THE RISE OF THE CHICKEN FANCY, FEATHERS & FORTUNE

THE SHORT INCOMPLETE STORY

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In the misty mornings of the early 1800s, when Britain was still largely a patchwork of agricultural communities, chickens were simply part of the landscape, unremarkable birds scratching about farmyards, valued only for the occasional egg and pot including their other feathered brethren like geese and ducks, when marriages had to celebrated or when times grew lean.

Yet within a few short decades, these humble creatures would transform from mere livestock into objects of passion, pride, and fierce yet friendly competition.

The tale begins in the grand estates of the 1600s, where the nobility first cast their discerning eyes upon ornamental fowl. The Dutch master Melchior d'Hondecoeter captured this aristocratic fascination in his sumptuous paintings, depicting exotic birds including chickens in palatial gardens.

ALL PAINTINGS ARE FROM MELCHIOR D'HONDECOETER AND CONTEMPORARY PAINTERS & FOLLOWERS

Amongst their exotic menageries and carefully manicured gardens, these aristocrats began collecting unusual chickens as curiosities: birds with peculiar plumage, sizes or shapes that spoke of distant lands and mysterious breeding.

For the common folk, however, chickens remained what they had always been: practical creatures with no pretensions to beauty, scratching around on the dung-hill.

Yet even before the industrial revolution's full force was felt, a remarkable transformation was quietly underway in the estates of England's landed gentry. In the late 1700s, gentlemen farmers had begun what we might recognise today as serious amateur breeding.

The Duke of Leeds, whose estate became synonymous with a magnificent breed of large fowl, was experimenting with creating birds that combined impressive size with delicate, white flesh. These "Shackbag" fowl, as they came to be known, could weigh up to ten pounds and commanded the princely sum of a guinea each, a fortune in those days.

Sir John Sebright, Member of Parliament for Hertfordshire, was the epitome of an aristocratic enthusiast of his own new bantam breed. From around 1800, he embarked on a twenty-year breeding programme to create the perfect bantam, selecting and crossing various breeds with the dedication of an artist perfecting a masterpiece. By 1810, he had established the first single-breed club in poultry history, The Sebright Bantam Club, demonstrating that organised fancy breeding was already flourishing before Victoria even took the throne.

Everything changed with the great industrial revolution that swept across Britain like a tide. As factory chimneys began to pierce the skyline and the thunder of steam machinery echoed through the valleys, people flooded from the countryside into the burgeoning cities.

Manchester, Birmingham, Liverpool, London, these urban centres swelled with workers who had left behind their rural ways but carried with them memories of the land.
By 1825, this transformation accelerated dramatically. Chickens were no longer merely kept for the odd egg and Sunday dinner. The growing urban populations demanded regular supplies of both eggs and meat, and enterprising breeders rose to meet this challenge. It was in the 1840s that this demand truly exploded, as the cities teemed with workers who needed feeding.

The old local chickens, birds that had pecked about specific regions in relative seclusion for generations, suddenly found themselves thrust into the spotlight. These ‘local chickens’, as they were called, became the foundation of what we now know as established breeds. Their names tell the story: many bear the names of the


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regions where they flourished or the ports from which they were shipped to eager markets across England.

Take the Dorking, for instance. This plump, five-toed breed emerged from a market town south of London where farmers from the surrounding Surrey countryside brought their finest fowl. These birds, specially fattened for the discerning palates of London's growing middle class, became synonymous with quality and abundance. The Dorking chicken was more than poultry, it was a brand, a promise of excellence that commanded premium prices in the capital's markets.

However, commerce alone does not explain the passion that began to grip the nation. As with any successful product, presentation mattered enormously. The 'outside', the feather colours, body shapes, and specific appearance of these birds, became as important as their practical qualities. Breeders discovered that a chicken's beauty could be just as valuable as its ability to lay eggs and/or provide meat.

This was the era of the dual-purpose breeds, chickens were bred for both beauty to advertise their outstanding qualities and utility, a stark contrast to today's egg-layers and meat birds, a division that wouldn't emerge until after the Second World War.

These Victorian chickens were expected to excel at everything: to lay regularly, to dress out well for the table, and to cut a handsome figure in the yard.

Competition inevitably followed. Breeders began advertising their stock as the 'Best Chickens,' and regional rivalries

flourished. Agricultural shows sprouted across the countryside, where farmers could display their finest specimens and compete for prizes, prestige, and profitable sales.

Not all chickens were destined for such practical purposes, however. The ornamental breeds, many imported from Asia, captured imaginations with their exotic appearances, long tails, short legs or 'fur' instead of feathers. The Silkie, with its peculiar fluffy plumage and black skin, fascinated Western fanciers despite their cultural aversion to its dark meat, which Asians prized for its supposed health benefits. Next to the commercial talent of the owners, also cultural preferences shaped which birds thrived and which remained curiosities.

