

A SHORT HISTORY OF THE NORFOLK GREY



Text and photos:
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The Norfolk Grey seems to be a bird that doesn't know when to die out. Given the number of times it has survived problems, maybe it should be called the 'Phoenix Grey'. For reasons that should become clearer by the end of this story, a suitable sub-title, with apologies to Tolkien's Hobbit, would be 'There and Back again'.

F W Myhill created Norfolk Greys sometime before 1914, possibly as early as 1908. It may be appropriate to think of this as Norfolk Grey #1. Alas, the start of WW1 saw Myhill depart for war service, leaving the new breed in the care of his farm workers, who seem to have left the birds to roam freely. On his return Myhill discovered 4 years of free range breeding had set the breed back badly. It was to this period of free range breeding that Myhill referred when he said there was an unknown element in the ancestry of the Norfolk Grey. We could see this version as Norfolk Grey #2 – it was to become the forerunner of the Norfolk Greys written about in various issues of The Feathered World and The Feathered World Year Book, along with occasional mentions in Poultry World and Poultry Club Year Books and other books. The majority of the references were published 1927 -1937 and I

am indebted to David Scrivener for being so helpful and generous in making relevant material available from this period. Sometime after 1937 the Norfolk Grey disappeared from poultry publications, the later verdict being that it was a victim of the rise of mass production of brown eggs. The Norfolk Grey was designed to be a dual purpose bird, a reliable layer of eggs, especially in winter and, as a large fowl, the cockerels were claimed to be a 'good table bird'. This latter was due to its game bird ancestry from the Old English Game. It was this Game bird ancestry that was to cause so much difficulty for the breed down the years, right down to the present day. As the Norfolk Grey had black legs, it also fell out of favour in a market that looked more for yellow legs, while its eggs were never a dark enough brown to save it in a 'brown egg' market.

Right: Description of the Norfolk Grey in The Encyclopaedia of Poultry, James Stephen Hicks, 1921.

In 1973 Sue Bowden found a farmer with what he claimed were Norfolk Greys. Very quickly Revd. (now Canon) Andrew Bowden arranged the purchase of what seems to have been the last three hens and single cock of the Norfolk Grey. He started a selective breeding program and introduced an Australorp hen to bring new blood into a visibly tired strain. We have now reached what I see as Norfolk Grey #3.

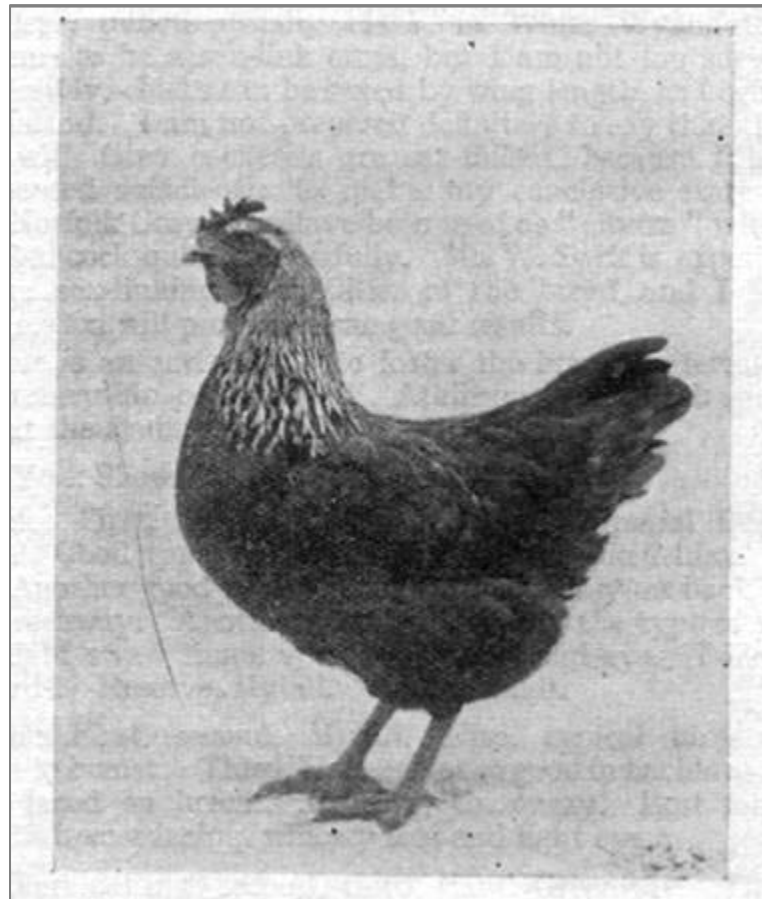


The Norfolk Grey as a distinct breed nearly vanished on a farm in the early 1900s and very nearly vanished on a farm in the 1970s – 'There and Back', one could say. The farmer was quite unaware he was holding the last of the Norfolk Greys. All of the Norfolk Greys in existence (that goes also for the ones currently in my brooder) trace their descent from these four birds – nobody has claimed to have sourced Norfolk Greys from any other source. But are they really Norfolk Greys? Are they the 'real deal'?

