

# FUR AND FEATHER



## PIONEERS OF THE FANCY



In this series highlighting the men and women who created “The Fancy” we look at rabbit health publications

Two centuries ago there was plenty of reading material for the rabbit fancier, from the weekly magazine *Fur & Feather* (published by Watmoughs from its Yorkshire offices) to several reference books on the rabbit (obtainable from the London publishers L Upton Gill.)

In *Rabbits for Prizes and Profit* (1881, price 2s 6d) Charles Rayson offered “full instructions for the proper management of fancy rabbits in health and disease, for pets or the market” while R O Edwards (*Rabbits for Exhibition, Pleasure & Market*) offered “a complete guide for the amateur and professional rabbit keeper” Edwards claiming he had been “assisted by several eminent breeders and exhibitors.”

In 1889 the second edition of *The Book of the Rabbit* (price 15 shillings) included coloured plates prepared from commissioned paintings of the popular breeds and a chapter on the following ailments:

Abscess, boils, ear canker, cold in the eyes/head, coughs, colic, constipation, diarrhoea, red urine, diseased liver, dropsy, eruptions, fits, sore hocks and overgrown teeth.

The authors concluded that “rabbits naturally have strong and hardy constitutions, but when, in domestication, they are attacked by any complaints, these are generally of a serious kind, which, without prompt attention soon terminate fatally.”

It was recommended that every rabbitry should contain its own medicine chest. The following treatment was recommended for sore hocks:

“Apply some healing salve, to be procured from any druggist, and bandage the feet up. These bandages the animal will probably tear off, so that frequent renewal may be required.

“Another remedy is to bathe the sores frequently with sulphate of zinc lotion, 2gr to the ounce of water. Keep the animal warm and quiet, well supplied with nutritious food, and there is every probability of an ultimate cure.”

The first health book for the British fancier was *The Rabbit in Health & Disease* (published by *Fur & Feather*). It was written in 1929 by J B McDougal who as well as being a Fellow of the Royal Faculty of Physicians and Surgeons in Glasgow was President of the Universal Angora Rabbit Club.

McDougal wrote in his introduction: “Breeders are, apparently, no longer willing to stand in ignorance and watch animals wane and die without having some source to consult.”

He offered some 100-plus pages of advice on various ailments including tuberculosis,

drooping ear, fractures, pneumonia, ruptures, abscesses, obesity and parasitic diseases.

There were also references to the dreaded “snuffles”. (The advertisement pages of *Fur & Feather* regularly carried claims to “amazing cures” but the only people to profit were the advertisers!)

With no “rabbit vets” around breeders consulted each other and had some common-sense solutions when it came to ailing stock. Anything below par was killed so only the fittest rabbits survived.

In those twentieth century pre-war days fanciers had more time to observe their stock and feeding time was a leisurely affair, especially during the summer months when stockmen would go to the fields and common land with sack and sickle to gather fresh grasses and herbs.

Every garden or allotment had space for root vegetables which were stored for winter feeding.

As a daily mash, potatoes and peelings were boiled and added to bran. To maintain show stock in show condition treats included linseed, acorns and dried nettle hay.

McDougal’s book is a fascinating health portrait of the rabbit in 1929, but contains no reference to caecotrophy (or coprophagy) the practice of reingesting the first soft pellet.

A detailed paper on coprophagy had been produced in 1882 by a French veterinary scientist Charles Morot but it was nearly one hundred years before the practice was recognised.

### Caecotrophy

Approximately three to eight hours after eating and usually at night (so the practice is rarely observed by the keeper) the rabbit expels soft string-like caecal pellets.

This itself prompts a reaction to lick the anus and reingest the caecotrophs whole. This process allows the redigestion of the soft pellet and the food is passed twice through the digestive tract in approximately twenty-four hours.

Occasionally the rabbit-keeper will observe these strings of soft droppings on the hutch floor, or they become entangled with the fur around the anus.

This is usually a sign of a dietary change, or that the rabbit may be unable to groom itself (ie. is obese) or has developed a musculoskeletal condition which makes it

painful to bend in order to reingest the soft pellet.

