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0 The court with a difference

It's a busy day in court number 3 in the market town of Great Bleating. The judges have already been working for six hours, and in that time they have dealt with over twelve wrongdoers. But unlike their colleagues in the other courtrooms, they do not have to face bank robbers, shoplifters and muggers. Their 'clients' are more likely to have overturned dustbins, dug holes in someone's garden or bitten the local postman. These wrongdoers are all animals, and they have all been brought to court by their owners who must account for their crimes.

1

The idea for an animal court originally occurred to local writer Michael Giddings when his neighbour's dog persistently came into his garden and dug holes in his vegetable patch. When the neighbour refused to do anything to prevent his pet from misbehaving, Mr Giddings was forced to take legal action. The neighbour was taken to court, and it was then that Mr Giddings discovered exactly how many people had problems with neighbours with badly-behaved pets.

2

'When I suggested an animal court to the local authority, they agreed it would be an excellent idea,' Mr Giddings told us. 'Great Bleating is a reasonably prosperous town and most people have pets of one kind or another. For the most part they are well-behaved, but here are troublemakers.'

3

It was decided that Wednesdays should be 'animal' days. The owner comes with his pet and faces a panel of three judges. If the animal is found guilty, the owner is told to act in order to prevent the animal misbehaving again. In some cases, the owner may be forced to pay a fine, and in the most extreme cases the animal may have to be put down.

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Of course, not everybody agrees that this is a good idea. Linda Thompson, a local member of the RSPCA, is furious. She is collecting signatures from other angry Great Bleating residents who want to end this scheme.

5

'Animals are animals,' she says, 'and you can't stop them acting the way nature intended. I really can't see the point of this ridiculous scheme. I can't help feeling that the funds the council have put aside for this scheme could be better spent elsewhere'.

6

However, she is in a minority. Most Great Bleating residents support the scheme and the neighbouring towns of Barkley and Mewton are considering setting up similar courts. As town councillor Richard Woofton told us, 'Residents are becoming increasingly annoyed with the thoughtless behaviour of their neighbours' animals. This scheme helps to ensure that all animals keep within the law.'

7

Mr Woofton continued, 'Of course, in most cases it is not the animal who suffers, but the owner. And anyway, most cases never get to court. A telling-off from the council is usually enough to ensure that most owners restrain their pets, rather than face the humiliation of appearing in court.'