

MEET THE FANCY'S PIONEERS

"The first records in the history of man's relationship with the rabbit start with the Phoenicians at the end of the second millennium BC," so begins John Sandford in his classic *The Domestic Rabbit* (Blackwell Science 1996). Sandford, a former Secretary, Chairman and Life President of the British Rabbit Council was an author of a number of books and also wrote many articles for *Fur & Feather*. It is the writings of Sandford and other pioneers of the Fancy that will be the subject of this new series.



We begin by dedicating this page to John Edwin Watmough of Idle, Bradford, Yorkshire the founder of *Fur & Feather*. Born in 1860 J E Watmough was a keen breeder and exhibitor of rabbits and cagebirds; recognising the fancy's commercial value he decided to publish a weekly newspaper. His paper advertised fur and feather stock for sale, stud fees and news of forthcoming shows and was entitled "Rabbit Keeper". After several issues the title was changed to *Fur & Feather* – above, see the front cover of its first issue.

Watmough can rightly claim to be the Fancy's very first Pioneer; his passion and dedication to our hobby ensured the rapid success of The Fancy and encouraged the birth of Bradford Ch Show and thousands of rabbit and other clubs. 130 years on his baby - *Fur & Feather* - is still read world-wide.

It is fitting to recognise Watmough's pioneering work by beginning this series with a reprint of *Fur & Feather's* first breed article.



BREEDING BELGIAN HARES

By J E Watmough (publisher, *Fur & Feather*) From the May 1 1890 edition

I do not intend to write a lengthy article on this subject, but to give briefly a few plain and simple hints to beginners in the Belgian Hare Fancy. In doing so I shall set forth my own experiences.

Some years ago my Belgian hares were remarkably successful, and I think in "Goldfield" I may fairly lay claim to having bred the best and most successful buck ever penned. I mention that period because about the time "Goldfield" was at the zenith of his career I could breed winners as easily as I had previously bred wasters, and the reason was that I had by judicious crossing worked my strain up to such a desirable pitch. I do not refer to this with a view to parading my own knowledge and ability, but solely to show that the principle I shall here advocate has proved successful in my own rabbitry, as the record of my winnings and sales at the time will substantiate.

Now, as to my plan. In the first place, a lot depends upon the knowledge and cash of the fancier. If he possesses both and will follow my suggestions, he will not only win prizes but will afterwards breed his own winners. If he only has knowledge, his ascension of the ladder of fame will be a matter of time only. And if he has a big purse without any knowledge, he may quickly rise to the top of the tree, but he will, perhaps, as quickly tumble down again, unless some one also supplies the judgment, or he develops a lot of native tact and ability to keep him going.

Assuming for a moment that the aspirant to Belgian Hare fame has only a very limited purse, he must apply the principles I here lay down for the extent of that purse, and if it takes him a little longer to achieve the best

results, he will be none the worse for it, and what he attains will be all the more lasting as being derived from a rather long but practical experience. If a man has kept rabbits before and therefore knows how to feed and manage them, with a judicious outlay of capital he is bound to succeed, providing, of course that ordinary luck attends him.

Placing myself in his position, I should purchase a few of the very best Belgian hare out; not necessarily all the winners under all the judges but the best that I could put my hands upon possessing that rich glowing rufous colour so essential to good Belgians.

I should make colour my guiding property, because a Belgian without colour is not a Belgian, so to speak, at all, and is no good either in the exhibition pen or at home. My experience in breeding Belgians hares is that once you get colour you are all right, as the other properties are not very difficult to obtain.

Assuming that I have now a few of the very best – and if I have purchased the very best winners I have got the best all-property rabbits – I should exhibit them, and thus win back some of my money, and make for myself a name. Afterwards I should breed from them, selling off, when I could select the best from the worst, those I did not want and retaining the rest.

These I should probably breed back to their own relations, and cross and re-cross according to the results of my breeding. I should of course, keep my eyes open, and if I come across one better than my own I should purchase it, and use such in my crossing.

