

As the Mail sees evidence of 20 Irish greyhou

ONCE a highly-prized greyhound, during his racing career, Ardfert Thunder was the toast of Shelbourne Park, earning his owners a princely €24,500 at the track.

In March 2014, he stormed home at the racecourse into the semi-final stages of the €25,000 Easter Cup. He won three out of his next six races, before sliding down the rankings, and ran his last race here on August 16, 2014.

After spending his life giving his all, we'd like to think the least champion dogs like Ardfert Thunder deserve to live out their final years in a loving, comfortable home. But the fact is that Ardfert Thunder is thousands of miles away from home.

Right now, he is at stud in mainland China. In a photograph advertising greyhound studs for hire on a Chinese forum, he is proudly paraded



by **Michelle Fleming**

by his new owner, complete with his Irish racing history and pedigree bloodline.

He's not the only one. The Irish Daily Mail has seen evidence of 20 prize-winning Irish greyhounds being shown off and advertised for rent in China. Irish greyhounds' highly-prized bloodlines are revered as the best in the world and highly sought after by a new wave of Chinese greyhound breeders and owners.

There's nothing illegal about the export of greyhounds. But Ardfert Thunder is registered with the Irish Coursing Club (ICC) as being owned by the late Noel Clifford, from Tralee, who died in 2015. The ICC's register, using the

Irish Greyhound Board's (IGB) website is designed to ensure traceability of greyhounds from cradle to grave, in accordance with the Welfare of Greyhounds Act 2011. However, many greyhounds on Chinese forums are still shown as registered to Irish owners.

The Greyhound Rescue Association of Ireland (GRAI) claims an alarming number of Irish greyhounds are being exported to countries around the world with dubious animal welfare records, such as China, Pakistan and Spain, for breeding, hunting and illegal or unregulated racing.

'Exporting greyhounds only adds to existing local issues with dog welfare and dog populations in countries which have little or no welfare legislation in place to give protection to these greyhounds,' says spokesman Richard King.

Ireland is in the grip of a greyhound crisis. For years, greyhound charities and animal campaigners have been calling for breeding to be halted and traceability laws to be enforced so they can stem the tide of retiring greyhounds with no homes to go to.

If greyhound owners approach rehoming charities hoping to find a place for a retiring greyhound, they face waiting months for one to become available.

Victoria Lyon of Erin Hounds Sight-hound Rescue and the Galway SPCA, says: 'It's so overwhelming for all of us. We're battling.'

'Give me any number of greyhounds and we're turning the same number away. We are all swamped with greyhounds and then another crisis comes along.'

This week Dogs Trust also expressed concern about the number of these dogs being abandoned. In a statement they said: 'Of the 284 greyhounds entering the pound system in 2016, 234 were surrendered by their owners and 46 were taken in as strays. Of the 284, a total of 152 were destroyed. Dogs Trust once again calls on the owners and trainers of racing greyhounds to make adequate provision for their rehoming once their racing careers end.'

Owners of greyhounds approaching retirement age — some dogs are as young as three years old when their racing days are up — face the choice of spending money on feeding and homing the greyhound until a home is found or having it put down.

Greyhounds were excluded from the Dog Breeding Establishments Acts 2010, leaving them in something of a vacuum. But greyhound lovers hailed a sea change in 2011 with the enactment of the Greyhound Welfare Act. It set out codes of practice, welfare officers and rules on sale, transfer and owner registration require-

ments, as well as penalties for those who breach them.

Under this legislation — to be enforced by the Irish Greyhound Board (Bord na gCon) the semi-State body responsible for control and development of the industry — owners are required to notify the Irish Coursing Club of ownership changes. But charities say this is not being enforced sufficiently.

However, the IGB denies this is the case, saying: 'The IGB would reject this criticism. We fully enforce all greyhound welfare legislation.'

'All reported cases of cruelty/neglect are investigated by Welfare Officers of Bord na gCon and sanctions are imposed on those found to be in breach of the Welfare of Greyhounds Act.'

The Act promised a new dawn but six years on, are we now simply exporting our problem instead of solving it and using countries like China as a dumping ground for our unwanted greyhounds?

'The traceability and welfare of the

thousands of greyhounds bred in Ireland itself is a constant alarming issue but to then find Irish greyhounds exported to countries where there is just no chance of adoption is just painful beyond words,' says GRAI's Richard King.

'It's quite shameful that an industry funded by the taxpayer cannot put an immediate stop to all greyhound exports other than those up for adoption.'

Celebrities are joining the fight against greyhound exports too, as Fr Ted star Pauline McLynn was this week part of a protest outside the Department of Agriculture. Ricky Gervais also called on the Irish Government — via Niamh Walsh's article in this newspaper — to stop the sale of Irish greyhounds to China, after the discovery of 24 Irish dogs, crammed into tiny crates, in bad conditions, en route to China and

24 dogs were found crammed into tiny crates

destined to race at the notorious Macau racetrack.

The dogs — who were traced back to a breeder in Cork — were stopped at Heathrow and shipped back to Ireland after being in transit for three days. The Canindrome racing track in Macau — the only region in China where gambling is legal — has been accused for years of neglect and cruelty.

Since the 1960s, Australia was the main exporter of dogs to race there but the Australian Government banned the export of greyhounds to race there in 2013, due to its poor animal welfare record. Such was the public outrage in Australia, Qantas and Cathay Pacific airlines refused to transfer dogs there in 2015.

Greyhounds such as Ardfert Thunder won't race at Macau but in a country where gambling is illegal, what is he doing there? There certainly seems to be an insatiable appetite for the offspring of Irish greyhounds. According to the Department of Agriculture's regional offices, nine greyhounds were exported to China from Ireland in 2016 with no greyhounds 'exported directly' to China in 2017.

The vast majority of dogs are exported to the UK, it said, and added that it supported the IGB's position that it didn't endorse greyhounds being exported to destinations which did not conform to our animal welfare laws.

So, does the IGB support export to countries such as China or Pakistan? Barry Coleman, IGB's Welfare Manager, says: 'Concerns over exports relate to all dogs, not just greyhounds. Some of the practices involving dogs in other countries are absolutely appalling and horrific. The IGB is opposed to exports to countries that do not meet Ireland's welfare standards and we would welcome legislation in this area.'

When pushed, an IGB spokesman said: 'At this time we aren't naming any particular countries but there's a lot of coverage online that's appalling and we share those concerns.'

Welfare groups claim we need to curtail breeding. Figures gleaned from local authority dog pounds, the Irish Coursing Club Stud Book and the Irish Greyhound Board (IGB) reveal every year thousands of greyhounds simply 'disappear'.

According to the Irish Coursing Club's Irish Stud Book, between 2011 and 2016, there were 17,018 greyhound litters registered in Ireland. The Irish Coursing Club averages a litter at six pups, taking numbers to around 102,000 greyhounds.

Meanwhile, the names of 91,980 greyhounds were registered at racing

152 greyhounds were destroyed in pounds last year

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