

# Brief Origin and History of the Basset Hound

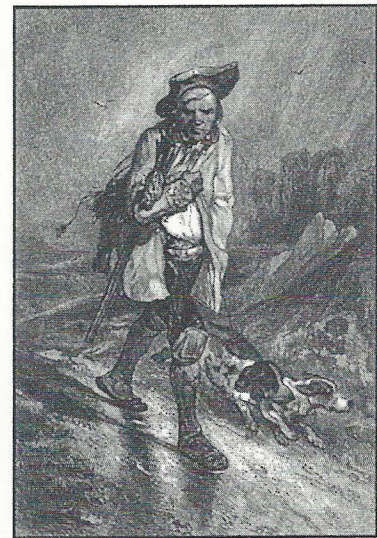


## What is a Basset Hound?

Ancient in lineage and aristocratic in appearance, the Basset Hound is a long, low scenting hound of French ancestry. The Basset's admirers consider him to be among the most beautiful and unusual of all hounds. His dignified look is owed in great part to a large, majestic head adorned with long, velvety ears, a wrinkled brow, and dark, soulful eyes. Resembling a short-legged version of his cousin the Bloodhound, the Basset Hound is one of the most easily recognizable breeds. Whether trailing rabbits through dense cover or finding the elusive loaf of bread on your kitchen counter, the Basset captures the devotion of his owners.

## Origin and History

The Basset Hound originated in sixth-century France, a country known for its many strains of hounds, each one evolving in response to local hunting conditions and terrain. Most strains of French hounds had both tall and short-legged versions, the short-legged dogs were known as "bassets", since "bas" means "low" in French. The taller hounds were followed on horseback in pursuit of stag, wolf, boar and deer. The low-set "basset" hounds accompanied hunters on foot in search of smaller game in thick cover.





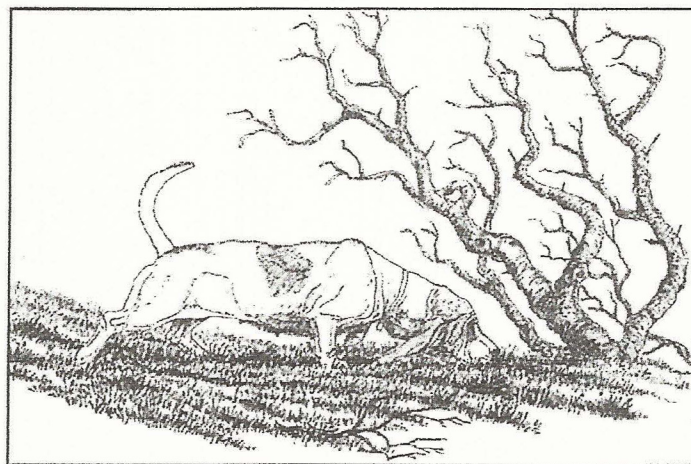
The keen nose of these short-legged hounds enabled them to work difficult, cold trails and easily follow and hold the line of a scent that faster hounds might overrun. The slower-moving, mild-tempered Basset Hounds did not attack and kill their prey but rather drove it into open terrain to the waiting hunter.

## St. Hubert and the Hound

In looks, temperament and scenting ability, the Basset Hound most resembles its longer-legged cousin, the Bloodhound. It is thought that both are descendants of the famed St. Hubert hounds. St. Hubert, a sixth century churchman, who became patron saint of the hunt, set out to develop a new strain of hound. His abbey, situated on the France/Belgium border, became famous for its packs of hunting hounds, which were annually presented to the French royal kennels. Following Hubert's death, monks continued breeding these prized hounds, which looked similar to today's Bloodhounds.

Authorities on dog breeding believe a mutation for short legs occurred in the St. Hubert strain. The resulting lower-to-the-ground hounds proved useful for penetrating underbrush, while their shorter legs benefited hunters on foot. Selective breeding maintained and refined this mutated version. The short-legged hounds gained popularity with sportsmen hunting small game since they needed extra time to load their cumbersome muskets and guns. They were also popular with hunters who could not afford horses.

