

HISTORY OF THE AUSTRALORP

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the Netherlands

The Australorp is an original Australian chicken breed. In general, their history is also known here in Holland but has never been published before in such detail. The Dutch Specialty Club for Australorp is short on the history of their breed; only the breed history in Australia is mentioned and the flourishing of the breed in Holland since the club was

founded in 1988. What happened to the Australorp between the 1920s and 1980 and why are 'ours' so different?



Photo Archives AE

Origin

The original breeding line that was used in Australia was directly derived from William Cook during the period of 1890 to 1900. In Australia, judicious crosses were made by local breeders with Minorcas, Leghorns and Langshans to further improve the utility features. As a result, the chickens developed slightly longer bodies and became more tightly feathered. At that time these were the only differences from the original Cook Orpingtons and they were known as: 'Black Utility Orpingtons'.

Unfortunately in England, the larger and fluffier (but far less productive) Partington-style Orpingtons had overtaken the Cook Orpingtons in popularity. By 1920, when the amazing laying ability of the Australian Orpingtons became known in Britain, they were quickly imported back to England and nicknamed "the boomerang breed", referring to the implement of the Australian Aborigines that always returns to the thrower.

Right: Australorp pullet, winner Dairy Show 1927.
(Photo Archives Avicultura)

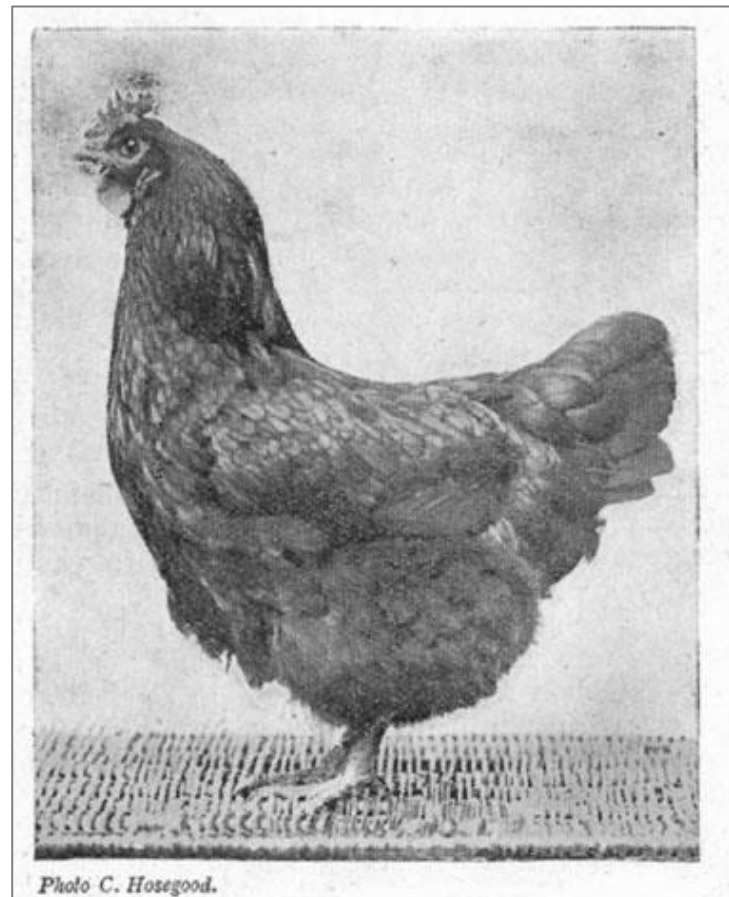
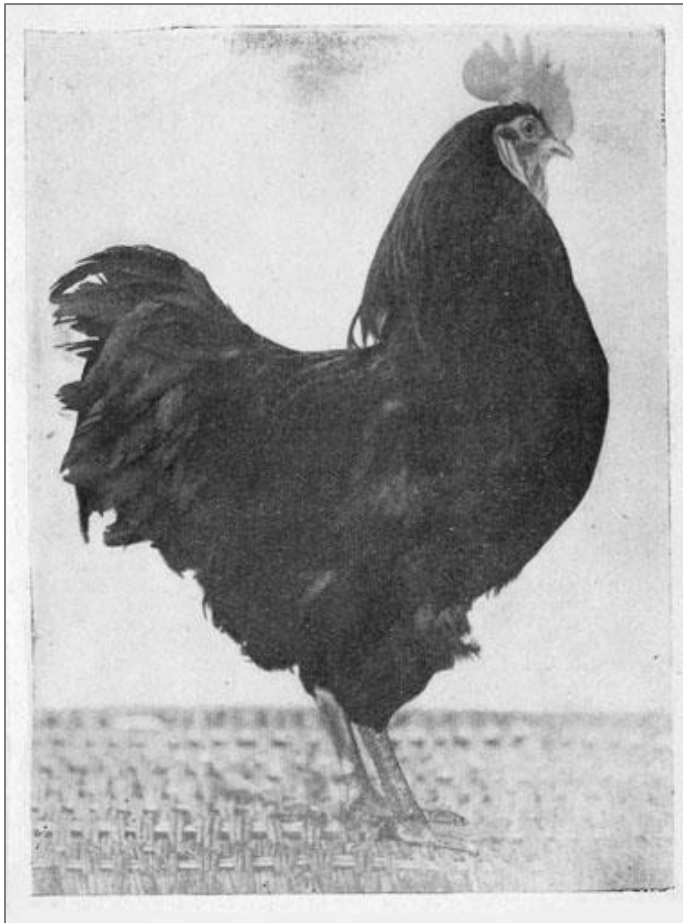


