

The Sensational Story of the Cochin

The Cochin is an ancient breed originating in the far east, but further details about the early development of the breed have been lost in time. Although their distant past remains a mystery, their introduction to Europe and North America was perhaps the most significant and influential event in the history of poultry keeping.

Events surrounding the arrival of Cochins in England became rather muddled at the time, partly because people like to embellish stories about things that are exciting and new. But what's more surprising was the confusion that resulted from people applying the name "Cochin" to the wrong birds!

It all began in 1843 when the first Asian fowl to be branded as Cochins were brought to England by British naval officer, Edward Belcher. After Great Britain had acquired Hong Kong, Belcher reportedly returned to England bearing five hens and 2 roosters as a gift for the newly married Queen Victoria. Captain Belcher had acquired the chickens somewhere along his voyage that included stops in China, Sumatra and Vietnam.



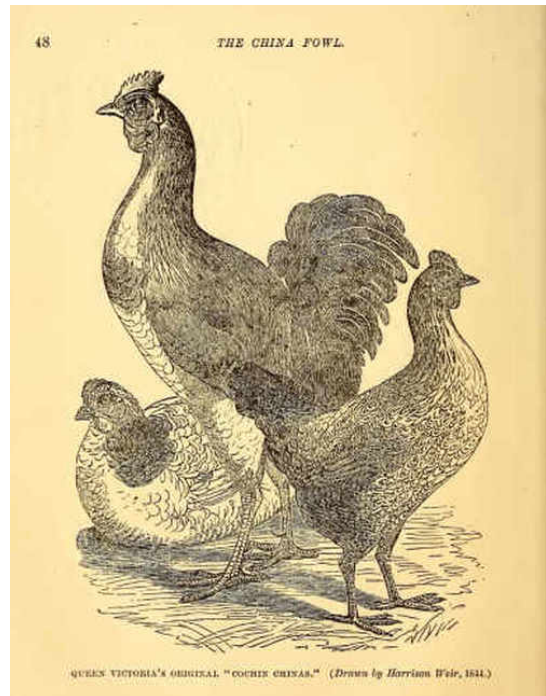
Figure 1 Royal Aviary

These elegantly tall, striking birds were curiosities, unlike anything that had been seen before. The royal couple were enthralled! They built an extravagant aviary at

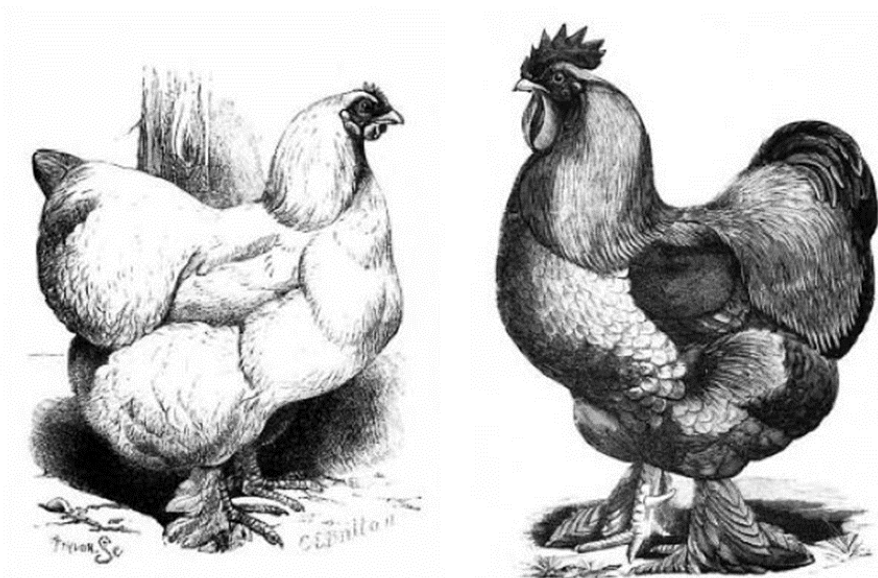
Windsor Castle where they could spend their time having tea while taking delight in their flock.

They began breeding their "Cochin Chinas" and sending hatching eggs around to other European Royalty who quickly became enthusiastic chicken breeders as well.

But other than their great size, these first arrivals had very little in common with the fowl that later came to be known as Cochins. These birds were orange/red with black tails, and had hard, close plumage. Their extreme height, featherless shanks and lengthy, sloping back suggests strong Malay influence, a breed which was already widely distributed throughout the Orient by that time.



Just a few years after Queen Victoria received her Cochin Chinas, a new breed of imported fowl arrived from Shanghai – progenitors of our modern-day Large Fowl Cochins. Mr. Moody, in Hampshire, and Mr. Alfred Sturgeon, of Gray's, Essex, both acquired large, fluffy chickens with feathered shanks and began breeding their Shanghai Fowl. The name didn't stick though. The public had formed an attachment to the Cochin name, and insisted on calling these new imports Cochins as well. Despite the efforts of breeders and poultry writers who continued to classify them as Shanghai's, the Cochin name eventually took over and has endured to this day.



White Cochin hen and Buff Cochin cock in 1873. Note less foot feathering then. Artists: unknown (cock) and C.E. Brittan (hen)

Offspring of these early imports hatched in a number of colour variations; so began the long process of selectively breeding for uniformity. Mr. Sturgeon and his friend Charles Punchard became leaders in Cochin breeding, developing the Buff and Partridge varieties.

“HEN FEVER” BECOMES AN EPIDEMIC

It was at the Birmingham Exhibition of 1850 that Cochins rocketed to fame. Exhibits of these wondrous, exotic new chickens had the place abuzz with rumours. Spectators went home with wild tales of Cochins that could grow to an immense size; hens that could lay several eggs a day; cocks with a crow similar to the roar of a lion yet would make a gentle, loving house pet. This, plus the idea that breeding them could be very profitable, drove the price of breeding stock sky high. 'Cochin Craze' swept the country.



BUFF COCHINS TO DATE.

WELLS, JONES & WHELAN ED., BUNNEN, ILL.

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Above: Reliable Poultry Journal, 1891

Ornamental chicken breeding had also taken a firm hold in the United States. America's first poultry show was held in Boston public gardens 1849 with over 1400 entries, followed by 12,000 birds being entered the next year! Chickens had previously been deemed quite insignificant, but suddenly wealthy fanciers were

driving prices of select breeds to the modern equivalent of \$30 an egg and \$3,600 for a pair.

The fascination with unusual and fancy chickens continued to expand, which fueled the development of highly focussed breeding programs. The result was a number of new chicken breeds that could pack on more muscle mass with a lower investment in feed. As the price of chicken dropped, it became a much more affordable food item. Eventually, chicken replaced other poultry breeds such as ducks, turkeys and geese as the meat of choice. Today, North Americans consume more chicken than any other meat. The US poultry industry is now valued at around \$48 billion. It's quite remarkable to realize that it all began with a few beautiful, exotic chickens that delighted and captivated people from all levels of society.

Kathy Stevenson, April 2017

Sources:

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