

Seeing **AHEAD**

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To anyone who owns a Beardie, it is no surprise that there seems to be a tendency to wax eloquent, searching for the proper words to describe the Beardie's unique expression:

Alfred Ollivant's:

. . . Noble breadth of brow. . . ; last and most unflinching test of all should you look into two snow-clad eyes, calm, wistful, inscrutable, their soft depths clothed on with eternal sadness — yearning, as is said, for the soul that is not theirs . . .

Owd Bob, 1898

Mrs. Willison's:

One early writer describes the Bearded Collies' head as similar to that of a Dandie Dinmont. Reluctantly I disagree. Since with a dog expression is everything, surely the closest affinity is with the Scottish Deerhound?

Both have that dreamy, wishful, far-away gaze. A gentleness. And yet a nobility which lifts them out of the rut they might otherwise fall into as mere shaggy dogs.

The Bearded Collie, 1971

And yet, what about the underpinnings, without which the "nobility" would not be possible? As far as the head itself goes, the standard states:

Head: The head is in proportion to the size of the dog. The skull is broad and flat; the stop is moderate; the cheeks are well filled beneath the eyes; the muzzle is strong and full; the foreface is equal in length to the distance between the stop and occiput. The nose is large and squarish. A snipey muzzle is to be penalized.

I was once told by a judge that my dog was too thin: "Why, I can feel every bone in his head!" Whether she had been reared with the dreaded — now hopefully extinct — Fat-Headed Beardies of Upper Volta is uncertain, but what is clear is that she didn't know much about Beardie heads. You should feel the bones in a Beardie head, including the rather prominent occiput. A flesh of a good Beardie head will simply

Follow the contours of the broad, flat skull underneath. Bear in mind that I am talking about *adult* heads throughout this article. Beardie heads can and do change quite a bit throughout their various development stages. In most cases, heads are "finished" by age two years or so; however, some of the later maturing "lines" may still be evolving up until almost four years.

The Beardie's head should be examined from two views: (1) full front looking down on the head from above, and (2) full profile. A complete assessment also requires a longer view from the side to note the proportion of head to body. Viewed from above, the backskull is slightly longer from stop to occiput than it is wide between the ears. It is also slightly wider at the back than at the front. The backskull should be flat, with no hint of a dome; it should *not* feel

like an over-turned rowboat, with a ridge down the middle (except possibly in the younger pups, where it may indicate additional development coming). Generally speaking, the backskull should readily fill an average-sized hand, keeping in mind the overall size of the dog. The sides of the backskull should be flat and blend smoothly into the foreface, so that with your hands on either side of the head, you should feel a smooth, wedgelike transition.

The foreface should be strong and full, and its length, from stop to tip of nose, should be approximately equal to that of the backskull. While some prefer (and we certainly see in the ring) a somewhat shorter foreface, since it gives a fuller or cheekier *appearance*, my feeling is that with the proper strength and width of muzzle, the desired fullness is actually achieved automatically, and the shorter muzzle gives the dog a less characteristic expression — more of a "cute, fuzzy-face."

Viewed from the side, the "stop" is that line from the top of the skull to the muzzle. This line should be slight and at a small angle, but well-defined. Too little stop or angle gives the Beardie a Deerhound- or Collie-like profile; too much stop or angle gives the Dandie Dinmont look. An incorrect stop may be *visually* camouflaged by teasing the head hair — and often is. For this reason, a hands-on exam is truly necessary.

In addition, too short a muzzle and/or insufficient stop and backskull often combine to force the eyes more forward and rounder in shape. Again, this gives an uncharacteristic expression, although it can seem charming in puppies.

The planes of the head should be approximately parallel; you will find that, in fact, the foreface slopes *slightly* down from the line of the backskull.

Beardie muzzle should be deep and rather square, ending in the large, squarish nose, and not slant back too suddenly from under the nose to the lower jaw. Again, the overall side view is that of the blunt wedge. If the dog is "snipey," it means that there is not enough depth to either or both jaws. It can also mean that the front arch of both upper and lower jaws is too narrow, which causes the correspondingly too narrow or pointy muzzle. One cannot find good deep root systems and properly place teeth in such jaws. (The standard states only: "full dentition is desirable." It also calls for a scissors bite.) The pinched or pointy-nosed look or a sloping shark-like profile should be penalized. More and more Beardies are coming up with missing teeth, particularly premolars. While it is hard to fault this in the showing on the basis of the standard's weak statement, attention must be paid to this problem in the whelping box.

Overall proportions of head to body should be considered from some distance back. What we are striving for is some sort of balance, whereby the head and body look as if they are part of an entire unit and not as if they are spare parts which

could belong to two different animals. Visually, just as with actors onstage, the eye is more please by a Beardie with a slightly too large head than by one whose head is too small.

Eyes: The eyes are large, expressive, soft and affectionate, but not round nor protruding, and are set widely apart. The eyebrows are arched to the sides to frame the eyes and are long enough to blend smoothly into the coat on the sides of the head.

