



BARRY

The legendary St Bernard Dog

NATURHISTORISCHES MUSEUM
DER BÜRGERGEMEINDE BERN

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Acknowledgments

2nd extended edition

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An exhibition dedicated to an icon

BARRY — THE LEGENDARY SAINT BERNARD

Barry, one of the most famous Saint Bernards that ever lived, has occupied a place of honour in his own permanent exhibition since June 2014. Exactly 200 years after his death, we shed new light on a Swiss icon.

Barry's life spawned many compelling legends. They embody all the qualities that make stories timeless and fascinating: danger and rescue, heroism and tragedy, the magical and the down-to-earth. Some tales defy belief, and many leave room for speculation and imagination.

Yet the true story of Barry's role in the religiously inspired rescue service provided by Augustinian canons on the Great St Bernard Pass is equally captivating. The exhibition weaves fact with fiction, and history with the present, while attempting to find a balance between romanticizing and demystifying.

Entering the exhibition is like walking into a picture book in which the Barry drama is set against large theatrical backdrops that celebrate a magical but threatening alpine world.

Behind the scenes, stories about Barry — or related to his world — are played out. Hospice servants and their dogs, for example, encounter a rescue helicopter. And a virtual flight over the Alps broadens our understanding of mountain rescue, past and present.

Further on we meet talking dogs, the famous little barrel, and travellers

traversing the pass. Wolves and off-piste skiers also inhabit Barry's alpine habitat. Who's afraid of the big bad wolf? — And how dangerous are avalanches when one is skiing wildly, far away from the pistes?

Visitors embarking on this trek through different worlds discover more and more about the Barry myth. The exhibition starts with its leading character: Barry himself, and his home, the hospice on the Great St Bernard Pass.







Barry of the Great St Bernard

MORE THAN A DOG'S LIFE

Barry was born in 1800 in the hospice at the Great St Bernard Pass. Bitter temperatures and snow were a constant threat in this harsh alpine environment at nearly 2,500 metres above sea level. For this reason, people from the hospice, accompanied by their dogs, would look for lost travellers every day. Barry was their most tireless helper — during the course of his career this faithful animal is believed to have rescued more than 40 people from an icy death.

In 1812, a monastery servant brought the old and tired dog from the Great St Bernard Hospice to the faraway city of Bern. It remains a mystery as to why this happened and how the animal spent the final two years of his life. There is no reliable information on this. Barry died in 1814 and the prior of the Great St Bernard Hospice arranged for a taxidermy mount to be prepared for posterity and put on display in the original Natural History Museum of Bern. He has been in our museum in his current form since 1923.

By the time Barry died he was apparently already a household name to some people. In 1816 a professor of natural history called F. Meisner wrote: 'I find it pleasant and also comforting to think that this faithful dog, who saved the lives of so many people, will not be quickly forgotten after his death!'

No details have survived, however, of Barry's rescue actions. The archivists at the hospice did not keep records concerning individual dogs. It is therefore impossible to verify all the facts and dates. That said, all sources confirm Barry's year of birth and the fact that he saved more than 40 people's lives.

So Barry was certainly a particularly capable hospice dog and an exceptional one too. One must not forget, though, that behind the dogs were the people from the hospice, who often risked their own lives during rescue operations. 'The rescue stories (...) demonstrate just what suitable dogs are capable of when used properly by intelligent handlers', writes Barry expert Marc Nussbaumer in his detailed and informative book *Barry vom grossen St. Bernhard* (Barry of the Great St Bernard).

As time went by, the few known facts about Barry's life were transformed into numerous tales and legends.

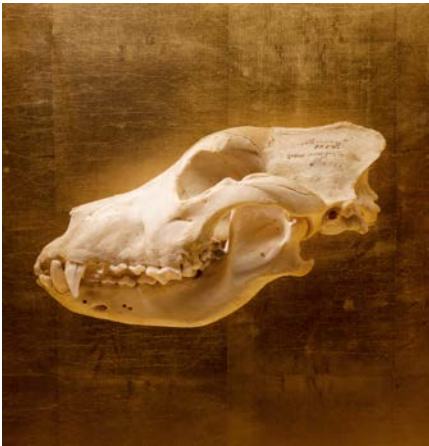
Highlight in the exhibition: The original mount of Barry and his original skull.

