

# THE ORPINGTON

by: Elly Vogelaar



## Introduction

It has been more than a hundred years since the Englishman William Cook created this all-round breed, bringing together the good qualities of Asian, American and Mediterranean breeds. Not only the good quality of meat, but also the good laying quality gave the breed a worldwide fame as a dual purpose breed.

In the fifth decade of the last century the interest got lost in most countries. In 1963 there were some buff Orpingtons shown at the Ornithophilia show (NL), which were imported from England by an enthusiastic breeder. They are still there, as well as some other colours. Though never showed in large numbers, we can say that the Orpington is there to stay. With their heavy body, nearly square shaped and the fluffy feathers they do impress people. Not only popular with fanciers, but also with people who keep them for fun and try to keep rare colours, or even create new colours.

## William Cook

William Cook was born in St. Neots, Huntingdon, England in 1849. At the age of 14 he started working as a coachman in Kent, but soon developed an interest in poultry on a neighbour's farm.

Around 1880 he started breeding chickens at Tower House, Orpington, Kent. In 1890 William and his wife Jane, three sons and two daughters, moved to Walden's Manor which he renamed 'Orpington House'. In 1886 he created the first black Orpington. It took several years for the Orpington breed to become popular, but then the business of William Cook and Sons started to grow and he even opened a London office at Queens Yard. In addition to the breeding of poultry he also spent a great deal of time in publishing the 'Poultry Journal',

travelling and giving lectures. He also made an intensive study of diseases in poultry, medicines, poultry food and fattening powder. By 1890 the farm at Orpington House was being run by his eldest child Elizabeth Jane. She was assisted by her brother and sister and she became as expert in poultry raising as her father. In 1902 William Cook was awarded the Poultry Club medal, which was a great honour. His business thrived with poultry farms in both South Africa and the USA. He made visits to both countries although he was not well. In 1904, shortly after returning from America, he fell ill and died from emphysema.



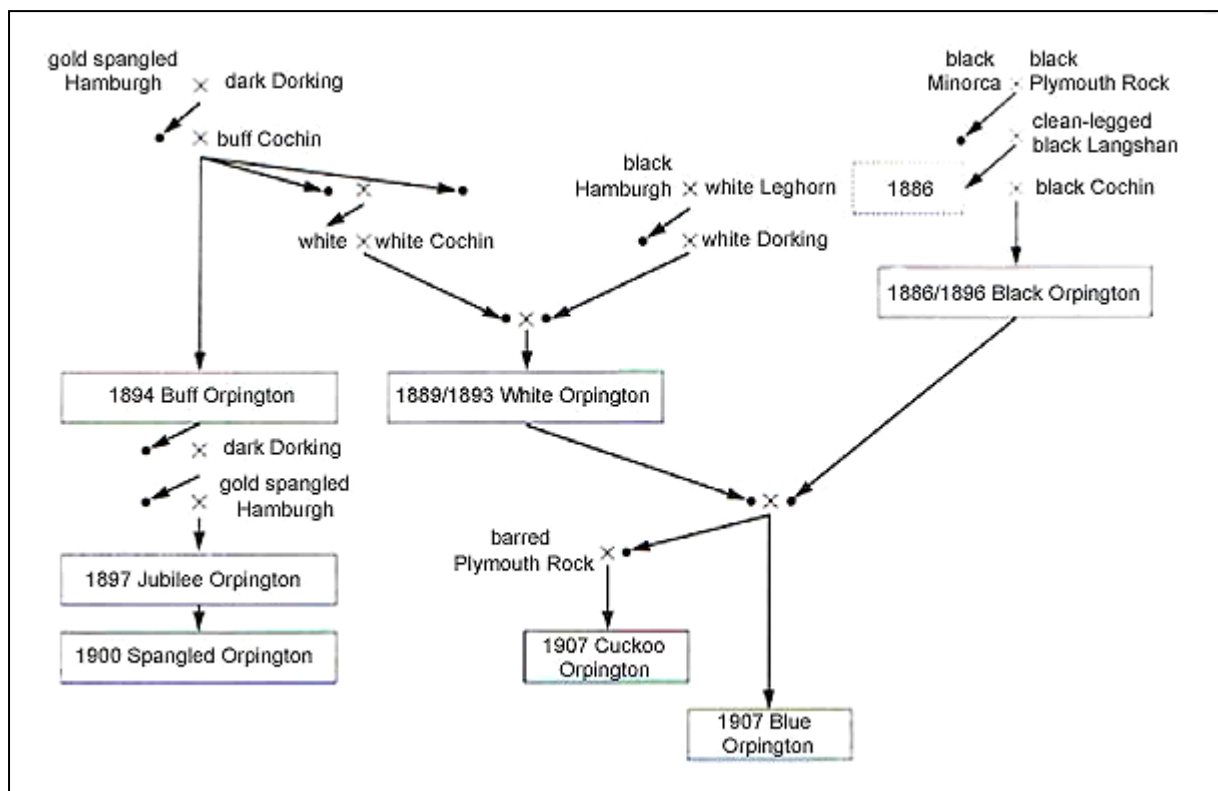
Left: Black Orpington in 1886 (by Ludlow)



