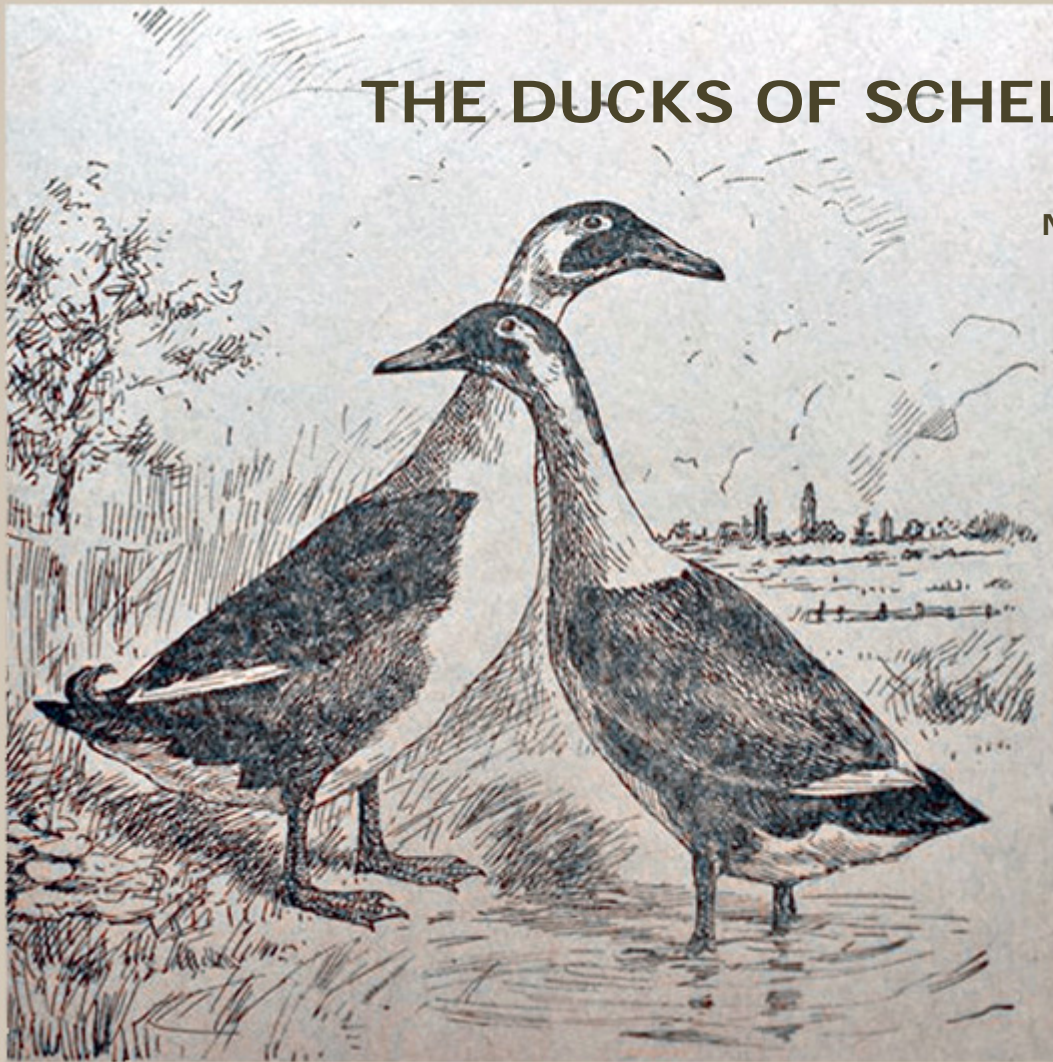


THE DUCKS OF SCHELDT BANKS

By:
Norbert Schollaert (B)

Edited by:
Jonathan Thompson (UK)



This drawing
of the Huttegem ducks
by Rene Delin
was published in
Traité d' aviculture,
Alex Moureaux,
1945.

