Above: a trio of Sebastopol; the gander (left) is too coarse in head.

Much that has been written, and generally accepted, regarding the emergence of the Sebastopol Goose on to the ‘poultry arena’, has been speculative or merely the repeated errors of previous authors. It is hoped this summary will set the record straight.

The first reported importation of the breed occurred when John Harvey sent a pair of smooth-breasted, trailing-feathered, red-beaked, white geese from Sebastopol, on the Crimea, as a gift to his nephew, Thomas Harvey Dutton Bayly, via Lord Dufferin’s yacht, the *Ermina*, and they arrived in England the spring of 1860.  

From the autumn of 1860 onwards, Harvey (as he was known) Bayly regularly exhibited his Sebastopol Geese at the major British poultry shows and very soon “several pens”, i.e. pairs of birds, were to be found at the shows. Whether due to badly lit venues or to personal perception, the beak colour of the Sebastopol Geese exhibited at this time is described as being “yellow” by the reporter for *The Field* (1860).  

As Harvey Bayly’s birds were accepted as being the only specimens imported into Britain at that time, it remains unexplained how, in 1863, a number of pens of geese, resembling those exhibited by Harvey Bayly, are reported on at the South of Ireland Poultry Association Show; these were entered under the title of Danubian Geese. Nothing is known of the origin of these birds but, from that time onwards, Irish breeders regularly offered their birds for sale in the British poultry-press, in both white and in grey colour-forms. It is possible such birds could have been selected from among those entering Ireland from Continental Europe as part of the fattening trade, as mentioned by Edward Brown & Bruno Dürigen, and only coming to notice when Harvey Bayly put his birds on display.

Around 1864 Harvey Bayly disposed of most of his poultry to engage in his favourite pursuits ~ horses and hounds; his friend and neighbour, Henry Savile took-over his waterfowl and continued to exhibit Sebastopol Geese over the next five years or so.

Foot-note: Henry Savile was a prominent figure in horse-racing circles. When the Derby was run at the Epson Race Course for the first time in 1872, his horse, Cremorne, won by the narrowest of margins and helped to save the family’s fortunes, as his owner, who had fallen upon hard times, had bet his entire estates upon his horse winning. That same summer Cremorne also won the Grand Prix de Paris. In all, Cremorne ran twenty-six races, winning twenty and finishing second four times. As homage to the noble equine, when Cremorne died in 1883, the family interred his remains at Rufford Abbey, where he lays today along-side the graves of the family’s dogs.

William Tegetmeier includes the breed in the first edition of *The Poultry Book* (1867), in which he repeats, almost verbatim, the account from the *ILN* (1860), but omitting some details of their importation and the colour of the beak and feet. However, Elizabeth Watts, also writing in 1867, furnishes information on the flesh-colour of the breed: The bills are flesh-colour, and the legs and feet deep ruddy orange. This corresponds with Mrs. Harvey’s account published four years later. She says of them:

.. the live stock of the yacht was increased by the kind gift (rather to Mr. Harvey’s horror) of a pair of quite lovely geese. We had not believed the usually despised goose could be so beautiful a bird. These geese were white as snow, had backs and wings covered with long curling feathers like ostrich plumes, and had bright pink bills and feet.

In the second edition of *The Poultry Book* (1873), Tegetmeier adds to his text on the Sebastopol Goose a brief sentence, taken from Darwin, which has caused a little confusion regarding the date of Sebastopol Geese arriving in Britain.

Lewis Wright repeats Tegetmeier’s (1873) text, thereby lending credence to its accuracy; he also presents an engraving of birds (see below) which he states had been displayed in the *Jardin d’Acclimation*, Paris, many years previously (This is discussed in a forthcoming chapter), and says:

The average weight of Sebastopol Geese is about ten pounds each. The first specimens were imported from the Black Sea, whence the name is perfectly appropriate. They breed freely with common geese, the progeny generally showing the peculiar...
plumage in a modified or inferior degree. It is worth notice, as showing the analogous character of the plumage to that of the Frizzled Fowls, that in some specimens the feathers on the neck are also actually reversed, though this is not usually the case. 31

Charles Darwin, writing on the diversity of forms within domestic waterfowl, refers to Abraham Bartlett, who at the time was Superintendent of the Zoological Society of London’s (ZSL) collection at Regent’s Park, and he displayed before the Society in the February of 1860, the head and neck of a goose with the feathering growing in a reversed direction. 9 It is this reference that The Domestic Waterfowl Club takes as proof such geese had arrived in England prior to the Harvey/Bayly importation; it is possible but, so far, not provable that this was the case. 21

The evidence to refute such a claim is as follows:

1. Darwin does not link this reference with his discussion on the plumage of Sebastopol Geese.
2. There is no documentary record of the breed existing in Britain (including Ireland) prior to the Harvey / Bayly importation.