**An excerpt of the breed's history**

The Orpington history must be one of the best documented of all poultry breeds. The Orpington were created as good winter layers of brown eggs and excellent table birds. They were easy to breed and grew fast. In 1886 the first Black made its appearance, though some years of hard work must have gone into the breed prior to this date. The Buff variety followed in 1894, the (single combed) White in 1900 and the Blue in 1907. Through the years they changed from utility fowl to show birds; their appearance was altered, they were chosen for plumage and lack of visible shanks.

The scheme below shows how the different varieties were created. As you can see, the Blacks were created with the use of completely different breeds than the Buffs and Whites. There was quite a variation in shapes/sizes between the various colours with the Buffs being quite large and the Blacks a little smaller, just like it still is today, often. The Blues (especially in the UK and Australia) seem to be the biggest, but have less refinement in both type and plumage quality. The Buffs tend to have better shaped tails than the Blacks with too many of the latter carrying Pekin/Cochin-style tails. Today, in Holland, all colour varieties are wanted in the same standard and hallmarks.







**Left: Buff cock at Priscilla Midleton's, England.**

**Photos on this page: José Kramer.**

### **Nature**

Orpingtons are calm and docile and are famous for the good laying quality, even in winter, which not every breeder will confirm. The eggs are of a light colour and rather small for a bird as big as the Orpington. Because breeders usually chose the more heavy typed birds, Orpingtons lost Mediterranean influences and they began having more qualities of the Asian type. They can still lay a lot of eggs if one takes care that the birds do not get too fat. Who seriously wants to breed Orpington needs quite some space.

In the beginning one can sort out some birds with comb failures, but the rest of the lot has to grow out completely before they can be judged properly.

The breed gets broody quite easily, but this is different from colour to colour and from flock to flock. Some hens never get broody; others never before the beginning of April, which is too late for a large breed like them. One normally wants to breed rather early in the year to have the young birds fully grown when the show season starts (in the Netherlands that is October). As long as you have the cocks together with hens or pullets you should regularly check the females for wounds on the back or under the wings. This is where the male can cause damage when mating. Especially the very heavy cocks can cause serious damage. It is said the wounds are caused by the spurs, but usually the wounds are caused by the nails. It makes sense to keep the nails of your males short and not sharp.

Some breeders even breed with pairs. They have the male mate while they keep the female in their hands. Also artificial insemination is done these days. A detailed instruction about that, completed with pictures you can find at the site of the Dutch Orpington club NSODC.



[http://www.nsodc.beko4u.com/index.php?option=com\\_docman&task=cat\\_view&gid=29&Itemid=29](http://www.nsodc.beko4u.com/index.php?option=com_docman&task=cat_view&gid=29&Itemid=29) )

Who wants it the natural way might consider buying chicken-saddles. Saddles are used in England, for example with turkeys (see the article in AE number 1-2005). Nothing for a sober Dutchman, but very effective. Meanwhile they are being sold in Holland too, on the site of José Kramer [www.orpingtons.nl](http://www.orpingtons.nl)