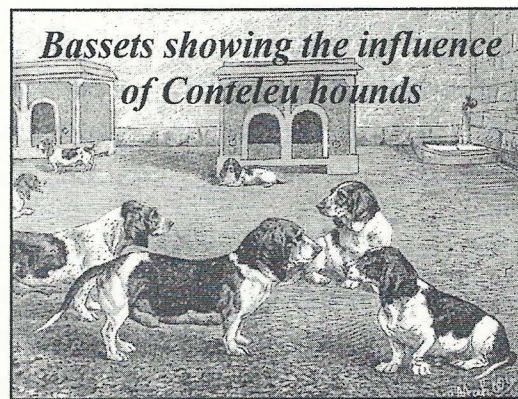
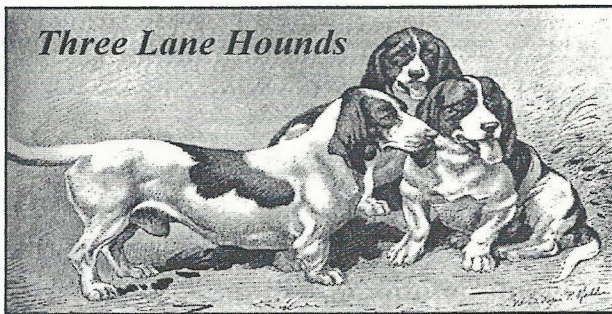
The sport of pack hunting with Basset Hounds continues to this day in France and England. In America, although a number of Basset Hound packs regularly hunted in the early decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, these were eventually disbanded and we no longer see formal packs of purebred Basset Hounds in America.



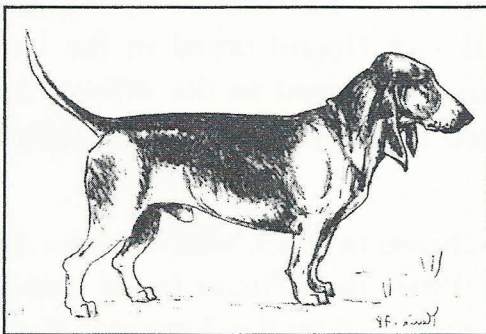


## More Recent History

Modern historical accounts of the Basset Hound begin with several important French breeders whose diligent work with the Basset Hound had an impact first on British Basset Hound fanciers, and ultimately on fanciers in the United States. Two of these breeders were Monsieur Louis Lane and Comte le Courteulx de Conteleu. The Lane hounds were reportedly very large, hefty dogs with short, crook'd forelegs. Some believed their very crook'd legs caused them to tire easily in the field, making them less proficient as hunters.



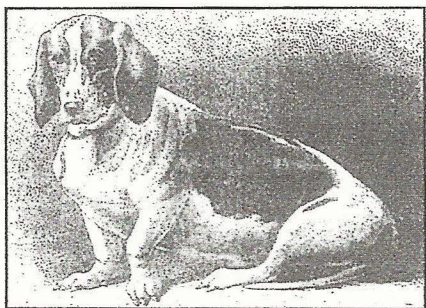
On the other hand, the Lane hounds gave outstanding “tongue” (the sound voiced when the Basset is on the trail of game) and were very determined in their hunting. These wonderfully long-eared hounds were described as tan and white, lemon and white or badger pied. The Conteleu hounds, in contrast, were not as big and were more fiery in temperament. Their legs were less crook'd, and it was thought that they were more efficient in the field. However, their quality of voice was lacking and they were less relentless in pursuing game. Compared to the Lane hounds, their ears were shorter and set high on a broad skull with prominent eyes.



*Basset Artesien-Normand –  
today's foundation*

In working with their low-set hunting dogs, both of these breeders envisioned the ideal Basset Hound in different ways. In spite of this, the bloodlines of the Lane and Conteleu Bassets were eventually combined, including the best of both families. The resulting French strain, now known as the Basset Artesien-Normand, was the foundation of the Basset Hound we know today.