Today we can hardly imagine this but, around the turn of the 19th century, multiple generations lived under one roof; grandparents, parents, children and grandchildren shared the home and the environment. In this way, the work could be divided evenly because, at that time, every household tried to be as self-sufficient as possible. A garden was sometimes only a few square meters, but every inch was used for growing fruit and vegetables. If the garden was slightly larger, chickens, pigeons and rabbits were also kept. Those who lived by a stream or river could rear ducks. The maintenance of the animals could, however, cost money; therefore they stripped the verges to collect grass and weeds for their livestock.

The English poultry authority, Edward Brown while on a tour of Belgium saw a peculiar spectacle on the banks of the river Escaut (Scheldt) near Audenarde (French) / Oudenaarde (Dutch), in Central Flanders. Here the Huttegem Ducks were reared, and fed on worms to meet their protein needs.

The breeders tramped the ground with their *sabots* (wooden clogs), which caused the worms to come to the surface, and they were then eagerly eaten by the ducks. This free food (the only expense being some labour) made the keeping of ducks profitable.

That this activity was viewed by outsiders with some surprise, is apparent in a short article which refers to the book by V. Pulinckx-Eeman "Races de palmipèdes par l'image" 1926. The author saw groups of men, women, children, and even elderly people, tramping on the ground. To him, it looked like some kind of bizarre rites; a cult dance of a primitive religion. However, their only purpose was to bring the worms out of the ground, after which the children quickly had to gather them up, or either the group was followed by the ducks that foraged for the worms. The reason why the worms come to the surface by the tramping seems to be because the vibration reminds them of the arrival of their nemesis, the mole, which they try to escape by

crawling above ground and end up in the mouth of the waiting ducks.



Above: Men engaged in treading the ground for worms.
Photo: Centrum Agrarische Geschiedenis (CAG).

When preparing his book "Report on the Poultry Industry in Belgium" (1910), Edward Brown travelled all over Belgium accompanied by Mons. Louis Vander Snickt, editor of "Chasse et Pêche"; and in those days the only magazine that reported on Aviculture. Brown could not have had a better companion, as Vander Snickt not only knew the region, but also many farmers and the various breeds they kept. Moreover, Vander Snickt was generally known as an expert, and so well known that his presence opened every door. In *Chasse et Pêche* he wrote several articles on "the ducks of the valley of the Escaut (Scheldt)", which we will describe further in this article.

Ducks were to be found everywhere throughout Flanders and Hainaut, and in other districts also. These birds were in great demand; as were their eggs, which were thought to have the flavour of those of wild birds, and to be especially valuable for culinary purposes. One of the most important centres for this industry was in the valley of the Escaut (Scheldt), where the Huttegem Duck was kept.

The Huttegem or Audenarde duck is a egg-laying variety that was kept end of the 19th century along the Scheldt river. In those days the banks were more marshy than today, because people had not yet intervened in the natural course and behaviour of the river, which is now channelled. Around the City of Audenarde, ducks were kept by a great number of farmers, with the Huttegem Duck at the centre of the duck industry. Originally the ducks were kept for their eggs, but they were soon appreciated for their fine and abundant flesh that was in high demand; and a new industry developed.

Edward Brown (*Races of Domestic Poultry*, 1906) suggests the origin of the Huttegem Duck is probably the result of crossing the Blue Termonde Duck upon a smaller duck, with a body long and narrow, resembling that of the Indian Runner, which latter type was formerly very common in the Netherlands.

The Termonde duck is also believed to be one of the ancestors to both the Merchtem and Huttegem Ducks. This is probably the oldest Belgian breed of duck. It is generally accepted that the Termonde Duck was spread on a large scale throughout the North of Belgium in the nineteenth century and that it was a very large meaty duck; slow growing but with excellent meat quality. The most typical variety of the Termonde Duck is white-bibbed blue variety.



