

MEET THE FANCY'S PIONEERS

In this series highlighting the men and women who created "The Fancy" we remember F G Woodgate a rabbit breeder and judge who wrote many articles for Fur & Feather during the period 1946 to 1969. Woodgate was elected President of the BRC from 1946/7 and 1961/2 and in 1965 he became Life Vice President, a position he held until his death in 1969



SMALLSTOCK HOBBIES IN THE 1790'S

Paintings by George Morland give clue to the age of the Fancy

There are few records on the early history of the domesticated rabbit or cavy; we have little published literature previous to 1870. What there is suggests that there was some sort of hobby connected with rabbit and cavy breeding before the '70's, but details are vague. For centuries before that, however, the wild rabbit appears to have been in existence in different parts of the world. Conies are referred to in the Bible.

Proof that it had become domesticated in the 18th century is shown by the well known painter George Morland, in his work of the two rabbits shown below. This work was executed in 1794; it is interesting to find that one of the rabbits shown favours our present-day Sable as far as type is concerned; this applies to the albino, except for the rotundity of the stomach. The head is similar and the ears much the same size, and with the same carriage.



Rabbits were said to have been bred in China in the time of Confucius (6th century BC). Another writer refers to them as having been in abundance in Spain in the year 50 BC and tells us that they originally spread all over the Continent from Spain.

As far as the British Isles is concerned we are told that they were first introduced by Caesar, though another writer gives the end of the 12th century as the date of their introduction.

Another historian informs us that rabbits were rare in this country in 1309 and that they were of the same value as pigs, and that in the reign of Henry V 111 the fur was valuable and was worn by noblemen.

Another record tells us that Cromwell had a rabbit warren at Hampton Court and that Silver Greys were in existence in this country in 1631. The Silver Grey of that time was almost certainly different from that of today. A large variety of rabbit was known in England in 1557. So much for the rabbit in its wild state.

The size and shape of body are similar, while it can be surmised that the weight would be much the same. On the painting the eye is pink.

The darker specimen could possibly have been one of the ancestors of the Flemish Giant. The similarity here is in the shape and carriage of the ears. On the original painting there is a close resemblance to the body colour of the Flemish, while it will be noted that the body is larger than that of the albino.

It will also be seen that the tail of this specimen is of the same colour as the body except for a white spot. It should be noted here that it is unusual for the underside

of the tail to be of the same colour as the body, whilst the presence of the white spot rather points to the absence of tweezers in those days.

These two rabbits take our minds back for a period of over a hundred and twenty four years.

By F G Woodgate F.Z.S.

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We find that our forebears had stock of similar type to our own. Rabbits then were apparently fed on hay and straw and carrots, all of which was depicted in the original painting.

In many directions the world changes rapidly but from these paintings it would appear that our predecessors of even a century and a half ago were interested in a pursuit based much upon the same lines on which we carry out our hobby of rabbit breeding today.

In the same year (1794) Morland painted the two cavies here depicted, and except for markings we find type and size much on a par with those of our cavies of today, while the food appeared to consist partly of the proverbial cauliflower leaves. From a glance at these two animals one could form the basis of the Tort & White of today.

The selves of today can show much improvement, however, especially in regard to head, shoulders and ears. The subject of this painting points out that the cavy has been domesticated in this country at least since 1794 but as to how much longer there appears to be little data.