*Model, brought to England  
in 1874 by Everett Millais*

The first Bassets arrived in Britain in 1866. These hounds, called Basset and Belle, were a gift to Lord Galway from Comte de Tournon. Lord Galway described them as “long, low hounds shaped much like a dachshund with crooked forelegs at the knees with much more bone and longer heads than on beagles.”<sup>1</sup> Basset and Belle were bred, producing a litter of five, which laid the foundation for the Basset in England.

The popularity and success of the Basset Hound in England owe a great deal to the efforts of Sir John Everett Millais. In the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, Millais imported the highest quality French Basset Hounds for use in his breeding program. One of these imports was a dog named Model, brought to England in 1874.

Thanks to Millais’ efforts to improve the Basset Hound through careful selection and mating, the breed captured the attention of English dog fanciers, including the Prince and Princess of Wales, Queen Alexandra and Lords Onslow and Galway. The Kennel Club in England officially recognized the Basset Hound in 1880. At about the same time, the Basset Hound was also capturing hearts in America.

## **Basset Hounds in America**

Entries in George Washington’s diary suggest that Basset Hounds made their debut in America following the revolution, when the Marquis de Lafayette sent Bassets to his friend Washington. These short-legged French hounds may explain the origin of the so-called “Virginia Bench-Legged Beagles”. Little is known, however, of the Basset’s development in America for the next 100 years, until the registration of the first Basset Hound by the American Kennel Club in 1885.

In 1935, the Basset Hound Club of America (BHCA) was formed by a group of Detroit fanciers, whose goal was to foster the Basset Hound breed in the United States. The Basset Hound Club of America was recognized as the official breed club by the American Kennel Club and a standard was developed which described the ideal Basset Hound (see Appendix A).

The first field trial for Bassets took place in Michigan in 1935, with the first AKC licensed field trial held in 1937. Last revised in 1964, the official breed standard written by the Basset Hound Club of America and approved by the American Kennel Club, is the blueprint against which all reputable breeders of Basset Hounds measure the excellence of the dogs they produce.

<sup>1</sup>George Johnston, *The Basset Hound*. London, Popular Dogs. (1968), p 32.



# FORM FOLLOWS FUNCTION IN THE BASSET HOUND

When giving “tongue” (sounding alert to the hunter) the Basset has a deep melodious voice and is perhaps the most musical of all hounds.

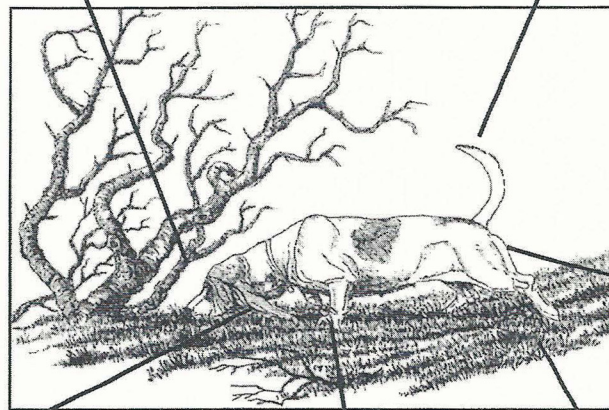
Large nose for trailing game. Especially keen sense of smell, which is second only to the Bloodhound.

Bassets carry their tails gaily. The white tip makes it easier to spot them in tall grass when their body is not visible.

Deep muzzle. The teeth of the Basset are relatively smaller than those breeds who attack their prey.

Long pendulous ears. When the nose is put to the ground, the ears help stir up the scent in trailing. Some feel the long ears diminish the Basset’s sense of hearing so he is less distracted when following a scent.

A prominent forechest is part of a long smooth ribcage, which houses strong heart and lungs for endurance in the field.



To assist him in thick cover and all weather conditions, the Basset’s water repellent coat is smooth, short and close.

The Basset’s strong hindquarters allow him to cover the ground with strength and endurance.

More bone, size considered than any other breed of dog. The Basset has good reach and drive.

When the Basset lowers his head to the ground, the loose skin falls into brow wrinkles which help protect the face from thorns while moving through the underbrush.

Short legs are useful in dense cover. The front legs are crooked in order to support the low, heavy body. Compared to longer legged hunting dogs, the closer-to-the-ground Basset is easier to follow on foot.