FIG. 75.—HUTTEGEM DUCKS.

Above: Huttegem ducks, taken from Races of Domestic Poultry, Edward Brown, 1906.

Apart from consulting Brown's book, as previously mentioned (and thanks to his round trip in Belgium), there is very little to be found about the origin of the Huttegem Duck. I searched in a dozen poultry books that also describe waterfowl, from all over the World, but there was no mentioning of the origin of the Huttegem. Neither in French books, like Larbalétrier or Voitellier, nor in England in books by Lewer, Wright, Dickson, Burnham and Tegetmeier and also not in American books as for instance the book of C.E. Thorne, although he extensively describes the duck breeds.

On the internet (Facebook) is a group dedicated to the ducks of the Scheldt valley and it does mention a few books, namely: *L'aviculture pratique*, by Carpiaux; the report of an international conference by Vander Snickt; Periquet in his *Traité Rustica*; *Traité d'aviculture sportive*, by Willems; *Traité d'aviculture*, by Moureaux and *Traité d'aviculture*, by Lahaye and finally *Monographie des races Belges*, by Bertaut. None of them, however, give anything new, especially as most refer to Brown's book with which we began.

Originally it was a colourful mixture of ducks in which, in addition to white, light brown and black, the blue colour predominated. On <http://volaillepoultry.pagesperso-orange.fr/canardetran.html> is mentioned that the first standard description was drafted in 1913, but in the breed standard drawn up in 1971, only a special blue and white pied pattern was described. Later, the pied black and white variety was also

recognised.

According to the Standard, only the neck, the breast and the primaries are white; the rest of the plumage blue or black. Furthermore, it requires a special head marking, with the white of the neck extending up and more or less encircling the eye, similar to those of the fawn and white Indian runner. The bill was slate blue and the legs and webs reddish orange with sometimes black spots.

There appears from the outset to have been a discrepancy between the breeders who were not interested in the colour or marking of their ducks, but more in their resistance and growth potential, and the duck keepers who discussed the colours. Various reports on these discussions can be found in *Chasse et Pêche* issues.

How did Hatching and Rearing go?

On the meadows which extended several miles from the city of Audenarde, beyond the village of Huttegem, were communal properties where ducklings were raised in large numbers. Here they found an abundance of rich natural food, and in return greatly improved the land by their manure. In April the birds were removed and the land left for hay. After that crop was cut the meadows were used for cattle and chickens in a well-balanced rotation.

Duck breeders in the Huttegem region each raised 500 to 600 birds annually, although in later years (Circa 1906) duck-breeding had somewhat declined, and chickens, chiefly Braekels, had increased greatly in number. The enormous amount of natural food obtained on these meadows, more especially in the shape of worms, was not only valuable and economic in the growth of chickens, but was thought to give their feathers the same resistance to water as in the case of ducks!

Each evening the ducks returned to their own quarters, where they were shut up for the night. They were not allowed out in the morning until after they had laid. Hens were almost exclusively used for hatching, and a local breed called the Huttegem Chicken was kept for the purpose. The maternal instinct of these hens was so strong that the hens of this breed sat for three months without a break, contentedly taking three nests of eggs in succession. They covered fifteen to seventeen duck eggs, and the plan usually adopted was to transfer the eggs nearly due to hatch to such hens as had sat longest, and to increase the number of her brood by additions of ducklings from other hens to as many as thirty to forty ducklings.

The Huttegem chicken (right) is described in "Traité D' Aviculture", 1948, by Dr. J. Lahaye as being a crossbred from the Braekel and Cochin.

A description of the Huttegem chicken in "Traité d' aviculture sportive" by Brandt & Willems: Poultry of great stature who first appears on Belgian exhibitions in 1898. Grown in the Audenarde region for incubating ducks eggs. Since the ducks were good layers but poor broodies, these chickens were specially selected to do this work.

