

TIMOTHY TORTOISE OF SELBORNE

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The famous eighteenth century naturalist, the Reverend Gilbert White, had a great interest in tortoises. This was stimulated by observations on Timothy the tortoise who originally belonged to his aunt, Rebecca Snook, of Ringmer, Sussex. Gilbert White made regular visits to his aunt (often recorded in his personal correspondence and in *The Naturalist's Journal*) to inspect the tortoise before and after hibernation, and this involved a trip to the local general store to weigh Timothy on the shop scales. In 1780, on the death of his aunt, the tortoise became the property of Gilbert White whereupon he dug it out of hibernation in the Sussex garden and brought it back in a post chaise to Selborne. With the tortoise in his own garden at The Wakes, White undertook further observations and did experiments on the tortoise. He was particularly fascinated by hibernation in animals and all aspects of this phenomenon in the tortoise were regularly documented in his journals. Timothy tortoise lived in the spacious 5 acre garden at The Wakes, feeding liberally on the abundant produce of fruit and vegetables, for the rest of Gilbert White's life. Timothy remained at Selborne and died in 1794, the year following White's own death. The carapace to the original Timothy is now in the British Museum (Natural History) and when it was presented to the museum in 1853, it was discovered that Timothy was a female — a fact which White, curiously enough, did not discover.

A collection of Gilbert White's writings on Timothy tortoise was assembled by Sylvia Townsend Warner and published in 1946 under the title *The Portrait of a Tortoise*. This book has now been re-issued by Virago Press at £3.50. After a full and amusing introduction by the compiler, we are presented with extracts from Gilbert White's entries in *The Naturalist's Journal* (1771-1793), some letters to the Hon. Daines Barrington from White's famous classic *The Natural History of Selborne* which feature the tortoise, together with some explanatory notes, White's supplement to *The Antiquities of Selborne* "More particulars respecting The Old Family tortoise" and appendices with a chart of Timothy's weight from 1775 until 1793.

After Gilbert White's death his house, The Wakes, went to his brother Benjamin, then to his niece Mary White and it was sold, and passed out of the family, after Mary died in 1839. The next occupant, Professor Thomas Bell, was a most appropriate person to live there for he was a keen scholar of White's work and in 1877 published a much annotated two volume edition of *The Natural History and Antiquities of Selborne*. Like Gilbert White, Thomas Bell was very interested in tortoises and before coming to Selborne he had published some parts of a monograph on these animals. Professor Bell (in a foot note to the 1877 edition of *The Natural History and Antiquities of Selborne*) originally identified White's Timothy as *Testudo marginata*, but he later named it as a separate species *T. whitei*.

Gilbert White's house is now a museum and continues the tortoise tradition but having a large present-day Timothy which is *Testudo graeca*; a closely related species and, like Gilbert White's tortoise, a female. The current Timothy has been at the museum since 1970, she measures 8½ ins (22cm) and weighs 4lb 5oz (1.96kg) (9.3.1982).

In September 1981 the museum Timothy caught a cold — she had long mucus strings hanging from her nose, exhibited difficulty in breathing with much wheezing and, at night, snoring. She was taken to the veterinary surgeon who prescribed antibiotics and recommended that she be kept warm indoors. In addition we also dissolved some Vick Vapour Rub in boiling water in a deep cup and placed her head over this to inhale the fumes. Fortunately Timothy proved co-operative and mostly kept her head out of the shell so she was able to receive this treatment two or three times a day, and it did seem to make her breathing easier. The cold symptoms persisted, though in diminishing severity throughout the winter; it was possibly a virus infection as the antibiotics would have had an effect had it been due to a bacterium. During the autumn and early winter the tortoise lost weight, dropped to 3lbs 12oz.

Timothy adapted well to life indoors in her box of straw and was allowed to walk around indoors for exercise. Keeping a tortoise active throughout the winter posed various problems — adequate temperature, feeding and house training. Timothy was regularly taken home at the end of the day (the museum building being too cold). At night the tortoise box was kept on the top of a gas-fired central-heating boiler and with just the pilot light in action thus preventing too great a drop in temperature during the coldest part of the 24 hour cycle. In the day time the box was placed in any warm location, in front of a coal fire, close to radiators, and occasionally the airing cupboard. The temperature achieved was not adequate for full metabolism and from mid September onwards, the tortoise lost all inclination to feed and therefore force-feeding was necessary, but this was accomplished without resistance from the animal. The tortoise's mouth was opened and small pieces of food put in, and when the first piece was chewed and swallowed it was usually possible to introduce the next piece into the naturally opened mouth. A range of food was given and each day's rations included some fruit (apple, orange, grape, tomato or soft banana), some starchy food (thinly sliced carrot, swede and cooked rice or porridge) and some green food (land or water cress, lettuce, dandelion leaves). Land cress grown in the garden proved a most satisfactory winter supply of green leaves. Vitamin supplement was given in powder form twice a week.

An associated problem with an indoor tortoise is the large volume of urine expelled in jet-like fashion. After feeding the tortoise was placed on thick sheets of newspaper and usually within an hour the urine and faeces are expelled and the tortoise can then be allowed to wander and exercise freely without risk of accidents. Although antibiotics are often said to cause constipation, the museum tortoise performed its bodily functions regularly (at more or less daily intervals) during six months on antibiotics.

Timothy tortoise has now recovered from her infection. Her weight has gone up, the eyes are black and bright, and there is no further discharge from the nose nor indications of breathing difficulties. Antibiotics and Vick treatment have been discontinued, but she will continue to be kept indoors until May when the outdoor temperature rises and it will probably be necessary even then to bring her indoors at night.

This summer Timothy tortoise of Selborne will be back in her pen in the garden at The Wakes and may be seen during museum opening times. The Oates Memorial Library and Museum and The Gilbert White Museum is open from March — October from 12.00 to 5.30 but is closed on Mondays, with the exception of Bank Holidays.