

Rare breed utilities

Fred Hams explains that it's not only the accepted utility breeds that can offer useful and reliable egg-laying performance.

While our list of the strains of breeds that are likely to have utility roles in a domestic or less-specialist environment is initially likely to be dominated by those that were once used in commercial set-ups, it will also include breeds that have played little or no role in industrial poultry farming since the end of WW2. In fact, it's their less common qualities and properties that may make them ideal candidates for very diverse, and occasionally challenging, domestic and utility roles and situations.

Even if the *PP Utility Register* may refer to the value of these strains in specific first crosses, listed strains will, at least until the register is fully established, have to be confined to strains bred to conform to a utility interpretation of an existing standard. Over the years it was admittance to a nationally-agreed

standard – usually administered by the Poultry Club – that defined a breed. This process will feature in a later article but however standardisation was arrived at, it was agreed that the ability to breed true over the generations was essential.

Useful strains

In creating the *PP Utility Register*, an obvious starting point was recognising which strains could be the most 'useful'. But, from a conservation point of view, a far more important aspect would be determining which breeds could best benefit from a well-established utility strain. We'll have to accept that there are a number of breeds that have been selected for so long to solely conform to an interpretation of their exhibition standard, that it makes utility selection unlikely.

This list will include several of the

better-known exhibition heavy breeds, like Cochin, Brahma and Orpington and, but for the existence of just one utility strain, would also include the White Wyandotte. The latter is a very good example of a variety that has split into two differing strains, each so far removed from the other that neither, even in the event of genetic crises, could be used to reinforce the other. More about this facet of genetic conservation later.

Most of the light breeds are such inherently good layers that, other than some of the heavily crested breeds, most could be included in the very large group of breeds that could sustain parallel utility and exhibition strains, each able to 'draw on each other' on, perhaps, the basis of a one-in-four generation swap-over.

One could define a 'utility strain' purely by the weight of eggs produced relative



The 1951 Millwall Show, in the heart of London's Docklands, held at a time when Powell-Owen's 'Beauty with Utility' would have been in the minds of judges he'd trained and influenced as they looked for birds that conformed to a breed's written standard. In fact, many of this school often used the term 'specification'. Here we have to remember 'P-O' had had a major influence in formulating many of the standards for the then popular breeds. The white-coated judge on this occasion is Charlie Sieloff; one of P-O's leading lieutenants. At this same time leading breeders were being asked to assess birds entered in laying trials, to help ensure that these, in turn, didn't stray too far from the breed standard.



It's unlikely that, when Ludlow drew these perfectly-laced Wyandottes, he'd ever even seen any as well marked, but his interpretation of perfection inspired future generations of breeders. This search for perfection (many came close), meant that feather structure had to remain crisp rather than fluffy, and the available genetic pool was limited to the original strains. The utility White Wyandottes that originated as sports from these Silvers probably remain more closely related to them than they are to today's exhibition Whites and, while each retained a similar body shape, the related trait of laying into the moult may now be confined to individuals within the exhibition strains in the silver variety.

to the weight of food consumed. But, in wider economic terms, it's the monetary value of the eggs that's likely to be used to define most utility strains. It could be argued that, as the contents of very dark brown eggs are very similar to any other egg, shell color is a luxury adornment. However, if the very dark brown eggs fetch nearly twice as much as mid-brown eggs in the local farmers' market, this will be what stands these strains apart from others of the same breed.

Another point is that, if selection for fancy points produces a bird that's worth twice as much money as a utility example, then that would make that selection economic.

However, the litmus test of utility value that we assign to a strain will have to remain confined to its eating qualities, egg production and food conversion rate. Economic production can hinge on a range of genetic factors that can be traced right back to the earliest selection and evolutionary pressures that helped create the early strains that went on to make the breed in the first place.

More eggs, less food

Useful traits that can affect the economic value of a strain can encompass a far wider range than the ability to lay the greatest number or weight of eggs, while consuming the lowest possible weight of food. They can also show themselves in

a myriad of ways. The ability to lay a worthwhile number of eggs in old age is obviously useful in a hen that's already proven herself capable of producing very

fecund daughters – a trait that was often associated with Rhodes.

Some of the older pure breeds have, at times in the past, been expected to live in close confinement while others, like Light Sussex, were expected to range far in search of food. Winter laying and, perhaps just as important, the ability to continue to lay as daylight hours decreased, coupled with a tendency to lay into the moult, were claimed by many early White Wyandotte breeders as being first found in their utility strains and, if not selected against, are likely to be retained in some strains of the other Wyandotte varieties.

