

A SILVER DOG COLLAR
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Alexander Dick, one of the most prolific Australian silversmiths, made the dog collar described and illustrated in this article in 1834 – shortly after being granted a free pardon by Governor Bourke on February 1, 1833.

Dick was convicted of receiving stolen property, namely 12 dessert spoons, on Christmas Day, 1826. The spoons had previously been stolen by persons unknown from the residence of the Colonial Secretary, Alexander Macleay.

A contemporary description of Dick is contained in his pardon:

Height – 5'7 ½"; complexion – fair, ruddy and a little pock pitted; hair – sandy/brown; eyes – grey. Remarks: Less a front tooth in upper jaw, mole right side of chin, nose broad and broken.

The dog pits were a feature of Regency and mid-Victorian English life and were peopled by two different classes, the 'low and degenerate' and the 'young bloods'.

The killing of rats, a sport not particularly dear to anybody's heart, was made popular by its gaming possibilities. A punter could back a dog to kill a certain number of rats within a specified time. Or, he could back a dog against another dog as to which would kill the greatest number of rats with the dogs being placed in adjoining pits and the dog which killed quickest declared the winner.

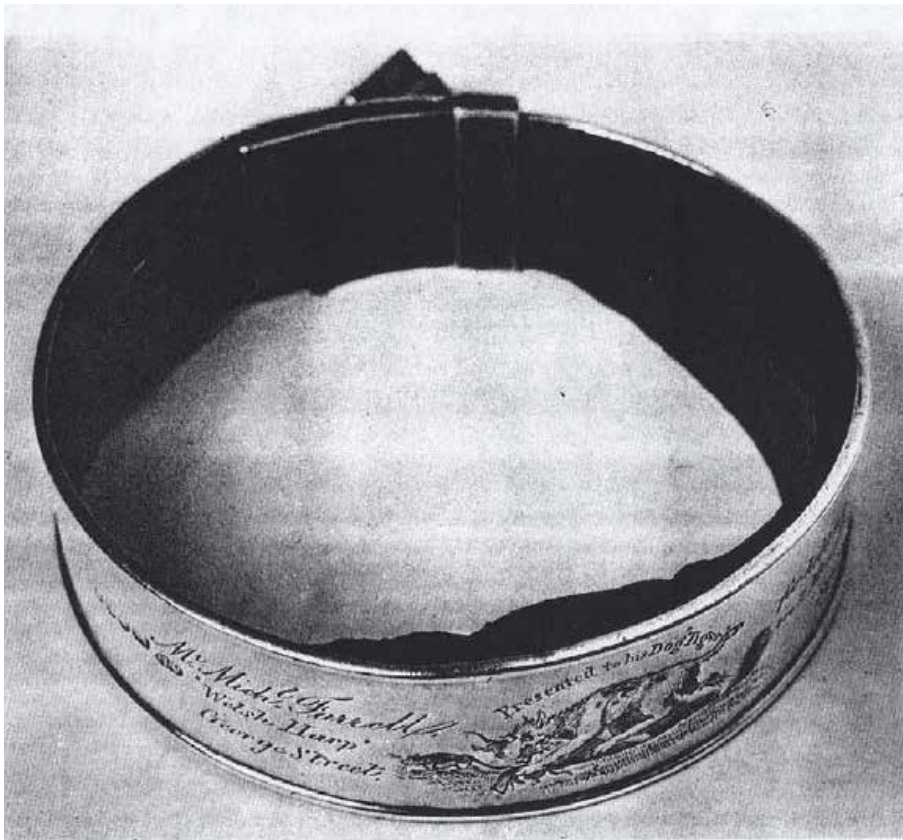


Plate 1. (left) A view of the dog collar won by Michael Farrell's dog Tiger in the Welsh Harp competition in Sydney in 1834.

Plate 2. (top) Alexander Dick's marks on the collar.



Plate 3. Detail of the main inscription on Tiger's collar, showing Dick's marks.



Plate 4. The engraving of Tiger on the collar.



Plate 5. And the detail of his achievement.



Plate 6. The padlock, its keyhole is a dummy and it has a secret system of opening by catches.

It was a sport that kept a particularly low profile in Sydney for, as in England, the rat pits were generally situated in public houses or taverns – locations which gave proprietors an easy and popular method of entertaining patrons and attracting custom. Michael Farrell was first granted a publican's licence for a pub called *The Whale Fishery* in Cambridge Street on August 5, 1831. He later transferred to the *Welsh Harp* in George Street. He did not, however, become the licensee of the *Welsh Harp* until July 21, 1835.

So, when his dog *Tiger* won the *Welsh Harp's* competition in 1834, Farrell was there as a competitor and not as the licensee staging the event. It is possible to surmise, therefore, that the centre of rat pit entertainment in Sydney was the *Welsh Harp* on the south eastern corner of George and King Streets and that Farrell acquired the *Welsh Harp* in 1835 as a result of a positive interest backed by a winning streak. Farrell remained the licensee of the *Welsh Harp* until going bankrupt in 1844, a rare feat for a publican in Sydney. He died in 1878 aged 86.

The dogs used were presumably a strain of the famous black and tans, the black and tan being a rattling terrier specifically developed in the Manchester area, England, by 1820. The breed excelled at this sport and some dogs were reputed to have killed up to 100 rats in three-and-a-half minutes. The black and tan was later crossed with the whippet to produce the modern Manchester terrier and with the bulldog to produce the bull terrier.

Assuming the detail on the collar is accurate, *Tiger* appears to be long haired rather than smooth coated and could well be a cross between a Manchester black and tan and an Australian terrier.

The engraving shows a view of a Victorian dog pit in London apparently peopled by 'young bloods' backing *Tiny the Wonder*, the property of James Shaw of the *Blue Anchor*, Bundhill Road, St Lukes. The dog had won at least 50 events including 17 matches of six rats, 20 matches of 12 rats, 15 matches of 20 rats, one match of 50 rats, one match of 100 rats and the unprecedented task in 5 minutes and 50 seconds, of 200 rats, at the *Blue Anchor* on Tuesday, March 3, 1847. *Tiny the Wonder* is obviously a black and tan with the cropped ears. Rattling terriers had their ears



cropped so as to prevent the rats getting a grip of the dog during combat, a practice finally outlawed by the RSPCA.

To return to *Tiger* and his dog collar. The killing of 20 rats in two minutes two seconds seems a better than average time by international standards of the period and would make him a dog of considerable value and fully entitled to wear his silver collar with its original brass padlock. This padlock has a secret system of opening by catches, the keyhole being a dummy.

It is a great shame that no contemporary descriptions of the goings on at the *Welsh Harp* can be traced through the literature of the period but the survival of this silver collar, an interesting and unique piece of colonial silver, is a reflection on a sport of the times which has faded entirely into obscurity.

Bibliography

Australian Silver 1880-1900 by J. B. Hawkins, see Alexander Dick, biography, p.20 and marks, p.130.

Descent published by the Australian Society of Genealogists, Vol. 6 Part 4, Alexander Dick, Silversmith by Kevin Fahy, p.49-56.

'*What Dog is That*' by J. & B. Prosser, *The Manchester Terrier*, p.178.

Plate 7. A typical Victorian engraving of an English dog pit in London showing: 'Tiny the Wonder, the property of James Shaw, the Blue Anchor, Bunhill Road, St Lukes, London, 1847, killing 100 rats.'