a

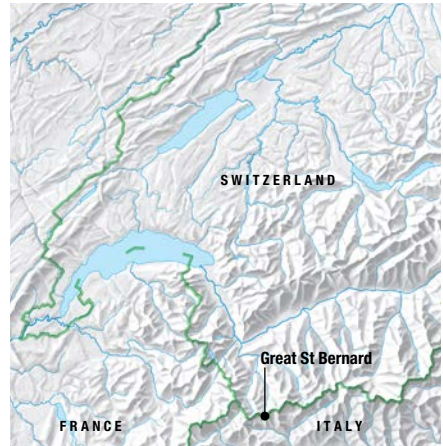




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- a The Great St Bernard Hospice at nearly 2,500 metres above sea level.
- b Canons and *marroniers* carry an injured traveller to the hospice.
- c On permanent display for the first time ever — the skull belonging to the original Barry.
- d The hospice is situated in the Pennine Alps near the Italian border.





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g

- e Audio station: Buried under snow – an avalanche victim's real-life story.
- f Meet the travellers who crossed the pass – from Napoleon to humble day labourers.
- g Facts and legends, past and present – the stuff of a captivating exhibition.



The legends surrounding Barry

FACT AND FICTION

Barry's life spawned many wonderful legends. They embody all the qualities that make stories timeless and fascinating: danger and rescue, heroism and tragedy, the magical and the down-to-earth.

One of the best-known Barry legends is that of the small barrel of 'eau-de-vie' that the dogs were believed to have carried around their necks so that exhausted travellers could revive themselves with a stiff drink. All over the world, the famous barrel is firmly embedded in the public imagination, and virtually every Saint Bernard featured in advertising or tourist brochures is seen with this accessory around its neck.

However, the barrels belong to the realm of fantasy. Some dogs were probably accustomed to carrying provisions in small 'packsaddles' from time to time, but the first appearance of the barrels in pictures was not until the end of the 19th century. The barrel became a recognized symbol, the use of which was a success story in the early days of marketing. In 1956 a chaplain at the hospice put the story straight regarding the small barrels of rum: 'At no point in time did the dogs carry such barrels'.

Another touching tale is that of a half-frozen boy who Barry is said to have found and carried back to the hospice on his back.

A similar story had already been circulating before Barry was born, and it

has been retold in various forms by numerous authors since. Although the story has never been confirmed, it is certainly conceivable that in the 18th century a dog could have discovered a boy lost in the Alps and that together they could have made their way to a nearby house. Yet even the smartest and strongest Saint Bernard alive today would not be physically or mentally capable of performing such a — well — legendary rescue mission.

After such a heroic life came an equally heroic death: Barry, that most faithful of dogs, saved 40 people only to be killed by the 41st person. A Napoleonic soldier is said to have mistaken Barry for a wolf and killed him with a bayonet.

Elements of the story of Barry's death could be true. Wolves did inhabit the area around the Great St Bernard Pass at the time. And because prey such as roe deer and red deer had been virtually eradicated by then, wolves searching for food would occasionally come dangerously close to humans. It is also true that soldiers returning home after service under Napoleon would have traversed the pass. However, Barry was definitely not killed after being tragically mistaken for a wolf; he died peacefully in Bern in 1814.

Highlight in the exhibition: Call Barry for help! An interactive staging of the rescue of the half-frozen boy keeps Barry busy.















The hospice

RESCUE IN THE NAME OF CHARITY

The hospice run by Augustinian canons on the Great St Bernard Pass has been a refuge for travellers for nearly 1,000 years. There were already lodgings providing shelter at the top of the pass in Roman times. Following their destruction, travellers were vulnerable not only to the harsh alpine conditions, but also to bands of robbers.

In the 11th century, Bernard of Menthon set out to improve this situation by constructing a simple stone house — the first hospice — at the top of the pass. It provided shelter, board and lodgings and thereby mitigated the dangers of a forbidding mountain environment. Whoever made it to the hospice door — exhausted or having been robbed — was saved. Bernard was highly venerated as a result of his endeavours, and in 1123 he was canonized.

