

The Harlequin Club celebrates 75 years at the West Midlands Ch Show

In this issue the Harlequin Club announces its 75th anniversary show at the West Midlands Ch Show at Coventry (see page 40/41).

The Club recognises eight colours of Harlequins (or Magpies, as the variety in which the golden orange or fawn is replaced by white is called). They are: black and golden orange (or white), blue and golden fawn (or white), brown and golden orange (or white) and lilac and golden fawn (or white). There is also a rexed version.

Below the editor examines the breed's beginnings – which as in so many rabbit varieties remains a puzzle, the Harlequin proving to be every bit as interesting and colourful a jester as its markings.



The Harlequin rabbit is thought to be a native of France; it had been created by crossing semi wild Tortoiseshell Dutch with wild rabbits. Quoting from a French publication published in 1887 Mr N Naudin wrote: "We saw appearing, at the time of the open competition of 1887 in a class of common rabbits, a variety which had excited curiosity highly. They were tricolour and bore the Japanese name."

In his book "Domestic Rabbits & Their Histories" Bob Whitman believes that the first Japanese appeared in the suburbs of Paris having been bred from the Brabancon (the forerunner of the Dutch).

Whitman quotes a French writer: "Let us not manage we from there to discover the very recent origin of this rabbit very common, but multi-coloured the made-to-order of the tricolour cat or scale of tortoise, in English tortoiseshell. We know that this colour is obtained by the crossing of black rabbit with the russet red one."

There is another theory that the Harlequin originated from Japan. The same writer maintains that partly coloured and tri coloured rabbits were being bred and exhibited in Japan during the years 1872 and 1874 and were popular in Osaka and Tokyo, with many rabbit shows being held for them. Whitman suggests: "Could these rabbits have been brought into France and released on the estates for the amusement and pleasure of the land owners?"

We can also look at *Rabbits for Prizes and Profit* published in 1897 in which Rayson writes: "It is now some years since this interesting rabbit was first introduced to the notice of English fanciers, and it still remains almost as unknown as in the year '93, when a short notice was published in a fancy paper. Like most other new varieties introduced from abroad, it is susceptible of very great improvement, which like the Dutch and the Himalayan, it will doubtless experience once its merits have been recognised.

"The Japanese rabbit is a large and stoutly built animal, shaped like the Dutch rabbit, but probably twice as heavy and half as large again. Its head is massive and the ears are large.

"The coat is beautifully fine and soft and somewhat open texture, and the markings, which as yet are sometimes inconstant, are curiously and attractively arranged in stripes, running around the body like two belts.

"Some specimens, very well marked, were exhibited at a show in Paris several years ago; but it has been found impossible to trace their subsequent career, and as French fanciers do not take the same interest as their English brethren in keeping their stock pure, they seemed to have crossed the Japanese in an irritating and foolish way, whereby they have gone too far to spoil an original and lovely variety."

In the summer of 1895 Rayson went to France to

acquire specimens of the breed obtaining rabbits from a French Zoo and passing them to breeders on the island of Jersey. They were introduced to America in 1917.

It is believed that a club for the Japanese rabbit was formed in England in 1919 (we were unable to find a report in *Fur & Feather*) but Japanese stock was being advertised for sale in the 1918 edition of the Beveren Club's quarterly magazine.

In his book *The Domestic Rabbit* John Sandford reminds us that in most other countries the breed is still called Japanese, Great Britain and America renaming it Harlequin following the bombing of Pearl Harbour by the Japanese in December 1941.

In the April 23 1943 edition of *Fur & Feather* it was announced that "the Harlequin makes his bow and asks for his inclusion among the fur breeds."

The Harlequin Rabbit Club first appeared in the BRC's 1944 yearbook. Its first secretary Mr Fairbarns of East Finchley, London was succeeded by several well known fanciers until Keith Bee took over the club in 1989; following his untimely death his wife Janet took the reigns in 1993. **In 2018 Mrs Bee has served as the club's secretary for 25 years – many congratulations, Janet!**

At Coventry on 26 August the club will be holding three shows to mark the club's 75th year and Janet is looking forward to welcoming all members and friends to celebrate this special year of the Harlequin.