Photo C. Hosegood.



**Left: Australorp cockerel, winner in 1927 at several English Shows.
(Photo Archives Avicultura)**

The origin of the name Australorp

When the name was first used, and by whom, will always be shrouded in mystery. Walter Scott Wallace, a well-known breeder of the day, claimed that he was the first, just before the First World War.

An equally compelling claim came from Arthur Harwood, who in 1919 suggested naming Australian Laying Orpingtons "Austral". The letters "orp" were suggested as a suffix, to recognise the breed's origins. Another claim came from Britain, from W. Powell-Owen who drafted the English standard for the breed in 1921, after the Australian Black Utility Orpingtons arrived in England.

In Australia however, the term Australorp wasn't used until the 1930s... they were always known and shown as Australian Utility Orpingtons. Up until quite recently, some shows still had classes for Utility Australorps, which were a smaller, more commercial style of fowl available from hatcheries. The name Australorp was commonly used when the breed became known internationally and was exported to many countries.



Above: Black Australorp hens at R. Westra, Grijpskerk (NL)

It was the excellent laying capacity that gave the Australorp its worldwide fame, particularly in 1922-23 when six hens set a world record of laying 1857 eggs, or 309.5 eggs per hen in 365 days. This was before the days of artificial lighting! The result was that overseas orders poured in from England, America, Canada, Mexico, South Africa, Russia and other countries.

In the USA, they were very well received, with one enthusiastic commentator writing : "The Australorp is a happy chicken with a beautiful glossy plumage with a brilliant green sheen. His bright red comb and ears indicate alertness, but they are quiet and peaceful, so that we may call it the most desirable fowl of the world!" A glowing compliment indeed! In 1929, they had already been included in the American Standard of Perfection. The egg producing areas of southern California became the stronghold of Australorp breeding and soon the Australorp Club of America was founded.

In England, the breed had also found a new home. In July 1921, the Austral Orpington Club was founded and a standard description drafted. In 1923, the club changed its name to the Australorp Club, but kept the nickname "Boomerang breed".

Even in South Africa, the breed had already been standardised by 1920.