He instructed the canons to dedicate themselves to prayer, to receive travellers as guests and to help them in the name of charity. From smugglers to customs officials, all people arriving at the hospice have always been offered food and a roof over their heads. The doors have not been locked for nearly 1,000 years, because someone could be in distress at any time.

At nearly 2,500 metres above sea level, snowfall is possible in any month of the year. Even a brief exposure to the cold is life-threatening to those who are not properly dressed. And in

Barry's day many travellers were penniless and would have been poorly clad.

Mercenaries, domestic workers and day labourers went over the pass in search of work; merchants transported goods with pack animals along mountain paths. Many people sought salvation on pilgrimages that took them over the pass. Every day for hundreds of years local guides working for the canons would travel to and from the hospice, ready to offer help to travellers in need.

These guides or servants, known as marroniers, started taking dogs with them on their patrols probably in the mid-17th century. These animals cannot be compared to avalanche dogs of today. They were sturdy companions — Barry included. One of their most important tasks was to locate snow-covered paths and to break trails through deep snow. Their barking would draw the attention of the marroniers to travellers overcome by exhaustion or buried under avalanches. And their excellent sense of direction enabled the dogs to find their way back to the safety of the hospice.

This collaboration between man and dog proved to be extremely successful and continued for over 200 years. The men and their dogs are credited with saving more than 2,000 lives.

Highlight in the exhibition: Virtual flight over the Alps, as captured by world champion paraglider Chrigel Maurer.

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b





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d



e

- a The hospice in around 1825.
- b A glimpse into daily life at the hospice in around 1900: travellers received free board and lodgings.
- c Mountain rescue as it was in Barry's day: a hospice guide on patrol with his dogs.

- d Crossing alpine passes was extremely dangerous at any time of the year.
- e For over 200 years Augustinian canons and their dogs saved travellers from an icy death.

f



g



f "Call Barry": an interactive game in which Barry comes to the visitors' aid when called.

g A virtual flight over the Alps takes off beside the helicopter cockpit.



h The gripping film material shown in the helicopter cinema explores avalanches, risk and rescue in the Alps.



FROM FARM DOG TO NATIONAL HERO

The dogs at the hospice were originally guard or protection dogs. Their appearance was unimportant — they had to be able to perform their tasks in the harsh alpine conditions. Until well into the 20th century the dogs of the Great St Bernard were therefore a mixed bunch of breeds. Away from the hospice, however, ‘Saint Bernard dogs’ — powerful farm dogs with red and white markings — were already popular from the mid-19th century.

At that time breeders began the first serious work on changing the way the dogs looked. In around 1900 the bulky Saint Bernard with its heavy head slowly replaced the lighter variation of the breed.

The appearance of dogs began to be increasingly important: people could afford to keep a dog as a fashion statement or for their amusement. As a result, strict selective breeding turned many working dogs into luxury breeds.

The former hospice dogs have also become gradually larger, heavier set and more long-haired — which is why Saint Bernards are no longer used as rescue dogs. That does not stop advertising agencies the world over from relentlessly depicting the faithful animal with the barrel around its neck as it rushes to the assistance of someone in distress.

Saint Bernards are used very differently nowadays.

They play an important role as the ‘Swiss national dog’ and are a popular tourist attraction. Saint Bernards and the Alps are inseparable images.

The dogs are not only used for marketing purposes, however. Their gentle nature makes them excellent therapy dogs. They love contact with people and enjoy praise and attention.

Highlight in the exhibition: An impressive computer animation showing how the skull of the Saint Bernard has changed over time.

a



b





c

- a Hospice dogs. Drawing by R. Strebel, 1896.
- b Until around 1900 the hospice dogs were not all of the same breed. They were a mixed pack of strong working dogs.
- c From farm dog to national hero – how St Bernards have changed over time.



SAINT BERNARDS IN THE SERVICE OF HUMANS

Saint Bernards with barrels around their necks do not rescue people in the mountains, but they still serve humans. For some time already they have been used as social and therapy dogs. The Barry Foundation in Martigny is particularly committed to working in this field. In 2005 the foundation took over the Saint Bernard breeding station from canons at the hospice. This is why only Saint Bernards from the Barry Foundation can add the words 'of the Great St Bernard' to their names.

Since 2007, staff from the Barry Foundation and their dogs have been visiting old people's homes and giving children with behavioural problems the opportunity to come into contact with the animals. Young people with physical or mental handicaps also enjoy the company of these warm-hearted dogs.