Left: A Norfolk Grey cockerel. Published in Poultry World, April 1970.

Right: A Norfolk Grey pullet at the 1931 Chrystal Palace Show, as published in the Feathered World Yearbook 1932.

In 1974 Andrew Bowden took the original cock and two of the original hens to Wilf Allen, noted poultry expert and writer, someone who had experience of judging Norfolk Greys, along with a personal knowledge of F W Myhill. In my telephone conversation with Andrew Bowden he told me Wilf Allen did not argue that the birds were game birds though he did comment the hens were a 'bit gamey'. Wilf Allen went on to say that the birds he was looking at and handling looked very like the Norfolk Greys he had seen years ago. With this encouragement (my deduction, not Andrew Bowden's comment.) Andrew Bowden went back and continued his breeding program. In 1976, an article was published, written by Wilf Allen in which he clearly said he did not believe there were any Norfolk Greys in existence. Plainly something changed Wilf Allen's mind or Andrew Bowden's visit was a figment of his imagination. After many telephone conversations with Andrew Bowden



(and I am so grateful for his patience and generosity with his time), you realize that what he says happened actually did. If Wilf Allen was persuaded he had been mistaken, then his change of mind was made without a fresh viewing and handling of the birds Andrew Bowden took to him. I find it very persuasive (of the original meeting between them) that Andrew Bowden went back and continued his breeding program. Their meeting was incidentally before the article that appeared in the Banbury Guardian, 7th March 1974, along with a typical press photograph of clergyman with 'extinct chicken' headline. This article also referred to his visit to Wilf Allen and his approval of the birds. I cannot help wondering if this poor quality photograph resulted in Wilf Allen apparently having his mind changed. Photographing poultry accurately is in itself an art form!

THE BANBURY GUARDIAN



Above: Four of the Norfolk Greys - thought to be extinct until two weeks ago - which the Rev Andrew Bowden keeps in his garden.

**Rector discovers
'extinct' chickens**

When Practical Poultry published an article recently by Claire Barber I was surprised to see that Norfolk Greys were not on any watch list. My email enquiry drew the response that the breed I had fallen for was alleged by the Rare Breed Survival Trust (RBST), on good advice, to be most likely a recreation. I was surprised because the material I had seen simply spoke of it as a Rare Breed. At this stage I could have dropped the idea of getting some hatching eggs and think of something else. For some reason I started to ask questions of those breeders of Norfolk Greys that I could trace. They were all surprised at this claim so I started investigating. Fairly quickly it appeared there were two distinct arguments against the current Norfolk Grey being from an original strain. One was that they were purely a recreation, the second was that the birds originally found by the Bowdens were in fact Game birds.

**Right and below: Some of my Norfolk Greys.
Note the difference in hackle colour in the hens. (These are not exhibition birds).**



At this stage I decided to search further, aided by photocopies provided by other breeders – a chance remark by one breeder informed me that Andrew Bowden was still alive. I managed to trace his phone number and a rather surprised Andrew Bowden got the proverbial 'call out of the blue'. He was totally unaware of the RBST decision about Norfolk Greys and decided to let me have what material he had to help my research. I also suggested that if the farmer he got the original birds was still alive then a talk with him would be helpful.

Shortly after this I bought David Scrivener's book on Rare Poultry Breeds and read his remark (p215) that the Norfolk Grey were possibly recreated, perhaps from Silver Sussex and Old English Game. I managed to get David Scrivener's email address and thus began an extremely helpful supply of relevant extracts from The Feathered World Year Books 1927-37 inclusive, along with other material, some earlier. One breeder, William Osborne, sent me a copy of an entry in the 1927 Poultry Club Year Book (which I have since verified as genuine) written by F W Myhill himself in which he says, "Norfolk Greys lay very nice sized tinted eggs". This came as a surprise to me since I had by this time received emails from Andrew Sheppy, supporting the RBST in their view that the Norfolk Greys were a recreation. In support of this he said:

"Further confirmation of those birds and their descendants not being authentic is the egg that they lay. One of the great selling points of the original breed was its large, high quality brown egg and none of the modern day stock I have ever encountered lays such an egg. Our experience is that the eggs are more likely to be very much on the small side and barely tinted, if not actually a sort of off white. That clearly indicates that they are not right, egg characteristics being very indicative of the true nature of populations and their ancestry".