Anyone doing this for some time, it may be years, is bound to establish a breed that cannot

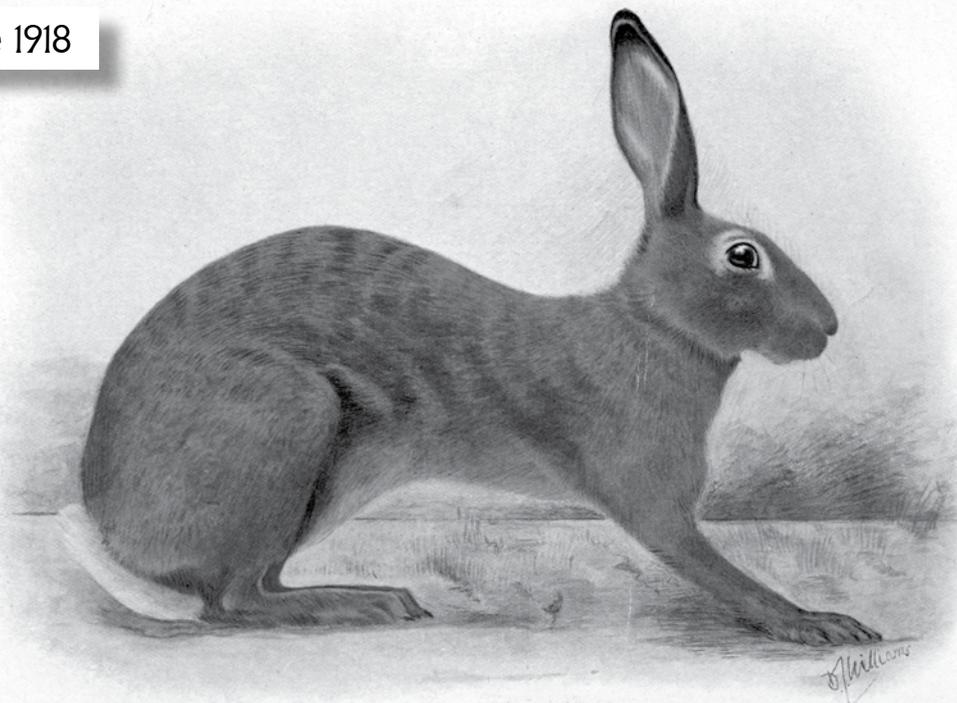
fail to turn out many winners, and when it is found that the "strain" cannot be improved by outside blood, then it is time to in-breed, with a view to retaining, securing and concentrating the good that has been got.

Generally speaking, the best-coloured Belgians produce the best all-round youngsters, and in building up a strain the first thing to look for is colour. Unless you have plenty of colour in the blood it is no good, and "one's house will be built upon sand". I always make a special feature of colour, and it was almost my sole object in breeding to pile colour upon colour. Of course, by paying big money for the best rabbits one gets not only colour, but all the other properties, and he therefore is building up a strain of all-property rabbits.

I have no wish to discourage anyone, in fact my object is to encourage, as I am sure the result is certain if the right way is gone about it, but it is little or no use attempting to "make bricks without straw" and unless one starts off with something suitable the successful end is very remote.

It is plain that in breeding Belgian hares it is not like breeding many varieties. In the former, pedigree is an important point, and in all cases the better stock one breeds from the greater are one's chances of success. When I have a good thing I am not one that likes to fritter it away by crossing with this, that and the other. I remember at one time crossing with blacks to get more ticking, the most suicidal cross any one could think of, as ticking can be obtained to superfluity in the worst of Belgian hares. Soon, very soon did I discover how foolish I had been, and it is just the same as crossing with inferior ones. Always aim at something better than one's own, or we weaken the blood we already possess.

Belgian Hare 1918



BELGIAN HARE DOE, "BARBERTON BEAUTY."

Sired by "Storm King."

Born July 24th, 1918.

Winner of 1st and Sp. Guildford; 1st and Sp. Abingdon; 1st and Sp. Combined London; 1st and Sp. Manchester (and 1st Breeders); 1st and Spoon, London No. 3; also 2nds Dartford, High Barnet, Bromley, and Fulham.

Bred and Exhibited by Mr. H. E. Sharpe, "Barberton," Maidstone.

