

Animals who help us:

teaching past and present in EYFS

Kate Rigby

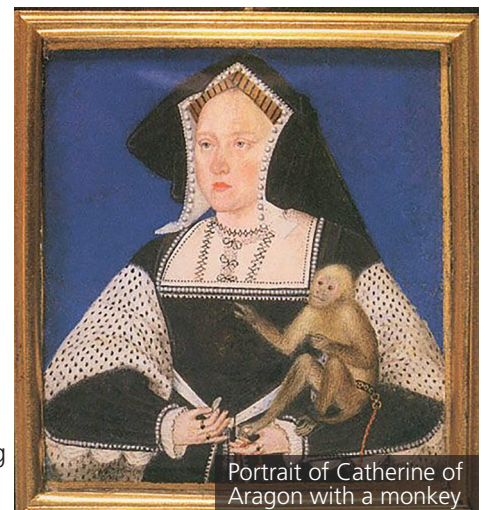
Remembrance Day is a useful time to explore with EYFS pupils the people who help us. But of course animals also play a part in human conflicts. This article explores animals who have helped us in wartime now and in the past. The article includes useful teaching ideas and picture books to help teachers explore what can be a challenging area for younger children.



Florence Nightingale at home as a young woman with her pet owl Athena

We often ask our youngest children to think about 'people who help us' in different aspects of our lives. Not only does this help children to understand more about themselves and their community, but it can also introduce significant individuals from the past who have shaped the world today. As we approach Remembrance Day, we might think about the soldiers who fought for their country or the nurses who healed the wounded, but we often forget about another group that played a significant role: animals.

For many children, animals are an important part of their home and community. We can start by asking them simple questions about the animals in their lives: *Does anyone have a pet? What different animals can you have as pets? What do you like about having pets?* Archaeologists tell us that people have been keeping pets for thousands of years. *Do you think they kept the same type of pets?* You might share some examples of unusual pets from the past, such as Catherine of Aragon's pet monkey or Florence Nightingale's owl. Some of the adults might even remember a time when large pet shops sold much more exotic creatures.



Portrait of Catherine of Aragon with a monkey

Farm animals

You might then start to think about how animals help us in the wider community. *Are farm animals the same as pets? Do some animals have jobs?* A visit to a local farm would be an ideal opportunity to identify different animals and how they have helped our community by ploughing fields and providing produce. When you get back to school, you could compare photos from your visit with pictures of farms in the past, where animals had a bigger role in pulling heavy machinery.

Activity

Show the children pictures of different working animals. Talk with the children about the different roles that animals play in our lives. *How are these animals helping us? What sort of jobs do they have?* Ask the children to create labels for the photographs, describing the animal or what it is doing.



If children are playing with small-world farming figures, you might add soil for the horses to plough. Observe how children use the resource and extend their thinking with prompts or careful questioning to invite conversation about how these animals support us. This farming vocabulary could be a foundation for children's future understanding of the substantive concept of agriculture.

Service animals

Service animals are another interesting avenue to explore with children. You might share a picture of a guide dog or a hearing dog and ask the children to think about how they help their owners. Perhaps you might know someone with a service dog or even have a school therapy dog that could come and visit. *What other jobs might dogs do?* You could ask the children if they have ever seen police dogs or detection dogs. Julia Donaldson's *Detective Dog* is a fabulous story to introduce the idea of sniffer dogs, for example.

Remembering animals at war

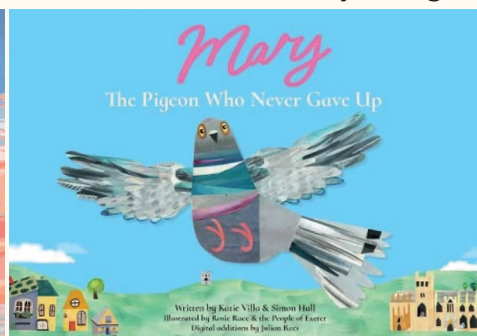
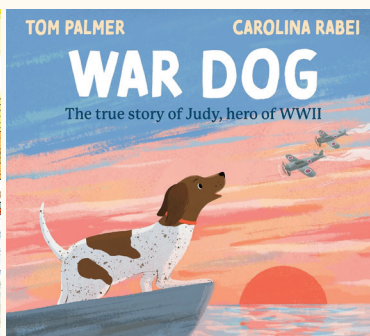
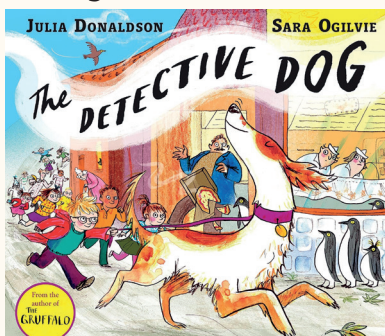
Remembrance Day provides another interesting lens to explore animals who help us. Children may be familiar with the red poppy that is worn to commemorate those who lost their lives during war, but have they

