



PIONEERS OF THE FANCY

Sam Arnold



In our November issue we featured Master Tanner A S Howden; here is another Tanner's contribution, from the legendary Sam Arnold who bred "Hotazel" Tans. Left: Sam's photograph with "Whisky Mac", a Tan that was best in show at the 1980 Bradford Championship Show. The owner of Whisky Mac was yet another showman, Walter Faint.

Walter's first best in show success at Bradford was in 1975, a best in show win he repeated in 1980 and again in 1985, matching A Streetly's Bradford best in show Tan successes in 1948, 1951 and 1960. These were truly golden years for the Tanners.

As we look forward to Christmas, what better time than to republish Sam's seasonal tale from our December 1962 issue.

MEDITATION CHRISTMAS

Tonight, as I sit over a blazing fire, come one or two of those negative thoughts which have dogged my mind this past few weeks.

This afternoon we have had storms of sleet, which left the hills and moorlands inches deep under a white coverlet and the main road in the valley a quagmire of slush.

It was such weather as this on Christmas Day about eighteen years ago; I had decided to have the day off duty at the farm, and my foreman was in charge.

Around 10 am when the storm was at its worst, the foreman came to my door and said: "Old Bill 'Whistler' has arrived and he wants to speak to you."

Old Bill was our local rat catcher, and came every Wednesday with his dog Judy and his ferrets and nets, to go on his rounds of the poultry cabins.

I had forgotten that today, Christmas Day, was on a Wednesday. "Surely the old chap is not thinking of ridding today?" I queried.

"I don't know," said the foreman, "but he asked to see you, and he looks a very sick man to me."

I had known Old Bill since I was a boy. At that time he was a strong virile chap in his late 30's and employed as a gamekeeper on one of our local grouse moors. He was a confirmed bachelor and lived with a widowed sister in a small cottage on the edge of one of the moors.

We kids gave him the tag of "Whistler" because whenever you saw him in the village he would be whistling a cheery ditty to himself as he strode along. His cheerful outlook on life was a tonic to all the villagers, young and old.

Nothing seemed to get him down. And now, having retired as a gamekeeper on a small pension, he lived on his own in the small moorland cottage. His sister had died some twenty-five years ago, and to my knowledge he had no living relative.

He eked out his meagre pension by going around the local farms rat-catching and keeping down the wild rabbits.

I knew the old man's health was failing; he

had passed many milestones, and the final one could not be a great way off.

But I was shocked when I saw him that morning; his usual weather-beaten face was pallid, and the veins on the back of his hands stood out like purple cords. He was sitting in the canteen, drinking a mug of hot tea, which had been brewed specially for him by one of the poultry men.

"Merry Christmas young Sam. It's a bit of a rum 'un today isn't it?" He always called me "young Sam", despite the fact that it was over forty years since he first knew me.

I asked him what he was doing at the farm in this rough weather, and reminded him that he didn't look too well.

"I had to come and see thee today lad," he replied. "I have to go into hospital, and I was wondering if you would tak' care of the old dog and the ferrets while I was in. I don't know how long I'll be in, you see Sam lad, I'm failing, and I doubt very much if I'll ever again see the heather bloom on the moors o'er Bronteland, nor the spring dawn light up the pine tree tops in the Craggs."

He said this in no self-pitying voice, but merely expressed, as a fact, an intimation that his day's work was nearly done, and that to his eyes that last milestone was already clearly visible.

He was holding a small parcel in his hands, and shyly offered it to me. Undoing the pages, I found an old pint mug.

"There, Sam lad, read what it sez on that mug. It's been my motto a'm life, and now, tho' the dust of eighty-odd years lies choking round my heart I'm doing as it tells me. I know you are one o' them chaps that think a lot and maybe you'll know its true meaning."

The motto inscribed on the mug was: "Be happy while you're living, for you're a long time dead."

Bill "Whistler" died a week later in hospital. His dog Judy, lived on the farm until she died at the age of fifteen years. Her grave outside my office is marked by one of four white-painted crosses with the painted inscription Judy 1936-1951.

