

By Elizabeth Archer

BEN the lurcher watches hopefully as people walk through the door of his RSPCA rescue centre. But while many of his orphaned canine pals have gone with smiling owners to happy new homes, he has been left on the shelf.

As a brindle dog – his fur is light with dark flecks – he is much less likely to be adopted because he isn't as photogenic as other dogs.

Ben has been waiting for a new home since March 2018, but is yet to find the loving owners he so desperately deserves.

"It's heartbreaking," says Mel Kermode, manager at The William & Patricia Venton Animal Centre in St Columb, Cornwall.

"He's adorable and gentle, and is longing for a warm, loving home with owners who can show him how a dog should live."

Sadly, Ben is not alone.

Alarming research from the Kennel Club shows dogs owners now spend longer on average photographing their dogs than taking them out for walks.

The organisation has warned of a generation of owners "obsessed with social media and aesthetics over keeping their dogs happy and healthy".

And animal rescue centres report a trend for less fashionable dogs – like brindles – being rejected in favour of breeds that are popular on social media.

"Sadly many people choose a puppy based on how cute it looks or because it's got a fashionable name," says an RSPCA spokesperson.

"It's believed that social media and popular culture in general is playing a part in driving the popularity of fashionable breeds and crossbreeds – for example, flat-faced dog breeds are commonly used in advertising which may make them more desirable.

"This contributes to driving a huge demand, promotes breeding for looks and profit and also fuels the rise in illegal importation of puppies from abroad to meet the demand."

FOR Ben, whose first owner was imprisoned for mistreatment of animals, this could mean spending the rest of his life in a rescue centre watching his more photogenic four-legged friends be snapped up by new owners.

What's more, the obsession with picture perfect dogs means traditional British breeds such as English pointers, West Highland terriers and cavalier King Charles spaniels are at risk of dying out, according to the Kennel Club.

Instead, people are opting to buy fashion-

What colour is that puppy in the window?

Charities warn of a glut of 'unfashionable' dogs deemed not photogenic enough for social media

LONG WAIT: Ben the lurcher sees his doggy pals come and go

BORDER TERRIERS: Bert and Ernie with David

SPROODLE: Norman with Gemma

DACHSHUND: Phoebe with Michelle

ionable cross-breeds such as labradoodles, or toy dogs such as dachshunds, pomeranians and chow chows, which are popular on social media and among celebrity owners, such as soap actress Gemma Atkinson, Our Girl star Michelle Keegan and author David Walliams.

"While we're lucky to have such diversity among our canine companions, it is worrying that old favourites like the Pointer and Parson Russell Terrier are dropping in numbers to historical lows," says Bill Lambert, of the Kennel Club.

Anna Webb, a canine nutrition and

behaviour expert and co-presenter of The Barking Hour on BBC Radio London, is also concerned.

"We seem to be more obsessed with dogs than ever but they've come to be seen as a commodity – something to buy and sell – rather than the sentient beings they are," she says.

She believes owners need to do more thorough research, especially before investing in fashionable dogs, like poodle-cross dogs like labradoodles. "They're often bought because they look like little teddy bears, but they don't behave like little teddy bears – both labradors and poodles have very strong personalities."

Over the past decade, Anna has seen the world of dog ownership totally transform.

Whereas dog owners used to be those who were nearing retire-

ment, now younger people are in the majority of those choosing to get pets. In fact, 53 per cent of 25 to 34-year-olds now claim to own a dog, according to a survey by Mintel.

"On the one hand it's fantastic but they're more likely to work in offices which means their dogs most likely spend their days in a creche," says Anna.

At the same time, the pressure to get likes on social media means owners spend more time than ever photographing their dogs.

"We're all terribly pressured by social media but I feel it's a bit sad that people are using their dogs to become influencers," she says. "They've become a commodity and it's not fair." What's more, the

TIPS FOR CHOOSING RIGHT DOG FOR YOU

- Talk to people in the park about what kind of dog they have, and whether they like that breed. Everyone loves to talk about their dog.

- Go to your local rescue centre and talk to the staff about your circumstances. Look at the array of dogs in the centre and see if one catches your eye.

- If you're a first-time dog owner, why not volunteer to walk some of the dogs in the rescue centre to see how it feels to have a dog.

- Be realistic about your lifestyle: are you good at getting up in the mornings? Have you got a garden for the dog to run around in? Are you away often, either overnight or at weekends?

- The Kennel Club website has some great advice on which dogs are suitable to country and city living. Check which breeds of dog will best suit your lifestyle.

ANNA WEBB

popularity of certain breeds is feeding the demand for so-called puppy farms. So much so, that the Government has brought in new measures. From April 2020, third party sales of dogs will become illegal under legislation known as Lucy's Law, named after a Cavalier King Charles Spaniel who died in 2016 after being poorly treated on a puppy farm.

"Often with pedigree dogs, there is a long waiting list, so if you get cold feet there is plenty of time to change your mind," says Anna. "But if you're buying with the click of a mouse, there isn't time for second thoughts."

PUPPIES sold on the internet may have been bred in terrible conditions.

"Sadly, they're often very sickly and many of them die, causing heartbreak for their owners as well as suffering to the puppies – all to earn unscrupulous people money," says Anna.

"You buy a Hoover online. You don't buy a dog online."

Meanwhile, rescue centres are overrun with "unfashionable" breeds, such as Staffies.

"We would urge people to see past their looks," says an RSPCA spokesperson. "Every dog is an individual and they come in all shapes, sizes and characters. Our rescue dogs can make great family pets and we think their distinctive markings are just as special as any other colour.

Meanwhile, Ben the lurcher continues to wait to be adopted by a loving owner. "We know the perfect owner is out there for Ben, and would urge people to get in touch to give him the chance he deserves," adds Mel Kermode.

- For more information about Ben, contact the William & Patricia Venton Animal Centre on 01637 881455.



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