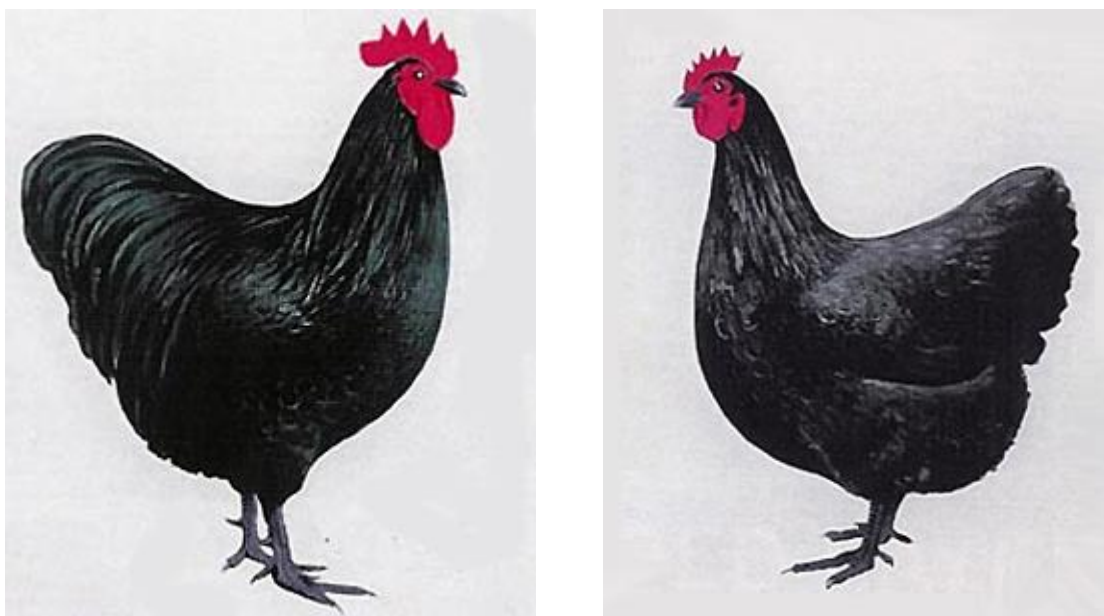
**Above: 2 black hens and 1 splash (not recognised).
Photo: R. Westra, Grijpskerk, NL.**

The Australorp in Australia between 1920 and today

Strangely, Australia itself could not reach agreement on the Standard definition. Each state had its own standard, and no one seemed willing to give anything away to enable a national standard to be drawn up. An Australian standard was finally achieved at a meeting of state delegates, called by Edwin Hadlington, Chief Government Poultry Officer of the NSW Department of Agriculture and chaired by R. R. (Bob) Brown, at the (now famous) Sydney Royal Easter Show of 1949.

It is telling that the standard that was agreed to at that meeting was immediately adopted word-for-word by the British Poultry Club. The illustrations in this first standard (and still used today) were of the two winning birds at that 1949 Royal Easter Show—a cockerel bred by (the late) Jim O'Malley from Queanbeyan and a pullet bred by (the late) Claude Ubrihien of Bega. *(Note by Greg Davies: Other people over the years have tried to lay claim to owning that cockerel. On a day trip to a local Australorp breeder's yards, Jim O'Malley opened a carefully wrapped envelope and showed us the 1949 First Prize card his*

cockerel had won. Today, there is little argument about whose bird it was. Unfortunately, the card was lost when Jim passed away, but I can personally guarantee it was the genuine article, as can the other three people who saw it.)



Above: The illustrations in this first standard (1949).

Prior to 1949, Edwin Hadlington himself had set up an extensive Australorp breeding program because he was not happy with the direction that the Utility Orpington seemed to be going at the time. His breeding program had started after a visit to Athol Giles famous Bonaventure Poultry Stud in Mount Druitt, where he chose 12 tight feathered black Orpingtons with good heads. They were taken to the NSW Government's Seven Hills Research Station where they were mated with selected hens. When this line was established, he crossed in Croad Langshans from an Australian breeding line, with lively eyes, a clean face free from feathers and minimal leg feathering. The effect was even tighter feathering with a beautiful green sheen, something hitherto lacking.

Later, fowls from the NSW south coast and Gunning areas were mixed with the Seven Hills line which resulted in an extremely fine strain. A national breeding station for the Australorp was set up where any breeder could purchase required breeding birds. Unfortunately, this breeding line no longer exists in its pure state; although there is no doubt that most modern Australorp strains still carry traces of its blood.