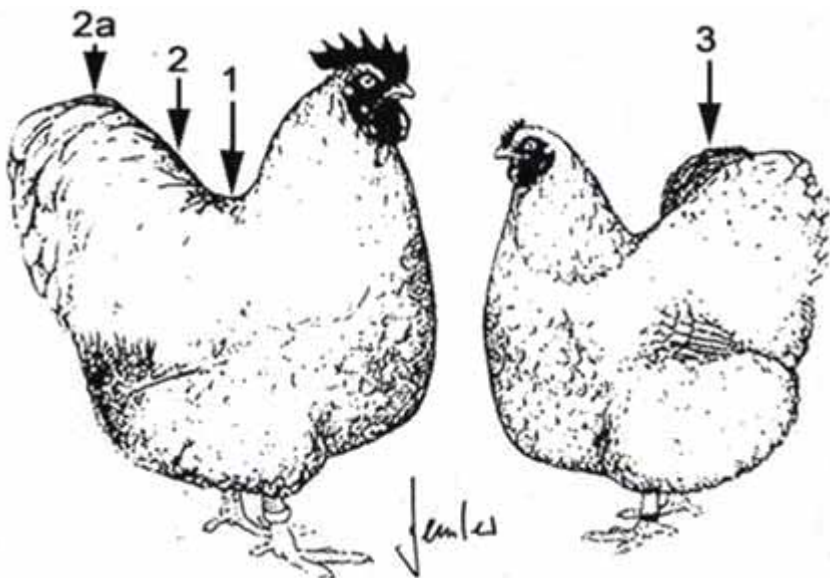
## Description of the Orpington

An Orpington is large, broad and shows a deep body. The typical cube shape makes the total picture. A remarkable appearing because of their huge size and cubic shape, in which the bird's breadth equals its depth and its height. The female shows more thick-set than the male does.



Above: Blue and lavender Orpington at José Kramer's. Photo: José Kramer.

The head seems rather small compared to the body. In Holland the Orpington is recognised with a single comb, middle high. Some males show very large combs and wattles which do not fit with the breed. Eye- and leg-colour depend on the colour of the bird. The neck is not too long and the back, seen from above, should be as broad as the breast. Seen from the side, the line of the breast goes straight down from the wattles and bends backwards as much deep as possible. The back slightly inclines and the cushion or saddle is richly feathered. The main tail feathers should be solid and not too long, covered by the feathers of the saddle in the case of males. In both sexes, the tail should not be rounded like in Cochins. The feathers must be very abundant and soft, without getting disorderly. A good Orpington does show legs; the fluff feather should be at least three fingers wide above the ground.



In the drawings (courtesy to H. Demler, Germany)

(1) The optimal length of the back is 2 to 3 fingers broad (= 3 to 4 cm) between the neck hackle and the start of the saddle hackle. The neck-back-tail line should show a regular curving line with adequate and visible length of the back. It is a fault if the neck hackle is adjacent to the rising tail. In this case the judge would speak of: 'more back length needed' or 'back too short'.

(2) This is an example of an even rise to the tail, to be more

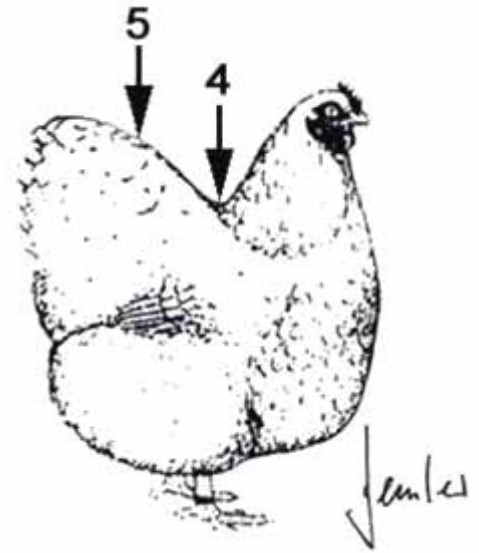
precise, this is the only right line, so without any cushion! We want an all in one sweeping, unbroken line.

(2a) The top (highest point) of the tail is before the end of the tail.

(3) This kind of tail line is called a saddle cushion, and not wished at an Orpington hen. Hens like this should not be bred from.

(4) This is how we want the back-tail line at the hen: flowing and slightly rising to the tail, saddle wide, but smooth and flat, no 'ball' cushion as in the Cochin.

(5) The ideal: a visible back and an even curving top-line neck-back-tail, where the highest point is just before the tail end.



**Below: The typical Orpington tail. Photo: José Kramer.**



## Weight

Dutch Standard: Male 3,5 to 4 kg. Female 3 to 3,5 kg.