3. As Harvey Bayly received just one pair of geese in the spring of 1860, it is extremely unlikely he had one slaughtered and then sent a part of it to Bartlett; if so, it has to be considered how he was able to exhibit a pair of Sebastopol Geese at the Crystal Palace Show that autumn.

4. Abraham Bartlett, prior to his appointment with the ZSL, had made a living as a taxidermist, and it seems unlikely that he would dismembered a specimen that could have been mounted and sold, in favour of exhibiting just the head and neck of what might have been a very singular specimen. It is most probable that Bartlett’s specimen was something other than a Sebastopol Goose.

Foot-note: The Domestic Waterfowl Club is also mistaken in its statement that Sebastopol Geese “may occasionally be short tempered having the Russian fighting Geese / German Kampfganze in their makeup.” There is no documentary evidence to support this statement; on the contrary, most authors have described the breed as being quiet and docile in temperament. If the Domestic Waterfowl Club has knowledge of any introduction of foreign blood into the breed, this must have occurred in recent times with indiscriminate breeders being responsible.

In Britain, from the late 1870’s, the breed was represented in two distinct forms of plumage; one following the smooth-breasted, trailing-feather type of the Crimean imports, and the other displaying extended and curled feathers over the entire body, excepting the head and neck.

Harrison Weir sketched some of the Hon. Lady Dorothy Nevill’s* Sebastopol Geese (see below) prior to her vacating her Hampshire home, the Dangstein Estate, near Petersfield, Hampshire, in 1878.

Weir says of Sebastopol Geese:

These, though small, are peculiarly attractive, and by some thought beautiful, . . . They were first imported into England by a well-known poultry and waterfowl Fancier residing at Biggleswade, about the time of the Russian War, now some fifty years ago. Coming as they did, from the neighbourhood of Sebastopol, they were accordingly so named by their owner. If not ornamental, at least they are peculiar, having the wing coverts much twisted, curled, and elongated, while the primaries and secondaries are singularly formed. . . In colour they are mostly of a mottled grey, with more or less white. They are neat and compact in form, hardy in constitution, but not over-prolific. Though scarce in England at present [1901-2], they are said to be fairly common in some of the northern parts of Russia.

The white which are the most fancied, and certainly on a lake or pond with varied verdant surroundings, and in the meadows or tangled bush environments, they present a most pleasurable appearance. The best and most useful hitherto seen have been some thus owned, and others bred at Daugstein [sic], the late beautiful home of the Honourable Lady Dorothy Neville [sic], where, though a singular adornment, they were grown for table purposes. When fat they usually weighed ten to twelve pounds, while in flavour the flesh is remarkably rich, and of the highest quality.30

*In Weir’s text for Neville read Nevill, & for Daugstein read Dangstein.

Foot-note: Lady Dorothy Nevill [1826 - 1913] née Walpole, had swiftly married her cousin Reginald in 1848, following an alleged incident in a summerhouse that ruined her reputation and prevented her from ever being received by Queen Victoria. Shortly after their marriage the couple purchased the Dangstein Estate, near Petersfield, Hampshire, England. The architect of the house, Mr. Knowles, had made an attempt to construct a dwelling in the form of a huge Grecian temple for one Captain Lyons. Weir’s sketch of the Sebastopol at “Daugstein” was made at some time prior to the sale of the house in 1878 (necessitated by the death of her husband who, in an attempt to curtail his wife’s
From the first announcement of this breed in England, in 1860, it appears to have been in the domain of the upper-classes. Harvey Bayly and his friend Henry Savile of Rufford Abbey, Nottinghamshire, were landed gentry, and Lady Dorothy a somewhat eccentric, but well-connected member of the aristocracy. In such circles the Sebastopol Goose was obviously the one bird that one had to be seen to possess, especially when the breed became favoured by members of the Royal Family.

