



# The Victorians

## Street Life: Dogs and rats

By Nigel Bryant

JACKO:

Me name's Jacko - I'm anuvver of the kids who sleep rough in the fish market at Billingsgate. Dunno 'ow old I am an' I can't see as it matters. We've all got our story of 'ow we got 'ere, an' this is mine...

I ain't always lived 'ere. First I was sent out to work wiv a rat-catcher - Vic was 'is name. An amazin' cove to look at - thick velvet jacket, great clod-hoppin' boots, and a tall shiny hat wiv pictures of rats all round it. So people'd know what he did, I s'pose. Though it weren't hard to guess, cos round 'is shoulders and down 'is arms 'e'd always 'ave a tame rat runnin'...

VIC:

Jacko - meet my fine, fury, friend. I call him Simon.

JACKO:

It's a rat!

You shoulda seen it. It was old, with long white whiskers, and it would crawl on 'is shoulder to be fed...and take food from right out of 'is mouth.

VIC:

Come on, Simon - a nice bit of cheese. Greedy blighter - swallowed it whole! They're quite easy to train, you know, rats. Sagacious creatures. That's why we have to be so artful in their capture!





- JACKO: Talked like that all the time, 'e did. Never understood the half of what 'e said. But I worked wiv 'im for months. Used to go in all the big granaries – the corn stores down by the river – and clear 'em of the vermin. Worst thing was the stuff 'e used to put on me...
- VIC: Come here, boy. I need to rub your clothes with this.
- JACKO: Eughh - what is it?
- VIC: Oil of aniseed. And let's have plenty on your boots...
- JACKO: Cor, it stinks!!!
- VIC: That's the idea. It attracts the rats wonderfully. You're to walk round this corn store, flapping your arms and swinging your coat-tail, and the rats will come crawling from their holes and scurrying to the master of this powerful spell! Off you go!
- JACKO: What we do then? Club 'em?
- VIC: By no means.
- JACKO: What, poison 'em?
- VIC: I have been known to kill the vermin with poison – arsenic's the best – but all you achieve is an ocean of dead rats. In no time at all the stench infects the corn. In any case, they're worth much more to us alive.
- JACKO: You what?





- VIC: I'll explain later – they've smelled you – here they come now!
- JACKO: Oh Lor'!
- You can't believe how many there were. Come from everywhere they did, out of every hole, every gap between the sacks o' corn. They was over me feet and crawlin' up me legs. I kicked 'em off, but Vic shouted:
- VIC: No, no, don't hurt the fellows!
- JACKO: Don't hurt 'em?!
- VIC: Draw them this way, over to me!
- JACKO: So I did, and he was dead clever. He'd got this old barrel and a pile of baskets, and as the rats followed me over to 'im he'd sweep 'em in the barrel with a big broom or drop the baskets over and catch 'em that way...
- JACKO: Get in there, you ugly great –
- VIC: No, Jacko, gently! And mind their tails!
- JACKO: Why? They're only vermin!
- VIC: You don't understand. If they're injured for the rat-hunt, the procedure in the pit will be accounted foul.
- JACKO: Can't you talk English?





- JACKO: I didn't know what he was on about, but I soon found out. We took all the rats to this pub in Soho, and in a yard out the back there was a big wire pit an' a huge crowd gathered, all swiggin' the ale. An' then this jolly old cove with a flash waistcoat and a gold watch stands in the pit and says:
- JEMMY MASSEY: This fine gold watch is this evening's prize! It is to be fought for by dogs under thirteen pounds weight. Dogs are now to go to scale. I thank you.
- JACKO: And they started weighin' all these dogs. Vicious-lookin' things with starin' eyes – real excited, they were – they knew what was about to happen.
- JEMMY MASSEY: Each dog will enter the ring with fifteen rats. Any man touching dog or rats, his dog will be disqualified! The first dog if you please: Mr Norton's fine terrier, name of Black-eye.
- VIC: Now, Jacko, you release the rats. Fifteen – get the number right or they'll set the dogs on us!
- JACKO: Right.
- So I reached in the basket, had to scrabble in among all them tails, all that skanky rat-fur...
- Owww!!!
- ...got bit three times an' me thumb went bad – and then I slung 'em fast into the ring. The dog went barmy and so did the crowd.





JACKO:

They was bettin' on it, see. Which dog would do fifteen rats the fastest. You shoulda seen the money flashin' round. And that dog was round that ring like you wouldn't believe, tossin' the rats all over the place...

We used to take about 300 rats a night down Soho. Paid well, an' all. But then...

Vic? Vic?

One morning' I found Vic lying on the ground, foam comin' out of his throat...

Oh, my life, Vic, what you done?!

Reckon 'e'd poisoned hisself by accident – or caught sumfin off o' that rat Simon what he fed from 'is own mouth.

Come 'ere, you piece o' vermin!

Seems to me it ain't natural, makin' 'em all tame like that...Any'ow, I 'ad 300 rats in baskets ready for Soho that night, so I took 'em there meself. But the ring-master paid me off with half the usual price – me being just a kid. And there's all that money flashin' about, I reckoned if they could afford to chuck it at rats and dogs they could spare some for me. So I started pick-in' a pocket or two...

But I weren't no good first time – nearly got taken. Only got away by the skin o' me teeth. And that's when I ended up 'ere – the fish market. Don't miss the rats – you never seen the size o' some of 'em. Except, o'course, down the sewers. But if you want to hear about that, you'll need to 'ear Gyp's story.