German Standard: Male 4 to 4,5 kg. Female 3 to 3,5 kg.

United Kingdom Standard: Male min 4.5kg (9.9lb) Female min 3.6kg (7.94lb)



## Judging

In the UK one judges with a scale of 100 points. All colours can get a maximum of 40 points for shape and size, 10 for the legs and 5 for condition. The 45 points left are in black and white divided into 20 for the head and 25 for colour and feather condition. In buff and blue it is 15 for the head and 30 for colour and feather condition. In Holland and other countries belonging to the Entente Européenne, the different parts are described as outstanding, very good, or insufficient. All positive and negative remarks are noted at the judge's report, followed by a final grade, where 97 (excellent) is the highest awarded number in ranking.



## Recognised colours

In Holland: (large Orpington) black, laced blue, buff, white, jubilee, mottled, red, partridge gold black-laced and crele.

In England: buff, black and blue are the most popular at shows. Other colours as mottled, cuckoo, red and jubilee are recognised and standardised, but are seldom seen on shows.

In the other European countries: mainly as in Holland. In Germany no crele (yet). Birchen is recognised there (this colour has been imported into Holland by Wim Wiechers). In Denmark cuckoo is not recognised, but silver-laced is.

In the USA: Buff, black, white and blue.

In Australia: Black, blue, buff, white and cuckoo. The most commonly seen are Blacks and Buffs with Blues popular in some areas. Whites are uncommon and Cuckoo may be only shown in the state of Victoria where their standards were once drawn up. There are also Splash Orpingtons shown in some places.

## THE COLOUR VARIETIES RANKED IN POPULARITY



### Buff

The most popular colour worldwide. That has always been so, since the creation in 1894 by William Cook, and this was the first colour to “come back” to Holland after the Orpington had not been seen on shows for many years. The buff colour had and still have a club of their own in UK. The club was founded in 1898: Her Majesty Queen Elisabeth is the Patron of the club.

The Buff, Black and other colours on English shows were showed in different classes as well as judged in different classes. This way one could win a prize in the category “best Orpington other than Buff”.

**Left: Buff cockerel by R. Jacobs (NL), Tilburg 2005. Photo: Aviculture Europe.**

In buff Orpington the even colour all over the bird is more important than the exact shade of the colour. A slightly lighter or darker shade is not so important, as long as the bird does not show any white, or pepper in the tail. The breast colour might be too light sometimes, nearly mealy. Difference in colour of neck and tail feathers and body feathers is not good either. Especially when the males show red shoulders or a too dark (copper-coloured) tail.

### Right:

**Beautiful Buff Orpingtons at Patrick Niks (NL). At the moment he doesn't exhibit his Buffs, but he uses them to breed the Red Orpington. Photo: Patrick Niks.**

Once the ideal colour is bred, it is important to keep the colour even until the show season. Rain and sunshine can play an evil part there. To keep the ideal



colour the birds should be kept in shady coops or even be kept inside if there is too much sun or the morning dew has not disappeared yet. Make sure your breeding stock does not show any white at all. This indicates the loss of pigmentation. The eye colour of the buff Orpington is brown-red. The beak is of a flesh-colour and the legs are white.