H.R.H. Edward, Prince of Wales was a regular visitor to Rufford Abbey during the Doncaster horse-racing season, and it is probable that from there he obtained the Sebastopol Geese kept at the Sandringham Estate. In 1883 the Prince and H.R.H. Princess Alexandra presented an assortment of livestock from their menagerie at Sandringham to be sold at the Countess of Leicester’s stall at the fund-raising bazaar in aid of the Norwich and Norfolk Hospital Building Fund. The gift included white Angora Goats (from stock originally kept in the menagerie at Buckingham Palace by H.M. Queen Victoria), white kittens descended from a favourite cat of the Princess’s, white rabbits and two pairs of Sebastopol Geese.

Foot-note: In January of 1889, Harvey Bayly had an accident when he was horse-riding in the Nottinghamshire countryside. He appeared to have suffered nothing more than a sprained wrist, but his demeanour became noticeable altered and he took no pleasure in the activities that had previously occupied him so fully.

A month after the accident Harvey was in London attending some meetings, when he took his own life; possibly due to some un-diagnosed injury from the riding accident that led to a confused state of mind, or depression. At his death his estate was valued at £43k ~ the equivalent of £2m today. He was greatly mourned by his friends and acquaintances, but his death was overshadowed in the major newspapers that were
reporting on the double demise, in that same week, of Crown Prince Rudolph of Austria and Baroness Maria Vetsera at Mayerling.

Edward Brown, knighted for his services to the poultry industry in 1930, was never certain as to the origin or date of importation of the Sebastopol Goose. In 1893 he says:

SEBASTOPOL, or DANUBIAN. It is under the latter name that we generally see this breed at Continental shows, and that is probably the more correct term, for there does not seem any reason to connect it with the town of Sebastopol. Possibly the name may be explained by the fact that it was brought over to this country about the time of the Crimean War [1853-56] by ships returning from the Black Sea, and the name would be given at that time.

It is clear Sir Edward never acquainted himself with the reports of the breed’s importation in any of the 1860 periodicals. Had he followed any of the clues set out in Tegetmeier’s or Wright’s texts back to these documents, or had seen Mrs Harvey’s account, he would have been more enlightened. He describes the breed thus:

The great peculiarity of the Danubian is that the hind-quarters of the bird are covered with loose, shaggy feathers, long enough to trail on the ground. . . The plumage of the Danubian goose is pure white; in some specimens grey or light brown patches are to be found, but the correct colour is white. . . They are gentle in disposition, and thrive well with other fowls, being also good foragers and look well after their own living on pastures.  

In the spring of 1893, the sixteen year old American heiress, Cornelia Martin, married William Craven, the 4th Earl of Craven, in New York and brought a dowry of $1m into the family funds when she came to England as Countess of Craven. Cornelia Craven had a keen interest in poultry and waterfowl and was elected as a member of the Waterfowl Club in the spring of 1898. She kept Sebastopol Geese on the moat at her country home, Coombe Abbey, Nottinghamshire; these were bred and exhibited from her collection of poultry managed by William Isherwood.

Judging from the photograph (left) of the Sebastopol Geese kept at Coombe Abbey, they lacked the volume of feather displayed in Lord Alington’s birds.  

Foot-note: Cornelia’s parents, Cornelia and Bradley Martin, inherited their unexpected wealth (approx $151m in today’s terms) from Mrs Martin’s father. Mrs Martin had a penchant for jewellery, and obtained many pieces of great provenance, such as the tiara and bracelets from the parure of diamonds and rubies which Napoleon I gave to his second wife, Empress Marie Louise; and those reputed to have once been in the possession of Queen Marie Antoinette. Cornelia Craven inherited the gems on the death of her mother in 1920, but the tiara and bracelets vanished from public gaze until Cornelia’s own death in 1961, when her personal possessions were sold at Sotheby’s Auction Rooms.

Lord Alington was a friend of H.R.H. Edward, Prince of Wales (later to become H.M. King Edward VII), sharing interests in horse-racing and the Prince visited his home at Crichel, Dorset, where Sebastopol Geese were kept among a collection of white animals and birds; and these were photographed in 1905.  