When it comes to those breeds that have a history of domestic usefulness rather than commercial utility, selection within the breeds is likely to reproduce traits that extend beyond the normal, 'sale-of-eggs-minus-cost-of-feed-equals-profit' equation. It could be that strains of Marsh Daisies, that may well still produce some of the best-flavored meat, could be selected to thrive on wet, boggy ground, as their ancestors did. It could also be that the Morville Heath strain of Jersey Giants, that at one time were selected on the basis of their capacity to lay very large eggs, could be found to be better at handling a bulkier home-produced diet than other breeds. There is even ►



Sometimes hens will moult and then produce feathers that have less clear ground colour than they had before. This can be particularly noticeable in birds that have continued to lay into, or even through, the moult. As laying into the moult is a facet of utility selection, its cause and effect would need to be understood by those seeking to build on the ability to lay a worthwhile number of eggs that's still evident in some strains.



A young Spanish male, from a strain that's been selected to lay over 225 eggs in a year. This, in turn, means that their breeder can afford to keep a large pool of females; the wider breeding program could be a useful counterbalance to those exhibition breeders who tend to breed from a very small group of birds.

the example of the strain of Braekels that, while living on a compost unit, evolved over a few generations to the point where they were still laying 250 reasonably-sized eggs, and were finding over half their food from among the slugs and creepy crawlies that inhabited the site. Anyone who can show that they have, or are selecting, a strain of a pure breed to enhance any economically useful trait, should therefore feel eligible to join the *PP Utility Register*.

Fancy utilities

It's the role of the utility strain within the structure of breeds which are now usually thought of as exhibition or 'fancy', that's particularly interesting. As many of these breeds exist in relatively small numbers, the presence of a parallel strain

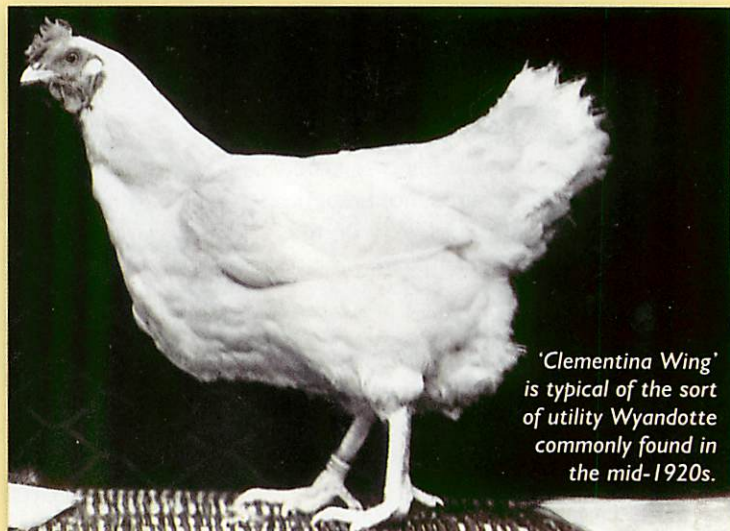
or strains could be crucial in ensuring these breeds' long-term future. The question of breed standard will have to be considered but, in many cases, selection that takes into account the breed's original function will often see a strain return to a type that was the norm when it was originally kept in very large numbers, and far from being in any way degenerate.

The Barred Plymouth Rocks that are featured

in several of our utility lists and are, in many cases, closely related to today's industrial strains, are likely to look very like those being shown in the 1890s. But, because the exhibition strains in this country have deviated so far from the original, it's unlikely that interchange between the two types will contribute anything useful to the other.

In many other breeds the fact that, while exhibitors tend to concentrate within families by breeding 'narrow' (often breeding from a single male and occasionally no more than a pair of sisters), the utility breeder will both need to, and be able to, afford to breed 'broader.' Here, the earlier equation, relating to food cost equaling egg value, should mean that those with a utility strain can afford to maintain a large pool of laying pullets during any pre-breeding evaluation period. The difference between selection for exhibition or fancy points, and for more useful attributes and their effect, will vary massively between breeds. However, two examples could be used to show the possible interrelationship between these aspects.