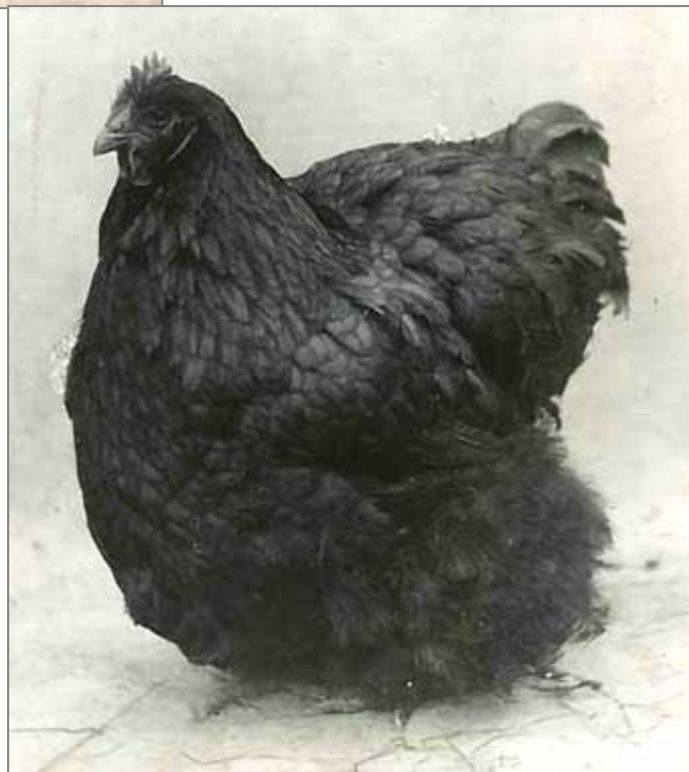


**Above: Black cockerel by Fred Swindells (UK) Club Champion in the year 1933.**

**Right: Orpington Female, Black Medal winner Show Champion Kettering (UK) in 1934.**

**Both photos: Arthur Rice Collection.**

**Courtesy Arthur Rice & and Scribblers Publishings.**



### **Black**

This is the second popular colour after buff. It also happens to be the oldest colour known in Orpington, although it also is the colour that changed the most since the original of 1886. The original black Orpington was meant to be a bird to produce eggs as you can see them in old pictures; not as heavy as the birds are today. Cook kept improving the Blacks until 1896.

The massive type we know nowadays is from about 1930. In those days the black Orpington was for many years showed in two classes. "Old type" (the utility fowl) and "New type" (the ornamental fowl for the show).

Often people think breeding the black colour is easy to do. Maybe, looking at the other colours, that is true, but the demands on black Orpingtons are very high. Not only the beetle-green shining of the colour but also the broadness of the feather and even comb and wattles are more severely judged. Birds with no shining in the colour or that show a purple shine do not belong in a show cage, nor in your breeding stock.





**Above and right:  
The black Orpington at Eric Te Selle (NL).  
Photo: Aviculture Europe.**

Eye colour of a black Orpington is dark brown till brownish black. The beak is black and the legs are of a dark slate colour with black shining. The bottom of the feet is white.

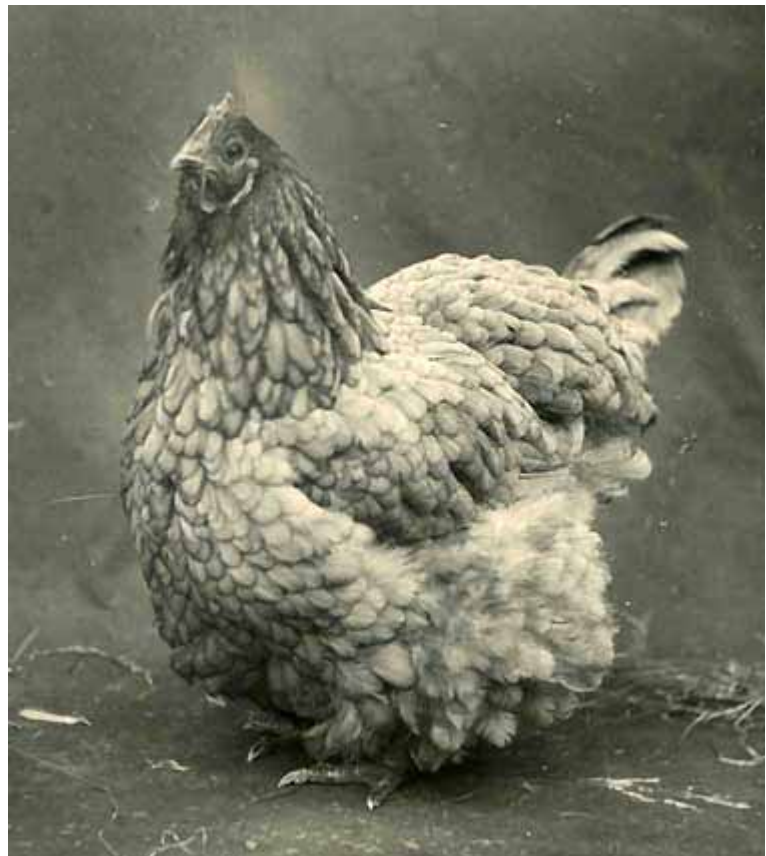
### **Blue (laced)**

Although there are quite some breeders of the colour, they are not that often showed. This creation was made by Elizabeth Jane, the daughter of William Cook in 1907, but was not popular until 1910.