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Edward Brown wrote again on the breed in 1906. His preferred name for the breed being *Danubian* Goose, and giving its nomenclature in various languages:

- **English**: Danubian or Sevastopol;
- **French**: Frise or Sebastopol; **German**: Lodengans*;
- **Italien, Spanish**: Danubio.

It appears the type-setter had difficulty in knowing which language favoured ‘v’ in the spelling of the name; and mistook the ‘ck’ in the spelling of *Lockengans* for a ‘d’—a mistake that has been repeated in texts as recent as 1999.

Of their origin Brown says:

We have been unable to obtain any reliable information as to the origin of this race of geese, which appears widely distributed in the countries surrounding the Black Sea. . . These birds were first seen about the time of the Crimean War, and the earliest specimens imported into England were received in 1859. Whether they came from the Sevastopol district there is no record, but that name was given to them then. Later the term Danubian has been adopted. . . In England the race has not attained any great amount of popularity, but we have seen them frequently in Continental exhibitions. . . The Danubian goose is very quiet in temperament.

The description is given as:

In body these birds are long in comparison with their depth, more like a duck, and they are very level with the ground, the neck is of medium length, fine for a goose; head like that of the Embden, except that the bill is rosy-red, as are the legs and feet, the eye is bright blue. The peculiarity of this race is that the wing and back body feathers are elongated, frequently trailing on the ground, the long feathers are very slender and often curled, as they are not webbed they have a somewhat draggled appearance, another result being that the birds cannot fly. They, however, are active walkers. Weight: males, 10 to 11 pounds, females, 8 to 9 pounds. In colour the majority of specimens are white, and they are certainly the more pleasing in appearance. We have, however, seen many specimens on the Continent of Europe in which grey or light brown patches were present. The plumage colour is very uncertain, and the Whites are due to careful selection. Among some of the earlier imported birds a few had a small tuft on the top of the head, and we have been informed that many birds having that decoration are to be found in Southern Russia and Asia Minor.
Edward Brown continues to propound his theory of the breed’s earlier importation in his books; and it is this ‘expert’s’ text that many authors have mistakenly accepted to be correct. Unfortunately, Brown, who has been so disparaging about the lack of references in other authors’ works, gives none himself in the case of Sebastopol Geese. In his 1929 work, he says:

**Origin.**—No information is available as to its origin of this race of geese. They are widely distributed in the countries surrounding the Black Sea. . . During visits paid to Hungary and the Balkan countries numbers of birds with loose feathers were met with in the regions of the Lower Danube.§

**History.**—These birds were first known to British Breeders at the time of the Crimean War [1853-56], and the earliest specimens imported are stated to have been received in 1859. Whether these birds came from Sebastopol, as the name then given implied, is not known. Later the name Danubian was adopted. 6

Brown remains as blinkered as ever on the original importation and, without giving any references, makes statements he cannot possibly substantiate.

§ In this region, in 1878, it is reported: “Further are flocks of beautiful Danubian geese, all white, with long silky plumes fluttering at the side and on the back of the bird, seemingly ready to be detached and blow away by the wind.” 7

The Sebastopol Goose was regularly exhibited at poultry shows in England throughout the 19th century, although no official description existed to serve as a standard for the breed and they are not mentioned in any editions of the Waterfowl Club’s Standards 1892 – 1897.10

At the turn of the 19th century the fortunes of the Sebastopol Goose in Britain began to wane and, by the 1930’s, they had become very scarce.

Reginald Appleyard of the Priory Waterfowl Farm, Ixworth, Suffolk, was one of the few people to persevere with the breed.

In his book Geese, first published in 1933, and in his promotional pamphlets throughout the 1940’s, Reginald Appleyard presents a photograph (below) showing long-feathered, smooth-breasted white geese.

![Photo. “A trio of Sebastopol Geese. The flowing mane of feathers, more pronounced in some than others, makes this variety most attractive.................. .”](image)

This variety is now rare, and should really be placed under the heading of ornamental geese; yet it is just as good as other varieties from a table point of
view. Medium-sized, snow white, lots of long feathers on its back and long feathers hanging down, often touching the ground; hardy, free breeder, very fertile, very quaint and out of the ordinary, and most certainly arouses the interest of all who see them.²

(Photo reproduced by kind permission of Mrs Margaret Hundy)

The Sebastopol Goose had become so scarce that it is absent from the list of breeds obtainable from members in the Year Books of the British Duck Keepers Association (1949) and the British Waterfowl Association (BWA) (1950); and only Reginald Appleyard lists the breed in his advertisements in these publications.

