to their mother, who was herself "fairly pissed off". A married couple in London reported that they were asked for their mortgage certificate before an answer would be given. Another journalist told me that after adopting a dog from the Battersea Dogs' Home, an inspector turned up unannounced one day to make a spot check on the dog's welfare – an assumed right usually confined to VAT inspectors.

Last week I tried for the third time. I was told again they would look up my papers. Declaring now that I was reporting for this newspaper, Mr Hogan, the original inspector, called me back. He apologised. There had been a breakdown in communications, he said, and we had "got lost in the system", which was at breaking point. The cause, he said, was the recession working through the cat generations. Poverty has led to lack of neutering; pet shops have been selling at cut prices. Unselected owners, he implied, have dumped their cats and kittens. In our case there had been an "area of doubt" about the "geography" of our house, on which he had needed "a second opinion". Mr Hogan owns three cats of his own. Was he not qualified to judge sloping roofs and ledges? His area was a wider one, he said, "dogs, gerbils, ferrets". It needed another official who specialises in cats; to find "a cat that fitted the special circumstances". Normally the second inspection would have taken place in 24 hours. Did he really see the danger of a cat falling off that wall? "Oh they do," he said, "They can be very clumsy", conceding that "We can err on the side of caution at times." At least at the Mayhew Centre they apply a strict non-destruction policy for homeless cats, although this did not apply elsewhere in the RSPCA. Now we await our next inspection.



Adopting a cat is a tortuous process

PHOTOGRAPH BY ALAN PEEBLES