In fact other material refers to Norfolk Greys laying brown eggs which is on the face of it a puzzle, since some of these sources are well respected poultry sources (Stephen Hicks, Broomhead and others). I think we have to take Myhill at his word on size and if the breed originator does not use the word 'large' when describing the eggs his bird lays then that I think is the end of the size argument. Murray Hale, writing in the 1932 Feathered World Year Book (p271) refers to 'about 2 ozs being about normal' (i.e. about 56 gs).



Above and right: Some more photos of my Norfolk Greys. The above photo shows the endearing side of how relationships and bonding can work between cock and hen.

Colour is a different matter – I have seen Norfolk Grey eggs that range from a pale rose tint to a pale milky coffee colour. There were no colour charts as far as I can find back in the 1920/30s, so perception of colour was probably a very subjective matter. It is interesting to note that in the 1924 'Poultry' Year Book (p186), when the Norfolk Grey was known by the name 'Black Maria', the birds were described as 'good layers of brown or tinted eggs' – this suggest to me that the 'brown' concerned was a pale colour. Note that there was no reference to the eggs being large!



**Right: One of my Norfolk Grey cocks.
Note: These are not exhibition birds.**



During the 1930s there was a lot of disappointment with the size of the Norfolk Grey, Thomas Leyson laying the blame squarely on breeders introducing too much OEG into the breed to get better markings. This it was argued made the breed smaller and was driving away possible purchasers. It seems the OEG spectre was starting to haunt the Norfolk Grey – but it may explain why future birds would tend to look more 'gamey' if not bred selectively enough. By the time the records ceased to record Norfolk Greys, appearances at show had dwindled and there had been, in the mid 1930s, suggestions to use the cockerels for crossing with other breeds to make fatter cockerels – a recipe for breed disaster. The only way the Norfolk Grey could survive was on farms where there was room and inclination to keep a flock of birds that were good foragers and looked pleasing to their faithful and decreasing numbers of owners during WW2. It looks as though the birds found by the Bowdens in 1973 were the last vestige of this small farm style population.

One of the points the farmer made when he sold the birds to the Bowdens was that the ancestor of the cockerel he was selling had won 2nd prize in the Any Other Varieties section at Stoneleigh in 1970. I phoned the librarian at Stoneleigh who was able to tell me that Mr E R Thompson had come second. When Andrew Bowden managed to trace the farmer he discovered that E R Thompson was a long standing friend who had prepared and exhibited the Norfolk Grey cockerel for him, as the farmer was not a Poultry Club member but he (E R Thompson) was, which

explained the name appearing as it did. The farmer, David Gaydon, who was a commercial poultry farmer amongst other things, was so pleased he got a local artist to do a pastel chalk sketch of the prize winning bird – it was this picture Sue Bowden was to see in 1973.

Andrew Bowden has kindly given me not only sight of a draft of his own submission to RBST (The Rescue of the Norfolk Grey) but also the phone numbers of Messrs Gaydon and Thompson, who both agreed to talk with me. It is helpful at this stage to mention another argument put forward by Andrew Sheppy against these current birds not being true Norfolk Greys:

“The group of birds which was allegedly rediscovered in the 1970s was more than likely merely a batch of Grey Old English Game which happened to have been found on a farm in Norfolk. (I think he meant to say ‘Oxfordshire’) The hens in particular were typical of that breed, in fact the Mealy or Steel Grey variety of Old English, not even the black breasted Birchen Grey which is the colour of the true Norfolk Grey. I have photographs of those birds and they are clearly neither black breasted birchen in colour, nor are they anywhere near the size and heavy type of the original breed”.



**Above: Norfolk Grey cockerel and one hen, these are show quality.
Photo & breeder: Gina Upex (UK).**

I spoke with David Gaydon in the evening of 13th October 2010 and he told me that the birds were sold to him in 1970 by another farmer who came to visit him on a non-poultry matter. He saw the poultry setup and offered David Gaydon his stock of Norfolk Greys as he was needing to clear a lot of stock. He said the birds had been in his family for more than one generation and arranged to bring the birds for David Gaydon's inspection. This he did and David Gaydon duly became a keeper of what was probably the largest flock of Norfolk Greys for many years to come. David Gaydon decided to sell on and dispose of many of the flock but reserved a fair number for himself from which he bred a few and sold more. One cockerel he was

particularly struck by and asked his friend, Edward Thompson, what he thought and whether it was worth showing. (I will come to Edward Thompson in more detail later). Edward Thompson agreed, in 1970, to present the Norfolk Grey cockerel at Stoneleigh on David Gaydon's behalf. We now know the result – we do not know if the 2nd prize certificate is at the back of the drawing David Gaydon had done and is searching for after a recent house move on retirement. This strongly argues against any recent 'recreation event' and suggests a long line of descent.