It is difficult to describe on paper the class of rabbit we would begin with, but there are some really excellent Belgian hares before the public at the present time, mostly does – certainly the best are does. And if we are going in for the formation of a Belgian stud, we should have no difficulty in purchasing the class of rabbit we wanted.

Having obtained colour, there need not be much difficulty in getting shape, lacing, ticking, etc., as these properties are pretty common. If, as we have previously said, a fancier can afford to buy a few of the best, he will be working up from the commencement a strain of all property rabbits, and he will probably obtain one property as soon as another. If so, all the better; but if on the other hand, a fancier can only go in for a moderately priced rabbit – and he had far better have one good one than fifty poor ones – he should buy for colour first.

In fact, I had much rather buy for breeding purposes an exceptionally good coloured doe if she had not a bit of lacing or ticking about her, or an indifferent or tolerably good all-property one. In breeding I would strongly advise – assuming the best of present winning rabbits cannot be obtained, as either being too costly or not for sale – fanciers to go in for really good coloured long, fine-limbed does, and mate them with the best bucks within the fancier's needed – and there are several good bucks at stud.

By this means good coloured youngsters can be obtained, and if the best of them are again crossed with good stud bucks, a still further improvement will be effected. By colour I mean a bright rufus, a kind of red-yellow, not the smudgy colour we have had far too much of. Long limbed rabbits of this colour should be

our ideal, and not the fat, bulky, brown-hued animals we have occasionally seen win.

Belgians, more than most varieties, breed true both to colour and shape. And if once a good strain is established it should be implicitly relied upon. I have known breeds of various livestock – not merely rabbits – that have been so judiciously crossed that they were simply invincible, when lo! Something has arisen, perhaps the death of the proprietor, causing the stud to be broken up, with the result that the achievement and success of years has vanished like the mist from the meadow. It is so in breeding Belgian hares. Strive to keep your improvement together, and instead of keeping some second raters, keep only some half-dozen or dozen good ones. Breed them carefully and only add better colour to them.

Now as to another important matter. I make the suggestion for what it is worth, but why should Belgian hare fanciers not only breed for colour but FEED FOR COLOUR also? It has often occurred to me that the experiment

is well worth trying. Our cage bird friends feed for colour, and to a certain extent they make their birds any colour they chose. Now why should not we rabbit men make a point in that direction. So long as colour feeding does not injure the rabbits nothing can be said against it,

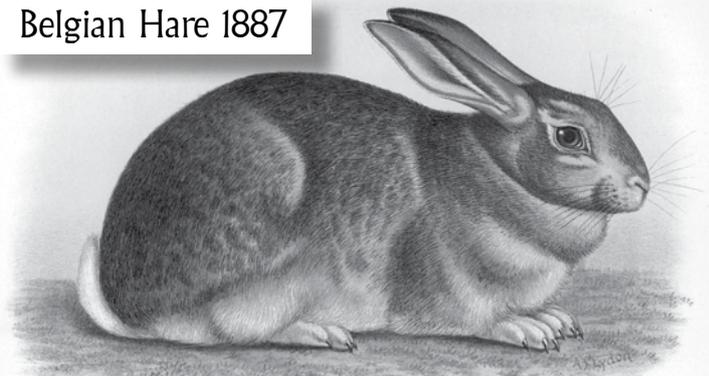
and there is no reason whatsoever why fanciers should not try a course of colour feeding.

In this rather hurried article I am not going to into the nature of the different peppers, flowers, vegetables, etc. used by our canary friends, nor am I prepared to state what effect they would have upon the rabbits. I have made the suggestion for what it is worth and yes, I think there is something in the experiment. I confess to having some time ago started a series of experiments of the nature suggested, but now that my time and attention are so much occupied in other directions I have been compelled to give them up and clear out, for the present at all events, my stock of Belgian hares, only retaining one or two for pleasure's sake.

I heartily wish all my Belgian loving friends success during the breeding and exhibition season.



Belgian Hare 1887



Above: A Belgian Hare in Watmough's day, a painting of J H Vicker's doe, first prize at People's Palace in 1887.