However, the work as a therapy dog is very demanding. It involves close and intense contact with unfamiliar people, and only Saint Bernards with an especially gentle nature are used for such work. Above all, they must have a great fondness for children. The powerful animals must remain calm if a small child is a little wild with its hugging and stroking — or even if the child wants to join the dog in its basket.

Saint Bernards are carefully trained by their handlers on how to behave in such situations. Such training is necessary because, contrary to popular belief,

dogs do not associate close physical contact with strangers with affection, it is stressful for them.

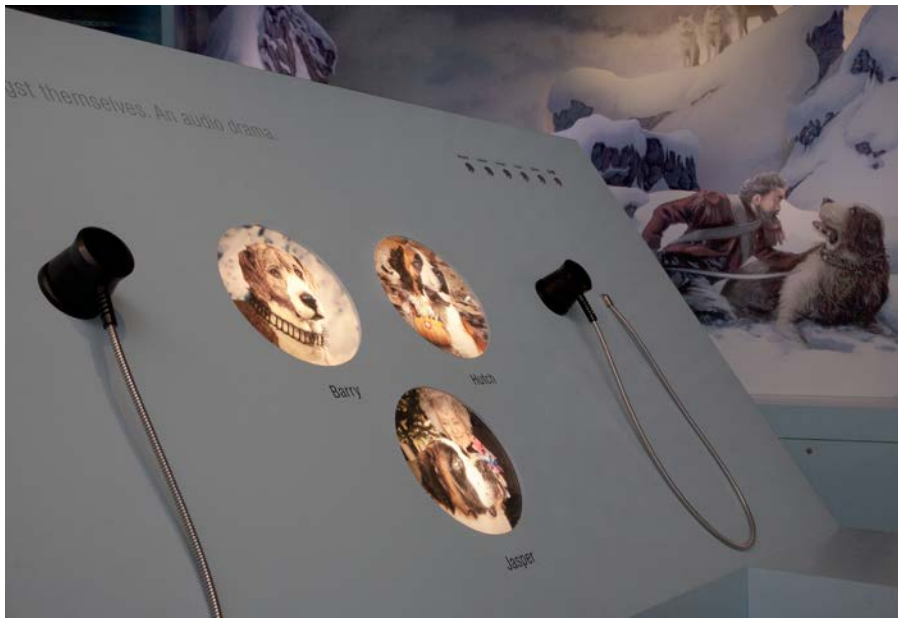
Although the animals need and love to have contact with people, it is also hard work as 'petting dogs' to be constantly subjected to stroking and fondling by unfamiliar hands. Even the loveliest dog needs regular breaks from so much affection.

So the versatile, patient and almost tireless Saint Bernards of Martigny are faithful servants and thereby worthy descendants of Barry the legendary hospice dog. Barry saved people who were lost or stranded in the mountains, and his successors perform equally noble tasks. They help in cases of psychological distress, give pleasure to children, or simply provide those in need with comfort and a change from their daily routine.

Highlight in the exhibition: When St Bernards get together — an audio-drama. A doggy dandy, a therapy dog and Barry talk about their lives.



Therapy dogs bring comfort and joy to a lot of people, as well as providing a change to their daily routine.



What would St Bernards say if they could talk?
An audio-drama reveals all.

Photo credits

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Angela Zwahlen, Simon Müller: page 14, 16, 18

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DU GRAND-SAINT-BERNARD

Congrégation du
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1st of August, Zibelemärit (fourth Monday in November),

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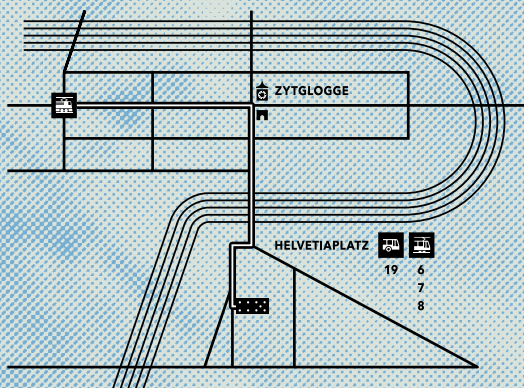
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