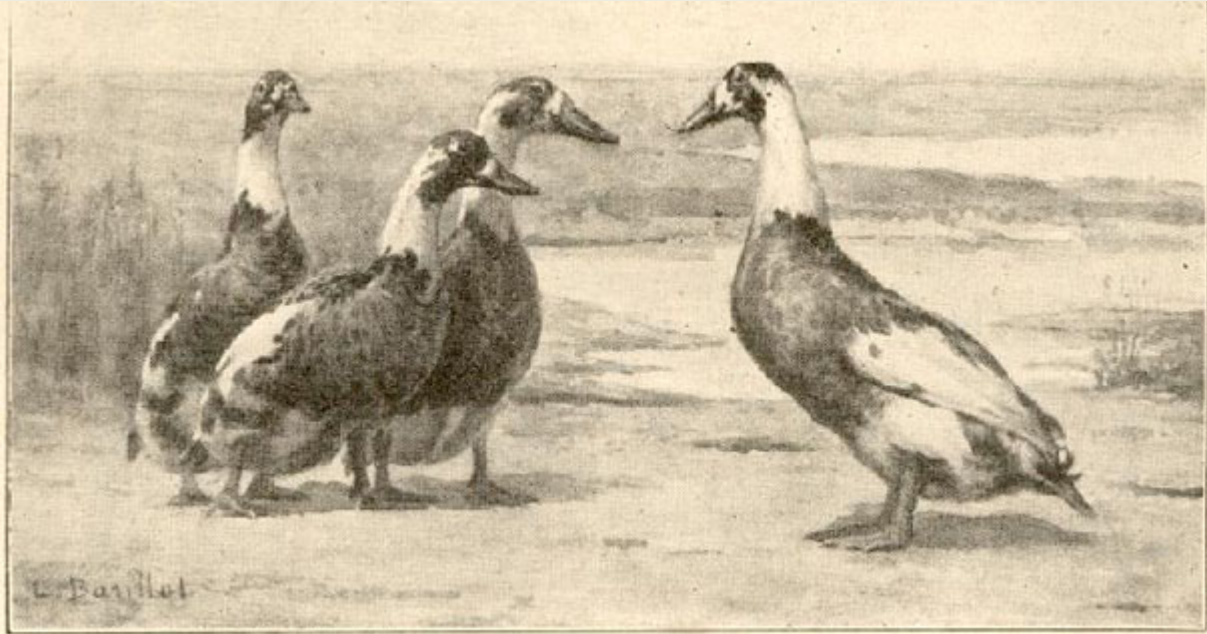
On the **Laplaigne chicken** breed they say: A large chicken resembling the Malines in form and type, but less heavy. This old meat breed bred in the Tournai region on the banks of the Scheldt, was very well adapted to the living conditions of the wet meadows and was used for the duck eggs hatch. Around the turn of the century (1900) they were dethroned by the Huttegemse, for which they indeed would have served as a basis. The Huttegemse was even heavier and could hatch more eggs and was therefore preferred over the Laplaigne chickens.



The fact that the Huttegem chicken was represented as a cross between Braekel and Cochin seems very plausible, because the Braekel is a local poultry breed in Audenarde and its surroundings, and when they wanted a breed to become heavier, crosses with Brahma and Cochin were made. (Same as the Malines is also a cross between the Flemish Cuckoo and Brahma.) Unfortunately, both the Laplaigne and the Huttegem chicken are completely extinct.

Brandt and Willems also confirm the theory that the Huttegem Duck would be a cross between the Termonde Duck and the Indian Runner Duck. Although they were originally kept for their egg laying ability, the local growers soon realized that they could also profit from fattening the ducks.

The same authors state the Laplaigne duck is therefore nothing but the Huttegem Duck from Tournai.



Above: Indian Runner ducks, early 20th century. Drawing by L. Barillot, from: Les poules de ma Tante, Mr Roullier-Arnoult, Société Nationale d'Aviculture de France.