ever seen a purple poppy? Show the children a picture of the War Horse sculpture in Featherstone. *What do you think the purple poppies could be for? Why does this memorial include a horse?* Tell the children that many animals were also heroes during the World Wars, and that some were even awarded special medals for bravery.

Horses had a very important role in World War I – they were part of the cavalry, transported injured soldiers, and pulled supplies and ammunition. An estimated eight million horses from all sides died during World War I alone. *Do horses still fight in wars?* Children might be familiar with the horse guard in London today. You might start to make some comparisons between past and present and consider why horses are less common on the battlefield today.

Stories are an excellent way to explore past and present. Although most books about animals during the world wars are aimed at older children, Tom Palmer has recently released *War Dog*, a beautiful picture book that tells the story of Judy, a dog who lives aboard a military ship in World War II. You might also enjoy *Stubby: a true story of friendship* by Michael Foreman, the tale of a brave dog working in the

The Early Years framework states that children should 'understand the past through settings, characters and events encountered in books read in class and storytelling'.



Area of the EYFS framework	Early Learning Goal	Activity
Literacy: writing	<i>Write simple phrases and sentences that can be read by others</i>	Can the children write their own message for a pigeon to carry? Perhaps you could send these messages to another class strapped to the leg of a cuddly pigeon.
Expressive arts	<i>Safely use and explore a variety of materials, tools and techniques, experimenting with colour, design, texture, form and function</i>	Make your own Dickin Medal for an animal who has helped you or your community. Perhaps you might explore some of the historic animals who have won awards for bravery.
Fine motor skills	<i>Use a range of small tools, including scissors, paintbrushes and cutlery</i>	Create some purple poppies for Remembrance Day. You could join these together to make a wreath or simply create individual poppies with a variety of media.



trenches in France. Alternatively, you could share videos such as CBeebie's Poppies as you start to consider what life might have been like for animals during the wars.

Linking to the Early Learning Goals

Show the children a picture of the PDSA Dickin Medal. At the end of World War II, the Dickin Medal was awarded to 32 pigeons, 18 dogs, three horses and even a ship's cat. Pigeons were incredibly important for carrying messages. *What sort of messages do you think they carried? Why did they use pigeons to send messages?* You might need to explain that soldiers did not have mobile phones or computers during the war.

Whether you explore pets, farms, service dogs or military heroes, animals can be a really engaging way of exploring aspects of past and present. We often talk about significant historical people or events – perhaps it is time we include significant animals too.

Kate Rigby is a teacher-educator in primary history, mathematics and inclusion at the University of Cambridge. She is a member of the *Primary History* editorial board.



Resources

Kirkland, S. (2020) 'Using stories to support history in the EYFS' in *Primary History*, 84, pp. 8–9.

Munro, M., Hazell, P., Wasik, T., Kelly, R. and Crawford, H. (2022) 'Teaching about Remembrance Day in EYFS' in *Primary History*, 92, pp. 8–11.

Crawford, H. (2017) 'Early Years: Learning about the past through "People Who Help Us"' in *Primary History*, 77, pp. 8–9.

Assistance Dogs UK (ADUK)

www.assistedogs.org.uk

The Guide Dogs for the Blind Association

www.guidedogs.org.uk

CBeebies – Poppies

www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p02qvbd9

BBC Newsround

What do the different coloured poppies mean?

www.bbc.co.uk/newsround/45975344

PDSA Dickin Medal

www.pdsa.org.uk/what-we-do/animal-awards-programme/pdsa-dickin-medal

The Historic England Blog

Heroic war animals: the history of the PDSA Dickin Medal

<https://heritagecalling.com/2023/12/21/heroic-animals-at-war-the-history-of-the-pdsa-dickin-medal>

The Royal Pigeon Racing Association

Pigeons in war

www.rpra.org/pigeons-in-war

Imperial War Museums

The incredible carrier pigeons of the First World War

www.iwm.org.uk/history/the-incredible-carrier-pigeons-of-the-first-world-war