

PIONEERS OF THE FANCY

MEET THE FANCY'S PIONEERS: MABEL ILLINGWORTH

Miss Illingworth created the Blue Imperial in 1896 and in 1908 brought the first Havanas into this country. She wrote these comments during a debate on colour published in the 1921 pages of Fur & Feather.

“Those we have now are not entitled to the name”

The present-day Havana is not an Havana at all, but a rabbit of a colour best described as “milk chocolate” or “cocoa made with milk”.

There is no harm in that present-day fanciers want a self chocolate variety – by all means let them make one and call it chocolate. Do not name it Havana but keep that for the real, original Havana.

To me it is an insult to our French friends to call the present-day, dull milk chocolate Havana; it is not, and can never be, for the original Havana was brown, a rich, bright brown.

I was the first English fancier to import the Havana into this country, and I bought my first pair from a French lady who claimed to have originated the breed.

Later, I heard of their appearance in Holland, but could never find out if they were recognised as a distinct variety there before the French lady brought hers out.

I got a lovely doe. They were then called HAVANE FRANCAIS, or Brown French, and in the standard were described as a “rich, bright brown”. There was no mention of the word “chocolate.”

When I began to breed and exhibit, I translated the French standard* as nearly as I could into English, and always sent a copy with every rabbit I sold. I found some trouble with the French name, and the Havane got converted into Havana, and I have since often wished I had kept to “French Browns”.

Let me here impress my readers again that there was no mention of the word “chocolate” in the French, and the word Havane (pronounced Havarn) meant to them a certain shade of brown, just as we English say “navy” when we mean a certain shade of blue – nothing could be easier, yet how many present-day Havana fanciers know the origin of the name of their favourites?

I have recently been asked if they were the colour and named after the Havana cigar. And who could wonder at the mistake? I did not laugh, I just explained, as I am doing now, and tried to help a novice.

I agree with my old friend Mr House [Editor – the then editor of Fur & Feather] he, having seen the French Browns abroad, and also my original imported specimens, is better qualified than anyone to judge a real Havana, for he knows what it should be.

In my opinion, fanciers instead of breeding to the original standard and keeping their best youngsters, bred some dull, milk chocolate ones, which they kept, and altered the standard to suit them.

I have been asked whether the feeding and housing have an effect on the quality of coat and, if so, in what way? Most undoubtedly yes. A well fed and contented rabbit always has a better coat than a poor one.

The food must be good, yet plain, not too fattening, and I found Havanas needed more fresh greens than other breeds.

Those kept out of doors, naturally have thicker coats; it is nature’s own protection. A naturally thick coat stands on end so that whichever way the animal faces, the wind cannot blow through it; a thin, silky coat, which generally lies down, is usually produced indoors, and although very beautiful to stroke with one’s hands, does not afford that natural wind protection, because there is no need for it indoors.

I always kept my rabbits out of doors, in the garden, and in Brentwood we had an ideal place for my hutches. I put up a high roof of corrugated iron over them, with room to stand under and work, with a gutter all along, and they were thus sheltered from both rain and sun, for too much sun is ruinous to both blue and brown fur, yet they were “outside” and grew beautiful coats in consequence.

In breeding Havanas the best browns have the palest undercolour, therefore when born, those with the lightest skins make the best adults. I speak from experience.

Take one that is born brown – a brown skin. It will grow up a dull, patchy colour, with no pale undercolour; in fact a self chocolate. But one born with a pinkish or almost white skin has the pale grey undercolour next to it when the fur is perfectly grown, and a lovely, rich, even glossy brown on top.

From the Havana to the Lavender** is but a step, for they are first cousins, so perhaps I may be excused for a few remarks about them ere I close these notes.

As usual, I was experimenting some years ago, and in a litter one morning I found two such as I had never seen, their skins being exactly the colour of new aluminium. As they grew they became a lovely pale silvery shade, two bucks, and I let them grow up. One had a white foot; the other I could not decide what to call him. He was then the colour of the palest shade of that much admired flower, the Sea Lavender, and I named him such, and the variety self lavender.

Before finally deciding, one day I took him up to London with me to the Dairy Show. There our mouse friend Mr W Maxey brought a Self Silver mouse to compare, and the colour was identical. But I thought it would be a name confusing to our Silver rabbit fanciers.

“Sea Lavender” was born in August 20 1911 and took 1st prize at the Crystal Palace in 1913,

when he appeared in his prime and was greatly admired. I kept him until he died, and bred many like him. I have never seen such thick fur or so soft, and the colour went right down to the skin.

Then the Dutch variety, the Perle de Hal, was produced – from what I do not know – but all honour is due to their creator. I saw my first when judging the pelts at Southampton show. It was a lovely shade, with a beautiful silky coat.

When I went back in the afternoon I took my old skin – Sea Lavender’s twin brother – and the living specimen could not compare with him for thickness and softness.

Colour breeding has always had a fascination for me, and I have bred many curious shades, but never on Mendelian lines. I always used my own ideas and selected the specimens I fancied as I went along, and I think I was successful on the whole.

Mabel Illingworth



Miss Illingworth in 1905 with her creation the Blue Imperial

* In England the first standard for the Havana was published in 1918 having been approved at a committee meeting of the newly formed Bevern Club:

General Appearance (20pts): Compact, well balanced, body short, broad arched back, thighs well developed and firm, neck very short, no dewlap.

Size (20pts): 5-7 lbs. Firm, clean flesh, healthy condition.

Coat (20pts): Thick, close, fairly long, fine and shining lying closely to body.

Colour (20pts) Rich, uniform shade of chocolate on top with pale, pearl-grey undercolour.

Head (5pts) Small, short fine head, rather broader in bucks.

Ears (5pts) About 4” long, pointed, carried erect and fairly close together, colour same as body colour.

Eyes (5pts) Large, gentle expression, same shade as body colour with red glow in dim light.

Legs & Feet (5pts) Legs short, straight, fine in bone, brown toenails.

Faults: White hairs, thin or uneven coat, bent legs.

**The first Lilacs were claimed to have been produced by Mr H Onslow of Cambridge in 1913; in that year Miss Illingworth was showing her “Lavenders” (bred from her Blue Imperials and Havanas.)