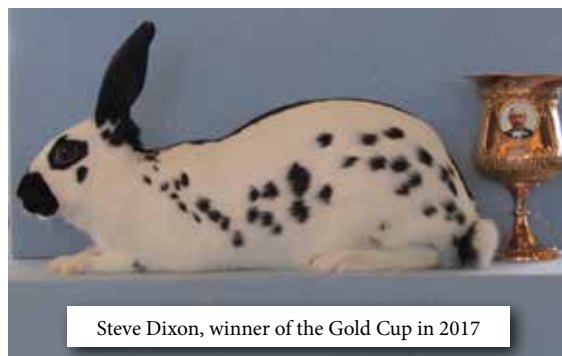


# Bradford's best: Breeding English rabbits . . . not just a hobby, it's a passion!

writes **Stewart Howson**  
Chairman, National English Rabbit Club



Steve Dixon, winner of the Gold Cup in 2017

**Y**ou will all be aware that the National English Rabbit Club celebrated its 125<sup>th</sup> year in 2016 but the first mention of an English pattern was in a writing by Gervase Markham in 1657 where he talks about white rabbits with spots.

It wasn't until 1891 when the club was formed that a standard for English rabbits was also introduced to enable breeders and judges to know what kind of English to breed for, however there was still extreme difference of opinion between breeders, exhibitors and judges.

In 1908 *Fur & Feather* asked all interested in the breed to make alterations to the club's standard ideal to produce a new illustration that would be used as the ideal English Rabbit (160 drawings were received). A vote was taken on the final six chosen and the Wippell painting was adopted as the National English Rabbit Clubs Illustrated Ideal.



Over the years there have been changes to the wording, allocation of points and criteria for disqualification but throughout all this the illustrated ideal remains the target every English breeder strives to achieve.

Ever since the National English Rabbit Club was founded (and perhaps many years before that) breeding show standard English has proven to be the ultimate challenge, something that cannot be entered in to with a half-hearted approach.

The standard calls for twelve different elements to be in place, each outlined in detail as to what should be expected and an illustrated ideal for everyone to see what the rabbit should look like. There does not appear to be any set



*The Club's Initial Standard Ideal, 1908*

method that will guarantee the English breeder success year after year other than a belief that you will eventually achieve your goal.

I personally believe that sound breeding stock is essential if you are to have any chance of producing a show rabbit and I don't mean a Gold Cup or Gold Shield winner, just an exhibit to take to the stock shows.

Breeding stock needs to be, if possible, sound in what I feel are key areas, head, type, coat and colour. The saddle needs to carry its colour right through to the tip of the tail because white tails are a fault that is so easy to get in to your stud but so difficult to get out.

Bodywork, do we go for light spotting or through work? I feel this is a matter of personal choice, the only thing I believe we should aim for is bodywork in pattern with graduation and no stray spots which is far easier said than done.

When it comes around to the time when you start to mate your stock the ultimate challenge begins. Your best does have gone to the stud buck, you wait patiently for the doe to kindle, lovely nest, mother proudly sitting there.

Carefully you pull back the fur and in your hand goes, nice big litter, first two out marked but not enough work, (all the markings can clearly be seen when the youngsters are born, except for Torts, it may take a few days before they show up) next three are selfs, two charlies, you continue to search, has the show rabbit hid itself in the fur?

The answer is no, that's your lot. Such is the genetic make up of English that litters can contain 50% marked and 25% self and 25% charlie but of course these percentages can change litter by litter.

Everybody knows what a self-coloured rabbit is but what is a Charlie? The name comes from its appearance around the smut when a lack of a proper butterfly marking is replaced with marks like a Charlie Chaplin moustache. The rabbit usually has a very thin broken saddle and very few or in most cases no spots on the body and cheek spots can be missing.

However, if you mate a Charlie buck and a self-coloured doe together all the youngsters in litters will be marked and I am sure this method will have been used in the past and probably still is to produce show rabbits.

Self-coloured does can be mated to a marked buck and form part of your stud, but they should only be kept out of litters containing a high percentage of marked rabbits. These matings will produce a percentage of marked rabbits and self-coloured with no Charlies.

You have kept the best breeding stock available to improve your stud but with English rabbits that most certainly does not come with any guarantee that a show or indeed a good breeding rabbit will appear in your litters.

You can pair your best two rabbits together and have a litter that in no way resembles either parent or you can breed a top class show rabbit, put that pairing together another dozen times and not even breed a rabbit to keep.

There is no definite method that will guarantee success all you can do is keep the best breeding stock available, try to improve on markings and eliminate any faults in your stock.

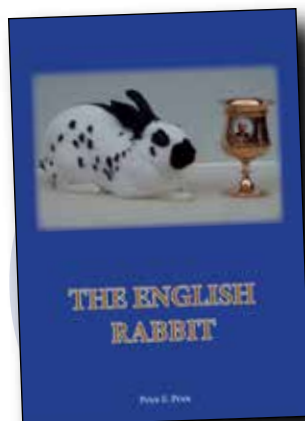
Breeding English rabbits is truly a challenge, one for the connoisseur, and in my opinion, this is what sets a true English breeder apart from the rest a dedication and commitment to the breed. What better sight can there be in the rabbit fancy than beautifully spotted English rabbit sitting proudly on the show table.

Together with Janet I have been breeding and exhibiting English rabbits since 1976 and still get a feeling of excitement when the does are due to kindle, the anticipation as I put my hand into the nest is as great now as it was when we first began, my hopes for a flyer are still as high and disappointment when expectations fall flat still as strong.

But the enjoyment we get from keeping English cannot just be measured in success in the show pen; it is everything about the English fancy that makes it so special.

It is the friendships that are forged, and the genuine pleasure shown by everyone either visiting or exhibiting when the Gold Cup and Gold Shield winners hold the trophy aloft because as the applause begins to die down they are all thinking the same: "next year it could be me".

*Stewart Howson*



## RECOMMENDED READING:

**The English Rabbit** by Peter Prior (Coney Publications).  
Reprinted and updated version of the 1992 original.  
Colour photos throughout.  
£9.00 From the *Fur & Feather* bookshop