It is important that the fancier recognises the difference between diarrhoea – which is potentially life-threatening – and this natural digestive function known as caecotrophy.

By 1945 McDougal’s book was out of print and *Fur & Feather* published a follow-up publication entitled *Rabbits’ Ailments* by W P Blount.

At that time most keepers fed their stock with large quantities of fresh greens or roots and Blount observed that “the experienced breeder has known for ages that his ordinary animals do not require water to drink.”

### Water

Water is, of course, essential! To quote Sandford in *The Domestic Rabbit* (first published in 1957):

“Rabbits can lose nearly all the fat from their bodies, and more than half the protein, and still remain alive, but a loss of one-tenth of the water of the body will result in death.

“Furthermore, the rabbit can live for a relatively long time without solid food, but lack of moisture very quickly produces harmful effects.”

A rabbit will normally drink 50-100 ml/kg per 24 hours (*Brewer and Cruise*). A doe and litter will consume about a gallon of water per day.

Rabbits consuming a high-fibre feed will drink more water than if they were fed a high-protein diet (i.e. including alfalfa meal).

The British Rabbit Council has a rule that “it is the duty of all exhibitors to ensure that their stock has a supply of water at all shows”.

### Diet

The following guidance was given in *The Book of The Rabbit* (1881):

“The appetites of all rabbits, as persons, differ and fluctuate. The feeder must use his eyes and his judgment ... if using bran and oats do not mix these two together in the same feeding dish.

“Rabbits should never have enough food to last from one meal to another, except in the case of does that are suckling and with young ones growing when hay and good sound oats should be the food given. Two feeds each day will be sufficient, say at 8 am and 6 p.m., yet in some cases three would be better.”

There are then pages of instructions on providing a good Diet Table over a five day period.

In 2000 the renowned rabbit vet Virginia Richardson wrote *Rabbits: Health, Husbandry & Diseases* which describes health symptoms in its 188 pages and has a chapter on Drugs and Treatments. (Blackwells. RRP £58.50 but on special offer to F&F readers: £33.00 incl postage.)

Also recommended: the *Textbook of Rabbit Medicine* by Harrogate vet Frances Harcourt-Brown (Butterworth Heinmann, £65.00) and *Diseases of Domestic Rabbits* by Lieve Okerman (Blackwells but now out of print.)

The *Fur & Feather* reference library includes *Rabbit Feeding & Nutrition* by Peter R Cheeke (Academic Press). 376 pages with chapters on General Principles, Digestive Physiology, Protein and Amino Acid Nutrition, Carbohydrates, etc. etc. Also, *Notes on Rabbit Internal Medicine* (Wiley, £60.95).

For something more basic Meg Brown's *Rabbitopaedia* is recommended as this guide to the care of the domestic rabbit includes a section on diseases by vet Virginia Richardson. (from £2.50 s/hand to around £10 from Amazon sellers.)

Meg wrote: "Most beginners, particularly children, tend to overfeed their pets and then they wonder why their rabbit is sick. Feeding once daily is quite enough; only pregnant rabbits and growing rabbits need extra."

One of Meg's golden rules when buying a new rabbit was to ask what it has been fed on and to continue that diet before trying something new. She also points out that although some rabbit mixes are very good others are "pretty awful".

Loose mixes sold in pet shops quickly lose their freshness and quality, so avoid these. Check that packaged products are securely sealed.

Also, check the "sell by date". Most feed products have a short (3-6 months) shelf life. It is also important to keep dried feeds in a closed container (i.e. a dustbin) to protect them from vermin.

## Quantities

The recommended daily requirements are usually printed on the packaging. A miniature breed (i.e. a Netherland Dwarf) requires approx 2 oz of pellets per day (weigh it and place in your usual feeding scoop – you may be astonished at the modest amount!) while 4oz daily is adequate for a larger rabbit.

Hay. This is a daily essential. It should be clean and have a "fresh" smell. To prevent hay from contamination tie it to the hutch front or place in a hay-rack.

Bread. Stale bread, baked in the oven, is very nutritious, and good for the rabbit's teeth.

Greens: wild and garden. The *Fur & Feather* Bookshop stocks the following titles:

F R Bell's illustrated *Greenfoods for Rabbits and Cavies* (£7.45).

