

WELSUMMERS AND THEIR EGGS: A UNIQUE COMBINATION

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In the Netherlands, a great number of Welsummer eggs no longer are what they used to be; they are too small and too light in colour. The reason is that Dutch breeders are selecting predominantly for the birds' exterior, they believe the Welsummer needs to conform to the breed's standard and win prizes at poultry shows. Egg production is of lesser importance as these are only needed these during the breeding season.

I am of the opinion that if we are losing the large production of the large dark brown speckled eggs of our Welsummers, we also lose the real Welsummer. As this quality is a true characteristic of the breed.

In this article I would like to talk about the origins of my current Welsummer breeding program; a hobby which arose from the desire to preserve the unique qualities of this relatively rare traditional Dutch chicken breed the Welsummer for the future.

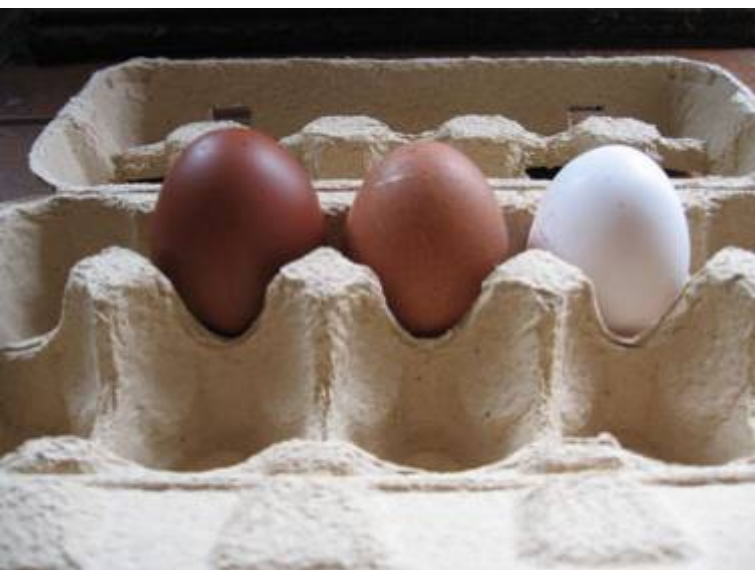
These days people no longer concern themselves with the Welsummers' egg production and shell colour as was the case more than 80 years ago. In those days a fierce battle took place in the town of Welsum. As exclusively the



largest and darkest eggs were set, the poorest layers were unwittingly but systematically selected to breed with.

Chicken breeder Schokkenkamp tried to increase the production of his business by crossing with Leghorns, by contrast his competitor Beumer wanted to improve the breed using the in those days frowned upon method of 'inbreeding'. The Beumer's hens produced fewer but larger eggs and of a dark brown colour. Not only these two men were involved in arguments about the best way to increase production, the relationships in and around the town also suffered.

The fact was that during months of high egg prices Welsummers produced fewer eggs, which meant that in the long run they were unable to survive as a utility fowl.



From left to right: Utility Welsummer egg, Exhibition Welsummer egg and Leghorn egg.

On several occasions during the 1920s Welsummer eggs were exported from The Netherlands to Great Britain. The British Welsummer breeders continued to focus on the production of large dark brown eggs.

Hence the idea came to me to import fertile eggs from Great Britain with a view to improve the shell colour, egg size and production of the Dutch Welsummer. The British Welsummer has the same appearance, both in colour (red partridge - a unique colour which only occurs in

Welsummers) and type, as the Dutch Welsummer, this in contrast with the German Welsummer. The British standard is also exactly the same as the Dutch one.

In Great Britain there also exist two distinct ways/trends for Welsummer breeders: breeders who keep Welsummers for exhibition purposes and those who breed Welsummers for the high production of dark brown eggs.

The British themselves distinguish between Exhibition Welsummers and Utility Welsummers. Breeders of both types can be found at several of the national shows, because it is possible to participate in Egg Competitions at these shows. The British Welsummer Club has even developed a standard for the Welsummer egg, which sets out exactly the qualities the Welsummer egg has to conform to.