Following the end of WWII, the breed became more or less moribund in mainland Britain, and when Lt. Col. A.A. Johnson took over the Priory Waterfowl Farm on Reginald Appleyard’s retirement, there were none left on the property. However, Reginald Appleyard knew where examples of the breed could be obtained, and relayed this information to a young man he had encouraged in waterfowl husbandry since first encountering him as a school-boy ~ John Hall of Chediston, near Halesworth, Suffolk.

In the late 1950’s- early 1960’s John followed his mentor’s advice and obtained very representative specimens of the breed from groups of geese that were being shipped from Ireland to the docks at Liverpool, and thence to fattening-yards in Norfolk; these were of the smooth-breasted, long-feathered type. This was a turning-point in the fortunes of the Sebastopol’s survival. John obtained breeding-stock consisting of a white pair and one buff-coloured female with white flight feathers; this buff female was paired with a Brecon Buff Gander and produced all buff offspring, some of which had trailing feathers. From these youngsters the best gander was paired with the original buff goose and by selecting the best-feathered youngsters a good strain of buff-coloured Sebastopol’s was established. Like-wise, the best-feathered white birds were selected, and after some years the occasional white female with ‘curled’ feathers began to appear; eventually a curled buff-coloured female occurred. Coloured forms of the breed have been mentioned by Edward Brown in the 19th century. John Hall maintained breeding-stock and contact with those to whom he sold stock birds, thus ensuring their continuance.¹²

Also, the late 1950’s, Enid Manasseh, of Send, Surrey, obtained a different strain of Sebastopol Geese from those available to John Hall; they were of the all-over curly form, and had bright pink/red beaks ~ just as originally described. Unfortunately, Miss Manasseh never divulged the source of these birds to the Public. This strain, having very poor fertility levels, became amalgamated with other strains and eventually died-out in its pure form.

Left: One of Miss Manasseh’s birds in 1964.

Enid Manasseh referred to the bird shown as:
The original very fluffy type, illustrated in Lewis Wright’s Book of Poultry, 1902, has a longer body and shorter neck than most domestic geese. The other type which is illustrated in Appleyard’s book on Geese, must have been crossed as they are the usual shape for domestic geese and, instead of fluffy feathers all over, have
very long feathers hanging down from their back and wings 18ins long. Both types are pure white and their bills and legs may be pink or orange. 15

Regarding the above statement on ‘type’, it can be seen from the early illustrations (1860, 1873 & 1902) that the Sebastopol Goose displays two forms of plumage development. The “original” type is surely those shown in the engraving in the ILN of 1860, which Appleyard’s birds resemble.

Above: Sebastopols, drawing from 1887.

It was not until 1982 that the Sebastopol Goose appeared in the Poultry Club of Great Britain’s (PCGB) Standards. However, the description followed the American Standard of 1938 (et sec) ~ the type with all-over curly plumage. The facts that both plumage forms were present in Britain at that time, and the German Standards (1934, et sec), while accepting both feather-types, preferred the long-feathered type, appeared to have been over-looked.

To the argument for Standardisation of both types was added the fact Hadlow College, Kent, had established that continuous breeding using only curly-type birds leads to a lack of width in feather, and eventually produces a bird with
plumage resembling that of the Silkie Fowl; a most undesirable trait. The BWA was immediately lobbied for acceptance of both feather-types to the Standard; this was achieved in June, 1985, and eventually published in Waterfowl Yearbook 1987-88. Both types, in White and in Buff plumage, appear in the editions of the PCGB Standards from 1997; and the BWA Standards from 1999. However, the BWA presently continues to accept Edward Brown’s unsubstantiated account of the breed’s importation.

The present-day standard-bred Sebastopol Goose differs from Harvey Bayly’s original imports in being required to be a little a larger in size and having orange, not red, beaks; and displaying two distinct plumage-forms and a coloured variety. The breed has, at least, achieved its place in the British Standards which should, hopefully, ensure its continued existence.

The history of the breed in Europe, the USA & Australia is the subject of the final chapter on Sebastopols.

References


Photo: Sebastopol geese at the author’s in 1979.