An Australorp rooster was selected as the motif for the stamps, badges and letterhead of the World Scientific Poultry Congress in 1962, as a symbol of Australia's contribution to the poultry world. This certainly is the greatest tribute one can get for your breed!

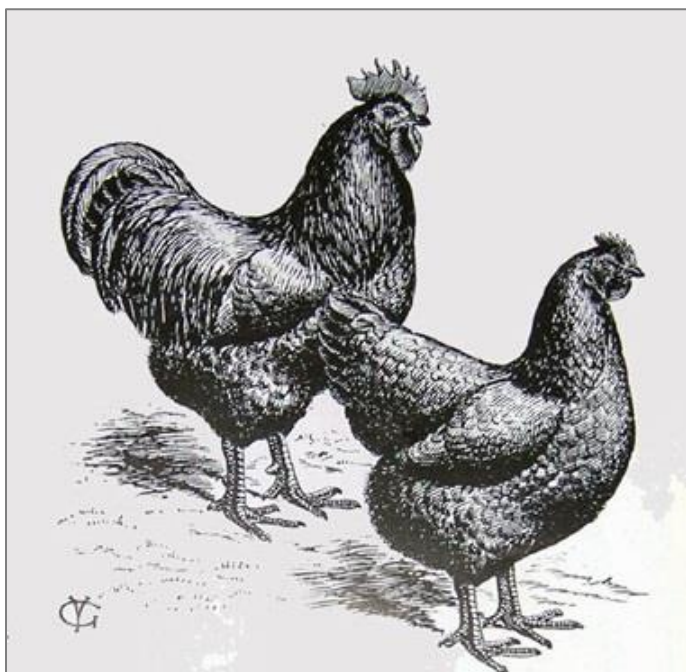


The Australorp was long held as the prime commercial poultry breed until it was found that crossing Australorp females with White Leghorn males produced birds that yielded eight per cent more eggs than each breed separately. The Leghorn created a dominant white feathering—ideal for the separate broiler breeding line and bred slightly heavier again by further crosses with Sussex and White Rocks. With the opening of the avian quarantine stations in 1990—there had been a total ban on importing poultry into Australia since 1948—the Australian commercial poultry industry began importing hybrid layers and broilers. Today the Australorp is a popular exhibition breed.

The Australorp after 1920 in other parts of the World

Is not it strange that a chicken, once touted as the 'world wonder hen' and also a good table bird, almost silently disappeared into obscurity? At least it looks that way, but it had its reasons. After the first glorious years in the United States of America, the white Leghorn cross was made. Americans prefer their chicken meat with yellow skin, so black feather stubble on white skin was not appetising. The hybrid was known as 'Austra-Whites' and were very productive. During the 1930s, they were the primary laying hens of America. The tinted egg colour however was not so popular—everyone wanted either pure white or brown eggs. The same experience happened in Europe and so Barnevelders and Welsummers with their beautiful brown eggs came into the market. Poultry farmers left the Australorp for what it was and moved over to the new varieties.

Fortunately, a number of breeders have always stuck to this simple, black chicken and whether fanciers or commercial breeders, they have always been very satisfied with their choice.



In the Netherlands, utility-Australorps from America were mated to Rhode Island Red and New Hampshire hens. This produced a black hybrid chicken with red neck feathers that were excellent layers. The Australorp X White Leghorn cross did not obtain a foothold in the Netherlands, as they were prone to contracting leucosis (= a chicken disease). The Utility Australorp was not suitable for show breeding - it was dull in colour and had a smaller and shorter body. Being a utility fowl it had to grow on minimal feed.

Left: Drawing by the Dutch poultry specialist Van Gink in 1955.

