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## Farewell to Polly (1994–2014)

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by Bruce Gillespie (with Elaine Cochrane as major contributor)

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Polly the commander of Keele Street, Collingwood, 1998. (Photo: Elaine Cochrane)



Baby photos! Polly soon after she first arrived at Keele Street, 1995, with Bruce (l.) and Elaine (r.).



Polly (facing window and cat enclosure) and Sophie, late 2004, soon after we moved to Greensborough. (Photo: Dick Jensen.)



Polly at Collingwood: killing her feather (mid 1990s) and posing for the camera (1998). (Photos: Elaine Cochrane.)

My diary does not record the day in January 1995 when John from the car workshop around the corner rang the front door bell at our place at Keele Street, Collingwood. He said that four kittens had been dumped in the vacant block at the rear of our house. Elaine went round to claim them. I had been snoozing on the settee in the living room and awoke to find four very small kittens striding across the floor towards me. Was I their mummy, and would I feed them? Two black, one white with grey patches, one grey, all very purposeful, but the runt of the litter walked oddly. She kept rocking her head from side to side to make sure she was going in the right direction.

Elaine put the kittens into a cat box and took them straight up to our friendly local vet's. Over the next two weeks, he checked them over and vaccinated them. He estimated that they were about five weeks old, and therefore were born in early December. One of Elaine's areas of expertise over the years has been finding homes for stray kittens. Judy and Alan Wilson took two, and LynC and Clive Newell took another one. We could not give the fourth kitten to anyone else, since she was blind in one eye and deaf in one ear.

We were faced with two problems. Would the runty little grey kitten be healthy? And would Sophie, our jealous black cat, try to kill it? Elaine's solution was to hire a large wire cage and place it in the middle of the kitchen floor. On 6 February 1995, Polly came back from the vet's to our place, and she lived in the cage for the next week or so. We called her Polly as short for Polyphemus, the Cyclops in the *Odyssey*. Little did we realise that we might just as well have named her after Napoleon, master of the world.

Never before or since have we seen a cat performance like Polly's. She spent several days in the cage, and sniffed noses with the other cats. Sophie did not seem too upset, but that could have been camouflage for her true intentions.

When we let Polly out of the cage, she deliberately set out to make friends with each of the other cats. She snuggled up to ancient, arthriticky TC, who was top cat. They seemed to fall in love with each other immediately, and Polly was the only cat that TC would allow to share his electric cat mat. Polly did not need to make friends with Oscar. Oscar loved kittens, any kittens. He had welcomed Theodore when, as a kitten, he had marched up the passage from the front door and moved in. Polly never really made friends with Theodore, but Theodore was too nice to stay grumpy at Polly. The challenge remained: how could Polly make friends with Sophie?

Polly was playing with a rolled-up piece of paper. Polly rolled the ball of paper towards Sophie. Sophie took it, and ripped it to shreds. She then pushed it back to Polly, who ripped up what little was still unshredded. Polly and Sophie were sort of friends from then on.

Having established her place in the household, Polly set out to conquer it. She zoomed around, as kittens do, and climbed trees and the piece of tapa cloth that Elaine had hung in the hall. She did not roam too far from the back yard, but she defended it several times from intruder cats. She loved to help with the gardening, and would often be on mouse watch at the compost bins. One day she gave Elaine a mouse — carefully and deliberately placing the half-dead creature on her foot, then dancing backwards with every expression of delight as she waited for a show of gratitude, and following and watching closely as Elaine returned it to the compost bin.

When TC died in 1996 Polly was distraught, so the vet (John Sandford, who is still working in Collingwood) gave us a large, young, grey desexed female cat he had been caring for at his surgery. We brought her home, called her Violet, and expected no problems. We certainly did not expect



Polly and her faithful servant Bruce, Keele Street, Collingwood, early 2000s. (Photo: Elaine Cochrane.)

that Polly would hate her immediately and totally, and would deploy every possible technique to try to drive her away! She was so implacable that we had to keep them separate — on one occasion when we failed to close the door between their parts of the house Polly went on the attack, and Violet needed eight stitches to close the rip along her tail. Poor Violet's life was pretty miserable until we moved to Greensborough, where the layout of the house and the two-part enclosure meant we could offer her more comfort and security, safe from further attacks.

Surprisingly, given such fierceness, there was very little friction when Flicker and Harry moved in with us in 2003.

Polly and Sophie got along fairly well, but when Sophie died in 2006, Polly's Napoleonic side could be seen more clearly. She was now the top cat, by reason of seniority. However, Flicker thought that he was top cat, by reason of being bigger, blacker, and (ex)male. This relatively friendly rivalry did not cease until Polly died.

Soon after Sophie died we acquired a sweet fluffy black kitten we called Archie (and Violet dropped dead suddenly the next day). The two lads, Flicker and Harry, liked Archie immediately, and they formed a gang of three. (We also acquired Sampson soon after, but that's another story.) Polly pretended indifference, but when Archie died of kidney failure in 2012 she was very upset.

Polly was always (except where Violet or intruder cats were concerned) a cheerful, alert, little busybody, and very affectionate. As she grew older, she seemed to grow chirpier and chirpier, until eventually she was diagnosed with hyper-

thyroidism. She remained just as chirpy on treatment, but slowed down very slightly as befitted her age. She also began to show signs of arthritis. Then, about the time Archie died, she became picky about her food, then stopped eating altogether and became very thin. Blood tests identified the problem as pancreatitis. She did well on her special low-fat diet for a while, but began to throw up regularly early this year. Casey Wolf from Canada, who had befriended Polly when they met 2013, suggested a particular medication that might help. Our Greensborough vet agreed to try it, and it did indeed help for a little while. Our sweet Polly was clearly slowly fading, but she remained her cheerful self, alert and inquisitive. When she started having trouble keeping solid food down, the vet also suggested a special diet that

Elaine had to prepare. She had to boil up a chicken breast with rice, add a bit of pumpkin for roughage, puree the lot with a stick blender, then feed the cooled mixture to Polly. She really enjoyed this and even put back a bit of the weight she had lost. The trouble is that every other cat demanded his share, so Elaine found herself having to prepare two lots of the mixture per day.

Polly by this stage had long since lost her hearing, which meant she would bellow to us for attention ('Sit down and be sat on!' 'Feed me!'). As her arthritis became worse she moved little. Some days she stayed almost still in one corner, except to climb on Elaine's lap when it was offered. Other days she roamed a bit, seeking sunshine, or even went outside in the enclosure. A few times she would skip onto the kitchen bench, then her bad leg would wobble and she would fall to the floor. We should have known that she was suffering, but we were not ready to admit this while she was alert, eating and purring.

We had hoped that Polly would reach her twentieth birthday, which we had told ourselves would have been 1 December 2014 — today, as I write. However, by the morning of Friday, 31 October, she could hardly move any more without toppling over, and all that was keeping her going was her various painkillers. We took her over to the Greensborough Veterinary Hospital. Dr Simon Choi, who had taken on Polly almost as a personal project, gently put her to sleep for the last time.

Polly's great long life was over. In human terms, she had reached 100.

— **Bruce Gillespie and Elaine Cochrane,**  
**1 December 2014**