"Be happy while you're living, for you're a long time dead." Read that again, all of you, and practise the seasonable philosophy of it this Christmas time.



It is in this period of ripening sympathy and human tenderness and when our best feelings, perhaps long since withered, blossom green again in the chambers of the heart. It is fairly easy to put grief and sorrow, hatred, malice and envy on the shelf, and be all things to all men.

But my meditative mood carries me further than that, and I want to apply Old Bill Whistler's philosophy to this Fancy of ours, and re-christen it "The Spirit of a Hobby".

There are a great man people in this Fancy of ours who spend all their spare time attending funerals – the funerals of their hopes, ambitions, and illusions, and when these are all dead and buried, they seem to hear the spirit of them laughing from their graves,

These are the people who see none of the purple and gold of life. I should like to wrap them in empty pellet sacks, sprinkle their heads with ashes from my garden bonfire and drop them in the slush outside to do penance. They would appreciate the warmth of my fireside after half an hour of such treatment.

If their fellow fanciers would freeze them off, instead of sympathising with their imaginary ills, the funeral ones would then learn to recognise friendship and good feeling when they met them.

There is another species of fancier who does untold harm to whatsoever hobby they take

up, and that is the suspicious character. They go about wondering why “so-and-so” did “such-and-such” a thing, and by their tone, if not by their words, sow seeds of distrust and lack of confidence wherever they go.

I am not a newly hatched chicken in the Fancy, and my green and salad days are nearly past, but my experience has taught me to beware of the man or woman who looks on every other person with suspicion.

Even my Christmassy mood scarce allows me to repose universal trust in all my fellows, but I firmly believe that the good in our Fancy easily eclipses the bad, and that there are a hundred honest fanciers for every villain.

I suspect the person who suspects others, and if he is not actually a villain, he does quite as much harm as the greatest knave.

The pessimists and the suspicious minded are the two prophets, it seems to me, who work with the most ingenious energy and untiring zeal to make their adverse predictions come to pass.

I have often wondered why it is that at a meeting, say, one disagreeable person can mar the whole pleasure of the gatherings, and make the whole proceedings leave a bad taste in the mouth.

One disagreeable exhibitor at a show can change what would have been a pleasant affair into something that is better not remembered.

In writing this there are two points I want to emphasize. One is the responsibility that rests on the grumbling pessimists, the suspecting and generally disagreeable people for the widespread harm they cause.

The other is that the one hundred good and virtuous fanciers must not be led to false conclusions, and must not place any faith in the noise and shoutings of the odd villain.

They must see and understand for themselves that the Fancy is still a wholesome hobby for all ranks of men and women to be connected with.

I have a very close and fairly long connection with the Fancy and though much of my youthful enthusiasm has evaporated, as youthful enthusiasm always does, I have got in its place a matured experience. And although I no longer expect to find a rose tree in a turnip field, nor figs growing on a thorn bush, I do find that this Fancy of ours has its own wonderful attractions.

We cannot escape the influences of our time, and I suppose it is admitted that the present time is commercial, money-making, money-grabbing.

The Fancy may be affected by it, indeed, to a certain extent it is, but I refuse to believe that the Fancy has entered upon a sorry period of decadence.

The old camaraderie which characterised the earlier fanciers is not exhausted and it is a favourite maxim of mine that if you are nice to people, people will be nice to you. It takes at least two to make a quarrel, and there is something to be said for the other person's side of the question as well as your own.

These are a few of the facts which in our haste, we are apt to forget, and it is then we should remember that it is well to be happy while we are alive.

The majority of human beings have their own share of the world's worries, and the first use of a hobby is to counteract these worries, or, to act as an aid to forgetting them. But of what use is a hobby if we are to bring our workaday militarism into it, or the commercialism of the market place? If we do so we only add to our worry – and worry is not the spirit of any hobby.

Come into the Fancy seeking for trouble and, make no mistake, you'll get it. Come into the Fancy seeking happiness and pleasant respite, and friendship, and equally certain you will find them.