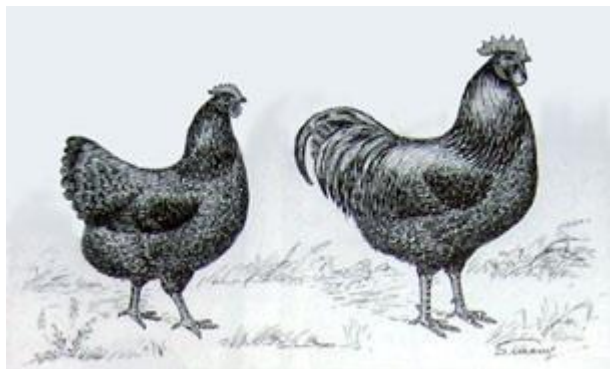
Below: Black Australorps at R. Westra, Grijpskerk (NL).



The Australorp as an exhibition fowl

Meanwhile, Dutch breeders had tried various crosses to 'beautify' the Australorp, first to further upgrade the laying capacity, but soon it was mainly to improve the 'looks'. There was no breed club to keep breeders on one path and the Australorps entered in the shows, widely differed by region.

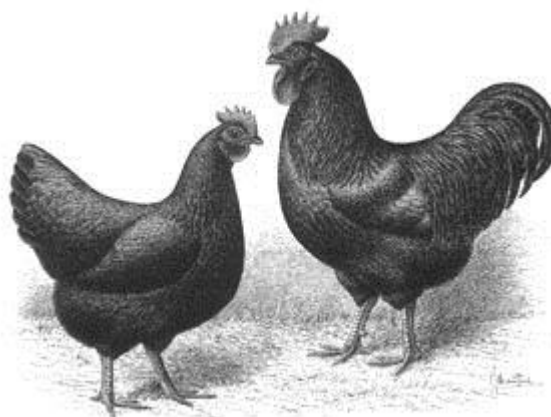
In the early 1950s, only the Utility Australorp was known in Germany, coming from imported hatching eggs from the United States. The 'Dutch' Australorps from breeders living along the German-Dutch border were top animals in the eyes of German breeders. These Australorps were crossed with Rhinelanders and Barnevelders, and in 1952 this type of Australorp was admitted to the German standard. Still the Germans were not completely satisfied with it, so again many crosses were made with German Langshans, Barnevelders and even Rhode Island Reds.



Clockwise, starting above: Illustrations in the German Standard, the French Standard, the English Standard (all from archives Avicultura) and the American Standard (cortesy of Diane Jacky).

Right the illustration in the Dutch Standard (archives Avicultura)

If we now look at Dutch show photos in sequence we see how the tail has become bigger and longer over the years. Closer examination reveals that in the Australian, English, German and French standard is wanted a full feathered, moderately long or medium long tail, in both the cock and the hen, only the Dutch standard requires 'a pretty big tail size'. The accompanying photographs or drawings in those Standard Books show Australorps with medium