During the anniversary show of the Dutch Welsummer Club in 2009 initial contacts were made with British breeders. Namely the Secretary of the British Welsummer Club Mr Geoffrey Johnson and their website editor Mr Michael Hart attended this show in Welsum (see our February edition of 2010).



Right: Geoffrey Johnson and Michael Hart in Welsum.

In the summer of 2010 I crossed the Channel and spent a week in the beautiful



Peak District where I enjoyed the hospitality of Mr Hart and his wife.

Mr Hart organised introductions to 2 breeders of Utility Welsummers from whom I would receive fertile eggs. Over the years these 2 breeders have won several prizes at a number of important shows. In addition I would take fertile eggs of his own Welsummers with me, as Mr Hart too breeds Welsummers for their beautiful eggs.

Right: British Utility Welsummers.

When I visited these breeders and saw their Welsummers' eggs I got a bit of a shock; these eggs were much bigger and darker brown in colour compared to the eggs of my own birds, and to the eggs that are shown at the club meetings / shows of the Dutch Welsummer Club.



I weighed a number of eggs, the majority weighed more than 70 grams and some eggs even weighed more than 80 grams! At the last club meeting/show of our Welsummer Club the majority of the eggs of the standard size Welsummer barely reached the minimum weight of 60 grams.



Left: British Utility Welsummer eggs.

I also noticed that the British Utility Welsummers are a bit larger in body than the Dutch Welsummers. The head features however are rather too large for Dutch standards.

Below: British rooster Utility Welsummer with a large comb.

Below Left: British Utility Welsummer hen with only little peppering.



I also didn't find the detailed peppering of the Dutch birds. One also observes a lot of hens with little or no peppering on the wings, which as a result consist entirely of red feathers. At times the roosters too showed a little white or even completely white primaries. I noticed in both the roosters and hens that the tail feathers are not always well positioned.

This indicates the difference in priorities for the Utility Welsummers and the Exhibition Welsummers.

I brought home 56 eggs in total. Of these 25 hatched. Unfortunately of 1 breeder none of the eggs hatched. The warm summer weather of 2010 and their transportation are likely to have had an unfavourable influence on the hatching results.

As the hatching occurred late in the season (the chicks hatched the middle of August) the pullets didn't started laying until the end of March 2011. The first eggs were rather small but they had the same amazing colour I had seen in Great Britain.



Above: Dutch Welsummer eggs (left) and British Utility Welsummer eggs (right)

At the present it is 2012 and already the second generation of British Utility Welsummers inhabit my pens. I strongly select eggs for hatching on shape, weight, shell quality and colour. As many eggs showed the dark brown shell colour but often lacked the beautiful specks, during this year I crossed a British rooster with hens of a Dutch strain which lays speckled eggs. When the pullets start laying in autumn I will be able to observe the first results of this cross.

Right: Dutch Exhibition rooster and hen.

I am convinced that the survival of the breed depends in large parts on this unique characteristic: the production of dark brown speckled eggs. While the Welsummer is outdone by hybrid breeds in the commercial poultry industry and only survives in the backyards of hobbyists, the Welsummer faces stiff competition from dozens of beautiful and useful chicken breeds at poultry shows.

But in contrast to the majority of other breeds the Welsummer offers a double challenge: they are admired for their



presence, and for their unique eggs, for most other exhibition breeds the eggs only serve as a means to procreate. These breeds have to rely on their physical appearance to become popular.

Hence it is extremely important to me, to safeguard the quality of the unique Welsummers' egg for the future, because its unique egg is an essential feature of the Welsummer.

Right: British Utility Welsummers.



Below: Dutch Exhibition Welsummers.



Websites of interest:

- www.nut-welsumer.nl (Nederlands, Engels en Duits)
- www.utilitypoultry.co.uk
- www.welsumerclub.nl
- www.welsummerclub.org