Edward Brown observed the method of husbandry employed by the people who farmed the fertile meadows that surround the community of Huttegem.

Young birds for breeding were employed to secure early eggs, as hatching commenced in August, and ducklings were ready for sale in January. The season was a short one, ending in April, when the birds were removed from the meadows. Rearing upon the Continent of Europe during the winter was more difficult than in the United Kingdom, as the weather is less favourable. However, the ducklings had to bear it; there was no coddling; if too weak they died.

Brown also describes his visit to the Audenarde district early in February, when the water-courses were frozen, and the ground covered with snow. He noticed that even under these conditions the ducklings were placed out in the open and allowed to go into the water, access to which was given by breaking the ice. He states that English breeders would never allow the young birds to swim in such very cold water, which was thought to retard growth and induce cramp. He thinks that it is more than likely this system explains why Huttegem Ducks do not attain the same size as the English Aylesbury ducks; but that the birds thrive upon it is unquestionable.

I presume Vander Snickt did not want to discuss this any further or just didn't know the exact thoughts of his colleague at that time. Anyway, in his article on "Les canards de Belgique" (The Belgian ducks) Vander Snickt stated that the Aylesbury was brought to England by Belgian emigrants, and the British - as they have done with many other breeds - have had the merit to grade these ducks up into an exhibition breed. This type of duck, however, could indeed not live long on the banks of the Scheldt and would die from fatigue, hunger and cold.

The ducklings were carried to the meadows in huge round hampers and a boy was employed to look after them. Near the water-courses the only protection given was by means of hurdles covered with straw to break the force of the wind. It seems that the percentage of loss, except from the depredations of crows, was very small, which speaks well for the vigour of the race. It was recognized, however, that the progeny from eggs laid by very young ducks were weaker than those from older birds, for which reason, as soon as the two- and three-year-old ducks begin to lay, their eggs were preferred for breeding purposes.



PLATE XII.—STRAW COOP FOR DUCKLINGS AT BEVERE.

Above: Straw coop for ducklings. From Brown's book.

As indicated above, the enormous development of the industry, and how it proved profitable, is explained by the natural food available in these meadows and in the water-courses; on the one side the small water-animals, and on the other side the enormous amounts of worms and snails that live in and under the ground of the wet meadows. The ducks were seldom supplied with artificial foods, but soon learnt to group around the peasants in their *sabots*, who tread the ground inducing the worms to appear on the surface.

Another article of natural food which was thought to be of almost equal importance, were the enormous amounts of the common dock-weed along the banks of the Scheldt, and minute forms of life which were to be found upon these plants. Brown considered this a field for enquiry, for such an investigation might help greatly in the work of raising all classes of poultry.

Whilst worms and plants were chiefly depended upon, these alone were not enough to secure rapidity of growth, and the feed supplied was liberal. For the first three or four days a mixture of hard-boiled eggs, chopped fine, buckwheat meal, and Indian meal, together with worms, after which two or three feeds a day were given of either steeped buckwheat or of buckwheat meal mixed with maize meal, the birds getting what natural food they could on the meadows. There was no fattening in this section of Flanders. When the ducklings were about six weeks old they were sold to the duck-feeders at Lebbeke and Merchtem, (the same which fatten de Malines fowl), who finish the work.

The Laplaigne duck

The other section of Belgium where duck-raising was carried out on industrial lines is at Laplaigne in the province of Hainaut, on the French border, and like Audenarde on the Escaut River. A considerable portion of its low lying land consists of water-meadows, as at Huttegem, under communal control, and flooded every year. Brown found a small duck of some-what uncertain type was bred here that was very rapid in growth, producing fine and abundant flesh, which was greatly in demand at Brussels, Lille, etc.