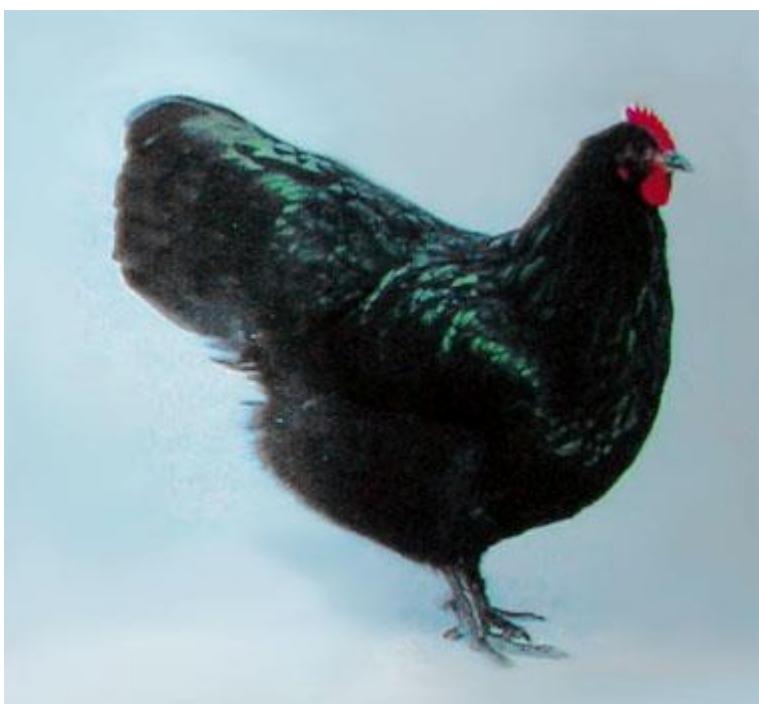


long tails. Apparently, one can select on tail length and breed what one finds beautiful, without adhering to the standard definition, with as extremes: the very compact tail size in Australia, and the very large/long tails in Germany. Also in the Netherlands, the tails were long, especially those of the bantam hens, but lately the Australorp Club has set guidelines to control this undesirable development.



**Left: Champion Australorp cockerel at the 1979 Gelre Show (NL).
Photo: Archives Avicultura.**

**Below: Champion Australorp cockerel at the 2004 Avicorni Show (NL)
Photo: Archives AE.**



**Left: A black Australorp pullet, winner at the 2004 Wieringerland Show (NL).
Photo: Archives Avicultura.**

Of course, one may wonder what the right Australorp tail should look like. The illustrations of the Australorp in the first Australian standard (1949) are pretty much the same as the today birds, so in that light, I think Australian breeders have kept to the ideal.

**Right: Black Australorp pullet, winner in 2011 at an Australian Show.
Photo: Greg Davies, Australia.**



**Right: Champion Australorp cockerel in 2011, Australia.
Photo: Greg Davies, Australia.**



Left: Champion Black Australorp cockerel at the 2013 Federation Show in Great Britain.

Photo: Rupert Stephenson.

Left: Champion Black Australorp pullet at the 2013 National Show, Great Britain. Photo: Rupert Stephenson.



Other colour than Black

In Australia the preferred colour is black. These are the only true Australorps to the breed's purists. Several years ago however, a blue variety was standardised. There were some white Australorps in Australia between 1930 and 1960 and they were even seen on occasion in shows, although they were not officially recognised. We therefore question the German declaration that the white

Australorp is a purely German creation. In the 1960s, A. Ziegler (Germany) bred a white Australorp from a black Australorp rooster and white hybrid hen.

However, Van Gink revealed in one of his articles in Avicultura that white Australorps originated in South Africa, where a Mr. W. H. Addison bred a pure white rooster sported from black parents. Through systematic back pairing only to mother and sisters, more white specimens were obtained. Another South African breeder also bred several white Australorps. These two strains were interbred and gave only white offspring. White Australorps were then introduced in 1937 into England. These were real Australorps, and not a result of cross-breeding.

Van Gink noted that these white Australorps had white legs and brown-red eyes (like the white Orpington), unlike the German whites, that have blue legs.

In the Netherlands, the large white Australorp - with white legs and brown-red eyes have been recognized for many years, but are now extinct. Today the white Australorp with blue legs (as in Germany) is standardized.



Above: A black, a blue and a white Australorp hen at R. Westra (NL).



Left: A blue rooster with white hens, at R. Westra (NL).

Right: A white rooster with a black and a blue hen, at R. Westra (NL).



In Australia some breeders have been working on creating white Australorps too, with the use of a small 'correct' gene pool, conforming in style to the black Australorp. The Australian Australorp standard is available at: <http://www.australorps.com/4.html>

Blacks, Blues and Whites are also in the standards (or pending standards) for Great Britain, Germany, The Netherlands and Denmark. The USA still only has Black and Blue. There are also Buff Australorps bred in South Africa.