“Seek and you will find” – just what you want to find. But take up the Fancy in the same spirit as Old Bill “Whistler” took up life, and then, when the dust of years begins to choke your heart, you will know the truth of his philosophy: “Be happy while you're living, for you're a long time dead.”

The thaw wind has long ceased whimpering in the chimney, it is getting late, and I must interrupt the writing of this article while I do my nightly round of the farm. A sharp frost has set in, and the hills and nearby moorlands are glistening white in the starlight.

As I passed the hay barn, young Judy (a grand-daughter of Old Bill's original dog Judy) came out from amongst the hay and dug her cold nose into my hand. A cock grouse gave its harsh alarm call. It sounded loud and clear, although it must have been a half mile away. Probably he had been disturbed by a prowling fox.

A large brown owl glided silently past, just a vague shadow, and Judy whimpered, turned and retreated to her warm bed among the hay. It was bitterly cold.

Are we to have a seasonable season after all? And what does it matter what the weather is? Could Christmas be any other than Christmas?

Most of us are too old to believe that Santa Claus still comes down the chimney, but it is we who have changed, not the season.

But the night is late, aye, and the year is late, and as this Christmas goes to join the shadows of its fore-runners, let me wish you all once again a Merry Christmas – and remember Bill Whistler's motto: “Be happy while you're living, for you're a long time dead.”

Durham & District Part 2 by Eddie Kell

In 1978 we had erected a 60' x 30' Atcost shed to house the eggs produced on our small holding. We decided to hold a few table shows on a Saturday night inside. This carried on until about 1982 when space was needed as our business expanded. Judges in those days included Bill Nicholson from Cockfield, a well respected fancier in rabbits and poultry, Harry Wailes the English breeder, Roger Lightfoot and J J Peirson from Gainford.

The show went into limbo until 1988, a fresh band of fanciers namely Jack Topping and his wife and his son Steve, Jack Turnbull, Geo and A Stephenson, Roy Wearmouth and Pauline and I decided to pick the show up. We had a meeting in our bungalow on Boxing Day. We put food and drinks on for those attending. We decided to operate once more as Durham and District Rabbit Club. We had no pens

but Charlie Owens the defunct Spennymour Show secretary said we could hire their pens and donate 5p a pen. We collected the pens from under a church cellar at Tudhoe and took them to Brandon Boys Club at Brandon. I was on the boys club committee there so we got the hall for £12 per day and the use of the kitchen, with free pen storage. We held 3 shows there but parking was poor. Joe Phillips judged Fur and Rex at one show and Howard Marshall did another. We made £150 profit on 3 shows with the help of a good canteen run by Pauline.

However, Jack Turnbull and I were at a car boot sale at Croxdale Community Centre on Sunday and he said to me “this is a nice venue for our show”. I contacted the committee and rented the hall on a Saturday for £18. Parking was in a big yard as the hall had been a school. The cavies came back and we held some good shows there. We were able to buy new pens from Moncasters.

We were at Croxdale until about 2003, when a knock on our front door by a committee man informed me that the hall was closing and could we empty the cupboards in the kitchen of cups etc and the pens from the outside storage area. What a shock this was to us. We had been there about 11 years. We held shows from October until May so this gave us time in the summer to look around.

Next time part 3 as space as limited and my hand is getting cramp!



Rabbit event proves a hit
MORE than 100 competitors took part in a rabbit show held near Durham.
Durham and District Rabbit Club staged the event at Brandon Community Centre on Saturday. Club spokesman Eddie Kell says: “It is quite a big thing in the North-East. It is a good hobby because you can start at a low entry, unlike dog and horse showing where it costs hundreds of pounds and you need lots of equipment. You can start off with a couple of rabbits and end up with hundreds.”
The event was sponsored by The Food Warehouse in Brandon and food is shown next to Kevin Kelly. From the club is hoping to encourage young people to take part by entering their pets.
Avery Corbett is pictured judging at the event.