Virginia Richardson's top selling *Rabbit Nutrition* includes photographs. (£6.00).

The *Hay & Greens Diet* book was written by Fiona Campbell who worked at Burns Pet Nutrition for a decade and solved her own rabbits' digestive problems by using these methods. £6.45.

Much later *Fur & Feather* published the popular *Practical Feeding and the Foods of the Rabbit* by John Sandford (£6.00).

It was Sandford who announced at the 1992 British Rabbit Council AGM that a new rabbit disease had arrived: Viral Haemorrhagic Disease. At that time there was no vaccine available in the United Kingdom and it was many anxious months before a licence was granted.

The BRC's strong recommendation is to vaccinate. Register with a veterinary practice that specialises in rabbit care and can offer

Right: This drawing of the well-known English Lop "Weymouth Prince" exhibited by Mr S Dalby Smith was published on the March 2 1893 edition of *Fur & Feather*. The Editor comments: "It may interest breeders to know that Weymouth Prince was bred and reared without heat, the average temperature being from 45-55 degrees. In fact during the cold weather the glass inside Mr Dalby-Smith's rabbitry was often frosted for days altogether. Roasters and boilers\* of Lops please note!"

\*This caption attracted much angry comment from readers, claiming that Weymouth Prince was, in fact, reared in front of a Bristol breeder's warm fireplace. In *The Book of the Rabbit* the author admits that "the length of ear had to be obtained by any means, and many were the ingenious contrivances used by fanciers for securing the coveted length. Many a specimen has obtained its immense size of ears by an application of artificial heat which has tended to shorten its life." **Thanks to public debate in *Fur & Feather* such barbaric methods in rearing English lops were eventually stamped out.**

the latest information on vaccinations against myxomatosis and RHD 1 & 2 – for latest info and advice visit the British Rabbit Council's web page.9

*Fur & Feather's* latest health title is *Microbiology for Fanciers* by Ann Storey MSc FIBMS (£6.45.) This 50 page booklet covers bacteria, viruses, algae and fungi – how to avoid them, what the risks are and why some animals become sick when others do not.



## BRC Office Report March 2019

Hope all those that travelled to Doncaster had a good weekend. It is always nice for us to put a face to the name, as we only normally speak on the telephone.

All membership subscriptions became payable on the 1 January 2019. We are now nearing March and in accordance with the Association Rules, Subs should have been paid by the end of February. There will be an extra £5.00 to pay to re-register as a new member from March 1st 2019. This will mean a break in membership, which will affect positions that require continued membership e.g. committee members and judges. Note all memberships ended on 31st December 2018 no-one should exhibit during the new year without first renewing membership.

A reminder that if you wish to have a say on matters referring to The BRC, the Annual General Meeting is to be held at Gloucester Rabbit Club, Upton St Leonards Village Hall, 13 Bondend Road, Upton St Leonards, Gloucester GL4 8AG.

Any items to go before the Governing Body's next Meeting on the 11 May 2019 should be forwarded to the Office by Friday 26th April 2019 to be included on the agenda.

It is now time to send in your Nominations for the Governing Body, President Elect and IC Committee, deadline noon on 5th July 2019. Forms are available to download on the website or by calling the office. Have opinions? Make them count!

**National Clubs** – We are still waiting for a few judges lists, if you have not sent yours in please do so immediately, otherwise they will not be included in the 2019 edition of the judges book. If there are no changes to be made, please advise accordingly.

**Secretaries** - I am having a few problems with show supports recently, please ensure everything required is enclosed with the application:

Show Support, ADVERT, Show Support fee + affiliation fee, where applicable. We need all these in order to approve any requests.

The GB have decided to try and set up a new District Adviser scheme where there is a DA in every County, this is to try and ensure there is assistance available locally, especially for all new members. This means there are lots of positions needing to be filled. If you think you have the knowledge and can spare a few hours as and when required, please call the office for an application form.

Anyone who has any interesting ideas or topics that would be suitable for the year book, who is prepared to write an article, please contact me at the office. This can be anything rabbit related; especially useful would be articles to help new comers to the hobby, who often have no idea where to start.

Have fun! Jackie