



## NATIONAL TREASURE

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Maria Slough interviews the Downton Abbey star with a paw print on his soul and a bear claw in his heart



Image: Maria Slough

**B**AFTA award-winning actor Peter Egan is one of the UK's most revered performers after starring in classic series like *Downton Abbey* (playing Shrimpie) and the iconic *Ever Decreasing Circles*. Tall and handsome, with a face full of kindness and a voice like velvet, we start the interview surrounded by his five rescue dogs. Pippa, a Staffordshire bull terrier, sits across from us at the table while Meghan, rescued from a puppy farm by charity All Dogs Matter, settles next to me on the bench.

In January of this year Peter, 69, decided to go vegan. "I was invited by Kate Fowler [a vegan campaigner and lobbyist] to try Veganuary," he says. "I had given everything else up except chocolate and cheese. Well I say given up but that sounds like I had been torturing myself when in fact I have actually moved on to things that I like better. I don't feel a sense of giving something up. I feel a great sense of discovery. I find the vegan way of life quite wonderful and it suits me very much. I became a vegetarian six years ago after watching the film *Earthlings* which I found both staggering and upsetting. My one regret was that I didn't do it all sooner. All of this is relatively new in my life and is very much related to my deeper association with how animals are treated on this planet."

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But the treatment of farmed animals is shrouded in mystery, with lack of transparency from the meat and dairy industries. Peter has some strong ideas about how this journey from farm to table should be displayed to the consumer. "In supermarkets there is very little relation to the reality of how your food gets to your plate. I think there should be CCTV in slaughterhouses but I also think there should be CCTV from the slaughterhouse, shown in supermarkets behind the meat counters or butcher's rack. If they think it is fine to show the carcass then they should show how it got there. I would go that far with it.

"Awareness is everything. I, like the majority of the world, was taken in by the fact that food arrives on our plate in a humane way. I spent the greater part of my life not even associating meat with an animal. I used to look at a plate of meat and think of it as a gourmet delight. That is part of our problem. Food has become an entertainment. Now I am the total reverse. I see an animal so I cannot dissociate a steak from a magnificent cow, or a chicken leg from a beautiful chicken. I see a piece of an animal on the plate. To me it would be like seeing part of a human being on a plate."

Peter grew up in north London in an overcrowded house full of aunts, uncles, cousins, grandparents and two dogs. "As kids we had a chocolate brown Labrador and a black and white collie called Bobby. We were an all-Irish family with my mother being the only English person in the household apart from us kids who were born in England and therefore known as plastic paddies! The dogs must have been in my life from when I was below the age of seven but they were just part of the great melting pot that was our family. From when I was nine, up until I was 40, animals were not specifically a part of my life."

Despite this, his journey to veganism started some 45 years ago when Peter, who was in his mid-twenties, had his first vegetarian meal in a restaurant in Hampstead. He liked it so much he returned weekly. Then 20 years ago, his wife Myra and he started rescuing dogs, which

helped him develop a deeper understanding of animal sentience. So why didn't he become vegan at this point?

"I suffered from selective compassion," he explains. "I wasn't connecting the relationships I was forming with dogs with other animals. I made a judgement that I was superior to animals and had superior feeling to them. They have different abilities yes, but they have the same heart and feelings that we have, just a different language or way of expressing themselves. Without hesitation I believe that any animal has as much right to its own life, as we as humans do to ours. We all have one life and we must respect that."

Peter continues to work closely with dogs, and is chairman and trustee of All Dogs Matter (ADM), a rescuing and rehoming charity. The group has played a key role in Peter's journey into the world of animal activism, as the first charity he attached himself to 10 years ago. "I met them when they were just starting, in their first year. One of the things that I am very proud of is that we all worked together to make the construction of the team work so effectively to this day. I am hands on but it is very well run by Ira Moss and her team."

That process introduced Peter to the cruelty in the dog world. "I figured if I was going to be a responsible trustee to a dog charity that I needed to be hands on and research the responsibilities of local councils and the ticking clock syndrome that exists in a dog's life when it is abandoned. I went and held dogs in my arms when they were being put to sleep and it totally destroyed me. It is part of the reason why I am so devoted to Staffies as the amount that I held while they were put to sleep was astounding and heart-breaking. They are the most gentle of dogs.

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"That started me being anti-BSL [breed-specific legislation] but also onto raising awareness of the problem of breeding of animals in this country and the rest of the world. Our animal welfare legislation in this country is appalling. The people who give licenses to puppy farms are also the people who give licenses to betting shops and public houses so there is no real expertise or care involved. ADM has become so much a part of my life it is like it has always been there."

He also has a place in his heart for bears, which he learnt more about after being introduced to Animals Asia, an organisation working to end the bear bile trade and other abusive animal practices.

"I was totally gobsmacked," he says. "Keeping bears in cages for nearly 30 years just to extract their bile? My jaw nearly fell off. In 2013 I went to their sanctuary in Chengdu and I was completely overwhelmed. It just hit my heart being amongst those broken bears all trying to heal. It is life altering when you really get in contact with extreme controlled cruelty, completely man driven. I do think that alongside the dog meat trade, bile farming is the most disgusting plague on this planet. I have a fascination and a love for the bears and a deep pain in my heart for what they have been forced to endure. There is a claw in my heart and it is a bear claw."

It is difficult to imagine a time when Peter wasn't standing up for the rights of animals such is his devotion to them. Has there been one animal who has left a paw print on his soul? His eyes fill with tears and >



Image: The Pavtrails Exhibition™

his voice breaks as he starts to talk about DJ, the dog he calls 'the gatekeeper' who died last year (pictured above). I ask him if he wants to take a break.

"No it's okay," he pauses. "It is ridiculous that just the mention of his name" the rest of the sentence lingers in the air, unspoken.

"Yes DJ was my gatekeeper from when I met him 16 years ago. We had had animals in our lives for many years and I adored them all. Yet DJ was the dog that I found under a bucket in a cattery and when I went to investigate the moving bucket a black and white bundle came out attached to my beard. I said to Myra, 'this dog has chosen me' and I think that maybe there was a residual link to Bobby. He was a black collie cross spaniel with a white bib. That is why we named him DJ [short for dinner jacket].

"When I looked at him, without any effort on his part just by being what he was, he made me see all animals. He was the first animal who used to put his head to one side and look at me when I was talking to him, and I thought, he is really listening to what I am saying. He was a special dog with an extraordinary personality and a wonderful spirit who could always tell how I was feeling. He was the first dog that would come up to me and put his paw on me if I was feeling stressed or fed up. He was just a magical boy. He was my gatekeeper."

As our chat draws to an end I ask Peter for his last thoughts on how we tackle the issue of animal cruelty worldwide?

"Our attitude is still set in the mid-Victorian period where people accepted it was right to see an animal killed by various royal establishments or take a beautiful animal and incarcerate it in a zoo, all so the public can see it," he says. "Now we are in an entirely different world of hidden cameras with greater access to view animals in the wild. All you will see in a zoo is a distressed animal displaying fairly stereotypic behaviour. Everything about our relationship with animals in the world is outdated. We have to do away with all zoos, do away with the sense that we as humans have the right to possess an animal and touch it and put it in a cage in our home because it entertains us and makes us feel good. It doesn't make the animal feel good. I am going to start giving some talks in schools about how I feel about this. There will be a change and it will come from the children of now. Education is key. None of the things that I am talking about are going to be compacted in my lifetime but we all have to fundamentally change our relationship with animals in order for there to be a peaceful and productive planet to live on."

*Peter Egan is Ambassador of CFAF, UK Ambassador of Animals Asia and Patron of APGAW.*