Left: A prize winning pullet by Gina Upex. Photo: Gina Upex.

I next spoke with Edward Thompson in the same evening 13th October and he confirmed the way the 1970 show presentation happened. He is very clear and certain, even today, that the bird he entered was a Norfolk Grey. We talked about the other birds David Gaydon had on his farm and the response was an emphatic comment that he remembered them well, that they were Norfolk Greys. When I asked if they could have been Game birds he replied 'absolutely not'. Firstly, he said, the 1970 2nd prize winner would not have got that prize in an AOV class if it had been in any respect 'gamey'. Secondly, and highly relevantly, Edward Thompson revealed that not only had he been rearing OEG large and bantam fowl since the age of 12 years, he has

also judged Game bird classes around the country over the years at Birmingham, Stoneleigh, the National and several other shows I did not catch the name of. I put it to him that I was speaking to someone who could definitively say whether a bird in his eyesight or handling was a Game bird or not and he replied, 'absolutely'. I asked him if I could quote him on that and he said, 'yes'.

To the best of my knowledge Andrew Sheppy is basing his opinion largely on the evidence of a typical human interest photo for a newspaper article, 'Rector discovers extinct chickens' (Banbury Guardian - 7 March 1974). I have looked at this clipping and the photo and simulated photographing a Columbine hybrid hen from the press photo angle and the conventional 'hen' photo seen in all good poultry books. I was surprised at the distortion and regretfully feel that on this occasion, Andrew Sheppy (whose invaluable contribution to rare breeds and poultry in general I profoundly respect and admire) is sadly simply wrong. I think the evidence of Edward Thompson argues clearly that these birds were not and never had been Game birds but were Norfolk Greys in 1970. The evidence of David Gaydon argues that this a long standing strain and not some recent recreation from a Silver Sussex and OEG (this possible method of recreating Norfolk Grey seems to have first appeared in Poultry World 16.4.1970). Every breeder of Norfolk Grey chicks I have spoken to, including the current Breed Registrar Tony Beardsmore, has stated that they have never seen a chick hatched that would suggest a Silver Sussex ancestor. I suggest the RBST adopt the Norfolk Grey as a genuine original breed.



**Above: Norfolk Grey eggs.
Right: Norfolk Grey chicks.
Photos: Frank Bridgland.**



Foreword as an afterthought.

Back in early July 2010 I had no idea I was going to wind up doing this investigation. It started with a simple enquiry to RBST about the omission of Norfolk Greys from their watch list and gradually grew. Why? I had 'fallen' for a bird I had only seen photographs of and its immense simplicity in both hen and cock won me over. In one sense I did not care if it was original or not. But my archaeologist's mind (from a mature student's humble 2(1) at Lampeter University) would not let go. I had a hunch something was being overlooked. Whether I have found the case proven for the originality of Norfolk Greys I leave for others to judge, I personally am satisfied that they are 'the real deal'. I think by the way that also Andrew Sheppy now accepts the NG is genuine.

One final note: No one seems to take into account that when Andrew Bowden purchased those four birds, the farmer he got them from said he had sold the rest of the Norfolk Grey flock he had purchased from another Oxfordshire farmer. So as far as Andrew Bowden knew, there were an unknown number of other Norfolk Greys in existence. But by the late 1980s no one else was claiming to have them. If

only we knew who the farmer was that sold the flock of Norfolk Greys....To this day no one has claimed to have Norfolk Greys from anything other than the four birds sold to Andrew Bowden.

We know one group of Norfolk Greys was in existence sometime around 1950 because there are accounts of a breed called the Exmoor. It was 'established' in 1950 but is now extinct. Recorded in very few books it was described as coming from a 'Foundation stock consisting of Norfolk Grey, Houdan and Andalusian.' This is a bit surprising because the Norfolk Grey by this time was in almost terminal decline. Whoever was using Norfolk Greys to breed Exmoors must have had one of the last sources of Norfolk Greys. However, it seems unlikely the mysterious Oxfordshire farmer was connected with the Exmoor.

I am very grateful to Ben Crosby, Roland Axman, William Osborne and Tony Beardsmore for their help, suggestions, leads and general encouragement. Claire Barber has also been helpful by the nature of her positive responses to a flow of assorted queries and images of old documents. My thanks to her also.

I am even more grateful for the tolerance of my wife who has watched my learning curve with some fascination. Despite her severe ME she has become interested in breeding and I seem to have become, along the way, an embryo breeder, Norfolk Grey archivist and not least, her poultryman! Frank Bridgland (frank@dolwen.net)

This breed is covered by the <http://www.rarepoultrysociety.co.uk/index.php>

Photo: Gina Upex.