Size, shape, placement, and colour of the eyes have a lot to do with expression. Beardie eyes are large and oval, *not* round, and set wide apart and slightly obliquely at the front of the head (though not as far forward as in the Dandie Dinmont). There is quite a range of acceptable eye colour for each of the four allowable coat colours, though in every case the eye should tone with the coat: in black dogs, ranging from medium to darkest brown; in browns, blues, and fawns, the colour of the iris blends with the lighter coat colour. "Bird of prey" eyes (yellow) should always be avoided, even in the fawns, where a dusty gold or amber colour is the lightest truly acceptable colour. *Generally* speaking, the darker the dog, the darker the eye should be, but the lighter eyes should never be penalized in the lighter-coloured dogs. In any case, a hard, hostile, or frightened expression, whether caused by the lack of colour coordination or by anything else is undesirable, since the Beardie cannot have the requisite "bright, inquiring" expression if he is exhibiting signs of deep-rooted fear or – Heaven forbid – viciousness. Puppy fright due to inexperience or unfamiliarity is different entirely, and the age and experience of the dog must be taken into consideration.

One interesting difference between the British and Canadian standards and the American standard is in regards to the "eyebrows." Unlike our, the other two standards specify eyebrows "arched up and forward but no so long as to obscure the eyes." This certainly changes the overall expression of the dog – in part because this type of headhair has the effect of giving the dog the appearance of having more stop, or at least serves to camouflage an insufficient one. Most probably this change in wording came as a result of reflecting the evolution in coat length and texture we've seen in the modern Beardie; the longer, more glamorous show coats have tended to be softer and simply do not break off so easily.

An entire article could be devoted to how different colours and markings on the face and head, especially around the eyes, can also greatly affect expression. For instance, very dark eyes, surrounded completely by white hair can give the dog a very harsh or staring look. The same dark eyes surrounded by very dark hair may be so "hidden" as to appear too small or dull. Markings on the foreface can influence the way we perceive its length and width – dark hair tends to make the muzzle look smaller and/or narrower, white hair tends to do the opposite. Uneven or asymmetrical markings may also affect the dog's expression, but space prohibits further discussion of these and other such important considerations at this time.

Ears: The ears are medium sized, hanging and covered with long hair. They are set level with the eyes. When the dog is alert, the ears have a slight lift at the base.

Beardie ears are set just below the top of the skull (even when the ears are lifted, they should not come above the top of the skull). Too low a set gives the dog a spanielish or setterish look; too high, a terrier-like look. There are two basic ear styles: those folded only across the flap where it joins the head, and those which fold similarly to the Wolfhound, longitudinally down the flap. This second type usually has considerably more mobility – the Beardie can lay the ear back against the head and expose the entire ear orifice. This more workmanlike ear tends to be smaller. Occasionally you will find a Beardie with one of each type. Ear size in general varies quite a bit, although when the adult coat comes in, the size of the flap (leather) itself cannot readily be discerning under the long hair without actually feeling. Generally speaking, the tip of the ear flap should be long enough to reach around to the eye. However, I have never penalized a dog for having too large or too small an ear, as long as the set is correct, since the carriage of the ears contributes greatly to the dog's expression.

It is, then, the combination of head and muzzle, size, shape, colour, and placement of the eye; markings and colour; correct position and carriage of the ear; along with, of course, the dog's personality and attitude, that all go together to help make up the unique Beardie expression we started talking about.

In her foreword to *The Beardie Collie*, Mrs. Willison concludes:

Finally a confession. A luxury no judge should permit himself. Before making it I insist that the writer has yet to be born who can create a perfect work picture of a dog.

Equally no artist exists imaginative enough to paint a dog accurately, straight from the official standards. How long is a neck of "fair length," a "fairly long" back, or a moderately long" tail.

Let us then admit that breed standards are not "blueprints." Rather they are guides to be interpreted within a broad framework.

When judging, even within this framework, one often sees a proportion of every class of Bearded Collies carrying some indefinable suggestion of Bobtails or Old English Sheepdog.

The traces are elusive. Hard to put a finger on. Even harder to put a work to. But they can be seen by a perceptive and unbiased viewer.

I usually put this type on the right hand side of my final line-up. And I make my awards from the left!

This may well be one of the most important passages I've come across in Beardie literature, underscoring as it does, *two* vital points: (1) breed standards in general are of necessity open to subjective interpretation, and (2) there are essential particular differences which, while absolutely defining a breed, can elude the most well-meaning observer, but especially are unfathomable to the novice or uneducated eye.

Much has been already written about the definition of "type"; I haven't attempted to add much more at this time. Rather, I chose this quotation to close this discussion on heads, since in my estimation, Beardie heads in general and, even more particularly, resultant Beardie expression are of inestimable importance in defining the character and essence of the breed.