The Spanish fowl, whose selection by man for an extended white face for nearly a century before the first poultry show, probably resulted in today's show birds being the purest remaining examples of the old western Mediterranean fowl. Just why Huguenot weavers in the Spanish Netherlands and, later, those in London and Bristol, became close to being obsessed by selectively breeding for both large and perfectly white faces, we will never know. Early on they'd reached the point where it was impossible to add anything to the strains that they were using, without losing size and face texture. This in turn resulted in a situation where, in the search for size and stature, breeds



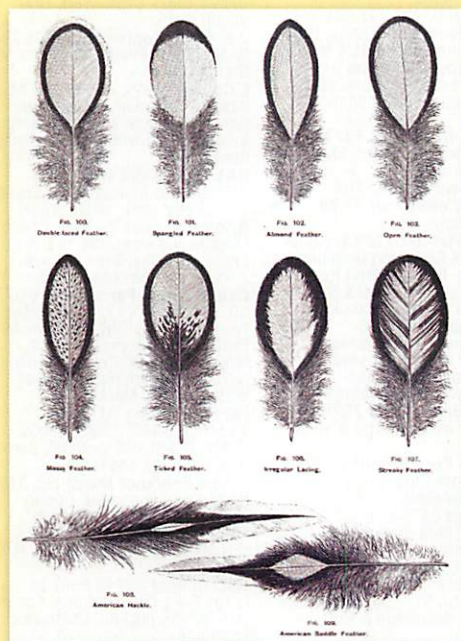
'Clementina Wing' is typical of the sort of utility Wyandotte commonly found in the mid-1920s.

like Minorcas could be judiciously out-crossed, the genetic base of the small family groups that were being bred from, remained very true to an old Western Mediterranean genotype. This was probably more pure than that of the Italian breeds which are thought to have encompassed Asiatic inputs centuries before they were first standardised in the USA.

Spanish rescue

During the 1970s I started a Spanish rescue, breeding from the few remaining descendants in Germany and Britain. By the time the program reached its third generation, females were laying over 200 eggs in their pullet year, and most of their brothers had fine, clear white faces. I distributed the stock widely and, among those who took them up were a handful of breeders who've put in a massive amount of work to produce males with faces as large and white as any seen in early centuries.

As soon as fanciers recognised this potential, little groups of enthusiasts began behaving very like their counterparts of earlier times; rather than competing with each other, they shared breeding stock, appreciating that producing the bird with the largest, whitest face was a sufficient goal. This could be best achieved by breeding 'narrow,' to the extent that if it was found that one hen produced cockerels with exceptionally good faces, then that was



When Ludlow drew these early (c1900) laced Wyandotte feathers, he could well have had the early American description for the breed 'American Sebright' in mind. Yet, in the hands of breeders looking for a well proportioned bird, the exhibition laced Wyandotte retained several of its early utility traits.



SPANISH COCK, AFTER M. JACQUE.



SPANISH FOWL AS NOW EXHIBITED.

When Tegetmeier used this plate to illustrate what he saw as good and bad in Spanish fowl, he cited the early type (after M. Jacque) as the more useful, and considered type of face then (1890s) as being of little utility merit. However, for the past 30 years we've had strains that are capable of producing males with faces every bit as large and smooth as the best of yesterday's examples, yet will produce females capable of laying over 200 eggs in a year. Other strains have been selected, and all descend from the same group of fowls that lay 225 eggs, and produce a percentage of males with only marginally smaller faces.

the hen to breed from. This is fine if there are other strains to fall back on for the odd outcross.

One breeder took a different route, only breeding from hens that laid 225 eggs, arguing that he could then afford to keep a pool of 20 females. That he was able to breed a young male with a face good enough to win at this year's National proves that we have two slightly different strains, each capable of complementing the other, should the need arise. Even the out-and-out exhibition strains will contain all the genetic material to be inherently good layers. With all descending solely from those strains that have been kept in backyards and urban environments for over 200 years, the Spanish is better equipped to live in close confinement than any other breed.

Exhibition-bred Silver Laced Wyandottes, whose lacing saved them from the worst excesses of fluff suffered by their exhibition white cousins, shared with the utility whites an ability to continue to lay well into the moult. Unfortunately, this will often mean that when these birds grow their new feathers, the ground colour is not as clear as it was in its pre-moult phase. If none of the birds that have laid into the moult are retained for further breeding, the ability to do so could be lost. Breeders' approaches to this sort of

problem will vary, but nearly every breed and variety will be genetically that much stronger if a percentage of breeders select with utility and useful traits in mind when making up their breeding pens. At some time, the Utility Register could be extended to include breeders of some of our oldest and rarest breeds, if their utility intent is to move their strain of these less-likely candidates to where they can begin to pay for their keep. ♡



Selection for perfectly-marked feathers that come close to the early ideals of perfection, has many of the laced varieties of Wyandottes retaining a similar type and shape that's remained largely unaltered for more than a 100 years.