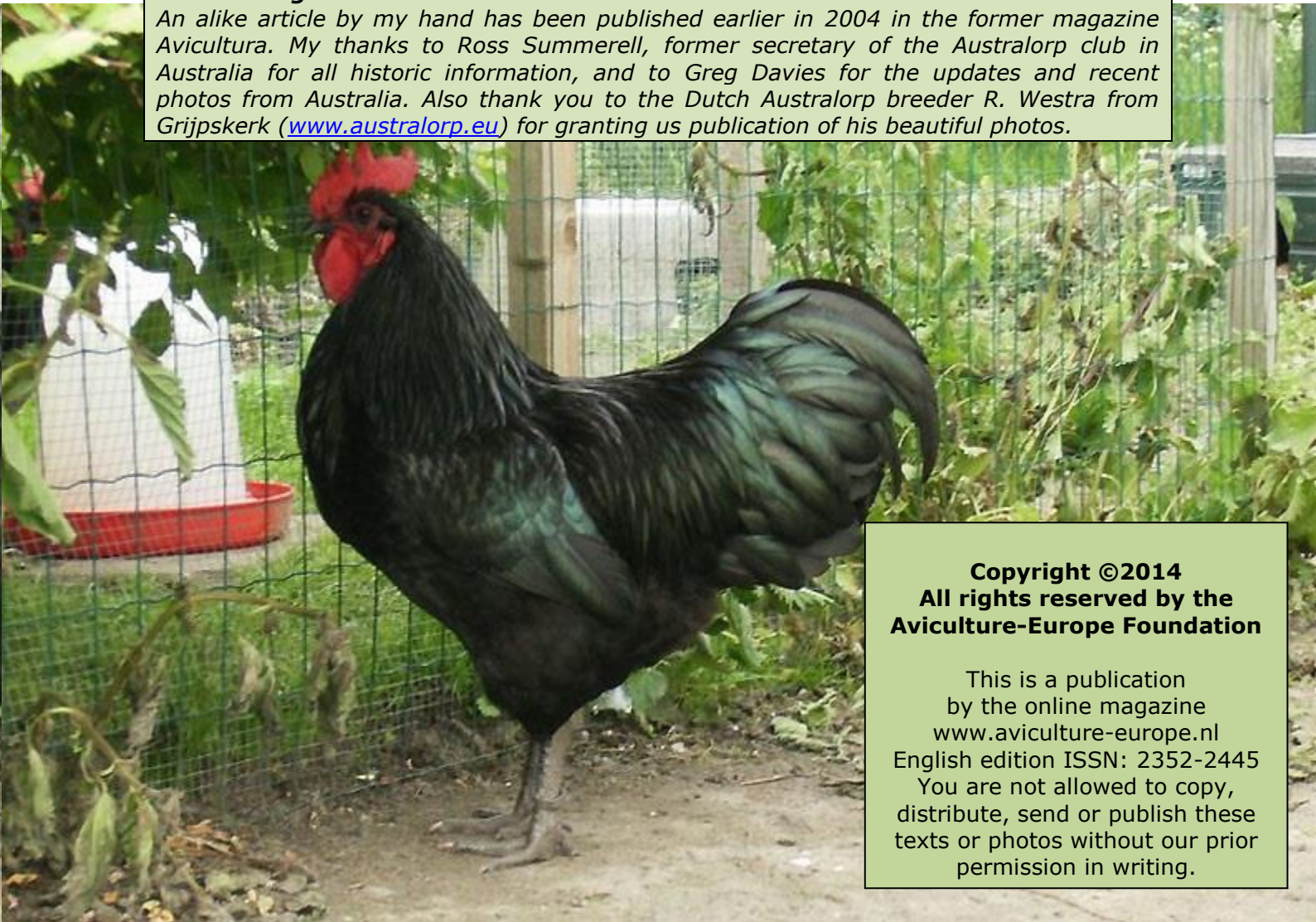
**Left: White bantam cockerel, Federal Show 2013, Great Britain.
Photo: Rupert Stephenson.**

Australorp Club

In 1988 the Dutch Australorp Club was founded. The years that followed Australorp, and especially the Australorp bantam became very popular. Not surprising, because except show quality they have always maintained an excellent laying capacity. Add to that their peaceful character and voila: you have the ideal chicken, suitable for both backyard and the exhibition. Many countries have their own 'Australorp Breed Club' where you can require any information.

Acknowledgements

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