The game breeds present a complex chapter in this story. Game fowl, bred for centuries for their fighting prowess, had provided entertainment and wagering opportunities until 1835, when England's new anti-cruelty laws banned cockfighting as a barbarous blood sport. Rather than disappearing, these special birds found new purpose as ornamental breeds, their martial heritage transformed into aesthetic appreciation.

This period also witnessed the tragic extinction of some of Britain's finest early breeds. The magnificent Shackbag fowl, once the pride of the Duke of Leeds and prized for their extraordinary size and delicate flavour, had vanished by 1830. Unscrupulous dealers,


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attempting to maintain the breed's reputation, had crossed Shackbag cocks with Malay hens, achieving the desired size but 'entirely ruining the colour and delicate flavour of the flesh,' as the poultry writer Bonington Moubray lamented.
Such losses served as sobering reminders of how quickly excellence could be lost without careful stewardship.

On the Continent, where illegal cockfighting persisted longer, Belgian, French, and Spanish game breeds continued their violent careers before eventually joining their English cousins in the show cage. Today, we hope these splendid birds serve only as living reminders of a more brutal past, their aggressive instincts channelled into competitive exhibitions rather than combat.

As the hobby matured, the need for standards became apparent. Chicken clubs were formed throughout Britain, its overseas territories and beyond, their committees carefully documenting the ideal characteristics of each breed in publications known as Poultry Standards. These volumes, covering not only chickens but turkeys, geese, ducks, and other domestic fowl, became the bibles of the fancy.

The process of recognition varied dramatically between nations. America, perhaps surprisingly, proved remarkably conservative, requiring years of documentation and multiple approvals before accepting new colours or breeds. Europe embraced innovation more readily, with streamlined processes allowing promising new varieties to gain acceptance within only a few seasons of careful showing and evaluation.

This system continues to this day, with technical

commissions examining new colours to determine their genetic feasibility, while judges assess their aesthetic merit. The standards are regularly reviewed and updated, although the chicken fancy remains a living, evolving passion, it is also a mere museum of Victorian preferences.

What began in the 1600s as aristocratic amusement had, by the late 1700s, evolved into serious amateur breeding among the landed gentry. The Duke of Leeds and Sir John Sebright were not merely collecting curiosities, they were pioneering selective breeding techniques that would inform Charles Darwin's theories on natural selection. Their work proved that the passion for breeding excellence could transcend mere utility, creating beauty and refinement for their own sake.

By the late 1800s, this movement had become thoroughly democratised. The industrial worker in Birmingham could compete on equal terms with the landed gentleman, their birds judged not on their owners' birth but on their own merits of production qualities, form, colour, and breeding.

In this transformation lies a peculiarly British story, one where practical necessity, aesthetic appreciation, cultural values, and competitive spirit combined to elevate the humble farmyard fowl into objects of genuine passion. The chicken fancy had been born, and with it, a tradition that continues to flourish at shows across Europe, the US and beyond, a testament to humanity's endless capacity to find beauty and meaning in the most unexpected places.

Yet this story is far from over. In the last decade, countries and regions without the historical breeding traditions described above have begun embracing ornamental poultry with remarkable enthusiasm. In Turkey and across the Arabic nations of the Middle East, in Eastern Europe and South America, a new generation of breeders has discovered the allure of beautiful chickens. These emerging fanciers often depend on European suppliers for fashionable breeds, frequently the largest and most impressive varieties that serve as extensions of both ego and aesthetic ambition.

The parallels with history are striking. Commercial considerations still precede pure aesthetics, just as they did during the "Hen Fever" that swept America and England in the Victorian era. Despite strict biosecurity measures, European breeding eggs are crossing continents from Turkey to anywhere in the world.

Poultry shows in these developing fancy regions sometimes feature European judges, flown in to educate local enthusiasts who aspire to become judges themselves. History, it seems, is repeating itself with remarkable fidelity. What we are witnessing today, this spread of enthusiasm for breeding ornamental chickens to Turkey, the Middle East, Eastern Europe, and South America, represents nothing less than a Second Hen Fever. As these regions establish their own fancy traditions, they too will likely rediscover and revalue their indigenous breeds, just as happened in Europe and America generations before.

Even in regions torn by conflict, where one might least expect such pursuits to flourish, the chicken fancy slowly takes root. Against all odds, in defiance of uncertainty and hardship, people still find time to breed for beauty, to gather and share their passion for these remarkable birds. It speaks to something fundamental in human nature, our irrepressible desire to create beauty, to improve upon what we find, and to find community through shared enthusiasm.

The chicken fancy, born in the estates of seventeenth-century aristocrats and democratised by Victorian industrial society,

continues its global march. Each new region adds its own cultural flavours, its own aesthetic preferences, its own breeds and traditions. The loose shards of this ancient passion scatter across continents, taking root wherever they land, ensuring that this most enduring of hobbies will continue to evolve and flourish for generations to come.

www.chickencolours.com is the result of the above story, writing and publishing books about chicken, their history, genetics, and the world of times gone by, when our modern day birds' ancestors roamed the fields.

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