**Right: Orpington Female, Blue. Winner at Brackley and many other Shows in 1932 for H. Whitley.**

**Photo: Arthur Rice Collection.**

**Courtesy Arthur Rice & and Scribblers Publishings.**



Blue is a diluted (intermediary) colour that can have many different shades. The ideal blue is a matter of taste. In the standard we read "a middle slate colour". Most important is that the colour is even all over the bird. The neck



and hackle feathers of the male and the neck feathers of the female are a shade darker than the rest of the body. It is laced blue, so each feather shows a dark blue lacing. Blue is bred in several ways. If you put blue to blue 50% of the chicks will be blue. The other 50% varies from white (splash) to (nearly) black.



Splash can not be showed in Holland, but in Denmark and in the USA one can. Often, one breeds a black male to a blue female from which the black offspring can be also showed. This combination can not be taken year after year because the blue colour will get too dark. This can be changed every few years by breeding blue to blue again. Another popular way to breed blue is crossing a splash male to a black female, which according to the book gives 100% blue offspring. Although they differ in shade and are not always even in colour. The best result you will get when the black female is bred out of blue parents.

**Left: Blue hen. Photo: José Kramer.**

**Right: Dark blue and Splash at Harmen de Kok's.**

**Photo: José Kramer.**

To keep the right shade of blue you should keep them in a run where you have shadow all day. Like the Buff, the Blue lightens up when the birds are kept in the sun. They tend to get a brown shining. This brown is not the same as 'gold' in the hackle, Robbert van Til tells us: "In blue Orpingtons you often have a gold factor which really should be a silver



factor. This gold-factor is sex-linked and a female that has gold or silver, got it from her father. In chicks you will see a buff coloured spot on the head or some buff coloured feathers round the beak. This can be lost when the birds are adult and without knowing you breed on with it. After some generations you might have a cock or a hen with gold in the hackle and on their wings again and that is not what we want". The eye colour of the blue Orpington is dark brown to brown-black; the beak is dark horn-coloured and the legs are blue with some black shining. The bottom of the feet is white.

**Left: Blue cock with a brown shade caused by the sun.**

**Photo: José Kramer.**

## White

In fact this is the second oldest colour variety of the breed. The exact year is unknown, but it is mentioned in 1887 and 1889, as well as 1892 and 1893, but at least they were there before the Buff where created and had a rose-comb. The single comb white Orpington is from 1899, which is later than the creation of the buffs. By the way, the three oldest colours- black, buff and white- all existed in rose-comb varieties, but never became really popular, not even in England. But never the less the variety is now, over a hundred years later, still recognized in the English standard. As far as we know, the rose-comb variety is only bred and showed in Germany in the buff colour. Once the Whites had a club of their own, but later they got to belong to the 'Variety Orpington Club'.

**Right: Orpington Male, White. Winner at 1935 Crystal Palace Show (UK) for W. Fielden.**

**Foto: Arthur Rice Collection.**

**Under: Orpington Male, White. Winner at the 2007 Avicorni Show (NL) for Ferry van Kasteren.**

**Photo: Aviculture Europe.**

Through the years, white Orpington were hardly showed, although today more breeders tend to keep them. To breed true Whites the male as well as the females from the breeding pen should be as white as possible. Best is silver white. At first the young birds may be white as snow, but if you keep them in the sun they might turn slightly yellow, especially the male birds. That is the main reason why young white Orpington are often kept inside till after the show season. There are even breeders who think that feeding maize influences the colour. The problems with the Whites are the often large comb and wattles. That might be caused because they are kept inside? In the dark combs grow larger. It is a natural reaction of the body to little sun. The birds can only take up vitamin D on the non-feathered parts of the skin. So if they do not get enough light these parts of the body will grow. The breeder has the choice; either keep them outside and have smaller combs and birds that look a bit cream, or keep them inside with good colour and larger combs. Who wants to show white birds must realise what he is beginning with, because if you want to compete with the best you have to wash your birds. Some even use a silver-shampoo to get them even more white. Dog shampoo for white dogs is also used.

The eye colour of the whites is brown-red, beak and legs are white.

**See Part 2 for the other colour varieties.**

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