Upwards of 100,000 were produced annually in the commune of Laplaigne, both in large and small flocks. Three brothers, named Drouillon, were amongst the largest producers, one of whom annually raised about 10,000 birds. One distinctive difference between the Huttegem and Laplaigne ducklings was that the latter were reared practically all the year round. The birds were ready for killing in seven weeks, by which time they weighed 3 to 3½ lb. The flesh was described as "beautifully white and soft". By March and April these birds realized 8 to 10 francs each, but the usual price was 12 to 14 francs per pair.

In several important respects the adopted breeding system at Laplaigne differs from the Huttegem system, and these were observed by Brown.

Incubators were almost exclusively employed, as the ordinary fowls of the district were Black Braekels, being small in size and unreliable non-sitters. A second difference was that during the first fortnight the hen and her brood were enclosed during the day within hurdles, which were placed by the side of, and across the water-course; where they had access to the small stream, on the banks of which a large amount of natural food was obtained. After that period they were given full liberty. No artificial heat was provided for the ducklings, but they rested during the day on beds of fresh stable manure placed in convenient positions, from which they obtained a considerable amount of natural warmth. Sheds made with hurdles and straw were distributed about the area, into which the ducklings could go when disposed to obtain shelter, while the older ducklings were permitted to wander among the clumps of trees and bushes.

Right: Enclosures for young ducks in Laplaigne. Illustration from Brown's book.



PLATE XIV.—ENCLOSURE FOR YOUNG DUCKS AT LAPLAGNE ACROSS WATER COURSE.

As distinct from what has already been stated as to Audenarde, the work was completed at Laplaigne by fattening and killing the ducklings. The method of feeding generally followed was that the food supplied consisted of crushed wheat or buckwheat meal, and mixed with cooked potatoes, to which a little meat meal was added. This mixture was prepared with water into a paste. Probably the reason why meat meal was added arose from the fact that, as a consequence of the large number of ducklings bred and kept on the meadows practically all the year round, worms were becoming scarce.

The ducks of the Scheldt in Chasse et Pêche

In an article in *Chasse et Pêche*, titled *Les canards de l'Escaut* (The ducks of

the Scheldt), Vander Snickt writes that the breeders of Audenarde were not particularly selective in their breed of duck and the fanciers who purchased ducks in Laplaigne all thought they bought quality stock, and they entered these ducks in the exhibitions/shows. Anywhere from Dolhain to Zottegem, Chèvrem and Heyst there were classes for the Laplaigne ducks and none for the Huttegem or Audenarde Ducks. Vander Snickt comes to the conclusion that the Audenaarde breeders were much too amateur and those of Laplaigne too commercialised.

In another article entitled *Les canards de Belgique*, the same author describes how animals may vary depending on the region where they occur. For example, he notes that the ducks kept in the Meuse valley differed from those that lived along the river Scheldt. Today we know only the Semois Duck, with and without a crest, in the Meuse valley. The breeding of ducks along the Scheldt valley had occurred on a large scale for centuries in order to provide for the boats to Antwerp. Vander Snickt wonders where this duck breed originally came from? In any case, the breeding of ducks had become a major industry: in Laplaigne 100,000 ducks were bred for consumption, and 200,000 in the region of Audenarde.

A Mr. Huart, an ardent defender of Laplaigne duck and a teacher in the same town, regularly enters the discussion by means of readers' letters in *Chasse et Pêche*. In one of his letters he states that the Huttegem duck is a cross between the Merchtem and Termonde duck.

The web-site <http://volaillepoultry.pagesperso-orange.fr/canardetran.html> states the Laplaigne duck originated in 1873 from crossings conducted by breeder Aimable Dervol, from Ypres.

Below: Abbey of Maredret, the farm. Postcard dating from before 1926. Indian Runner Ducks or Huttegem Ducks? Who knows? ... "
Postcard courtesy of P.E. De Wulf.



A decisive change

After the demolition of the old lock in 1918, the construction of a new lock on the river Scheldt, in the Eindries, by 1920, resulted in a profound change to the cityscape. During the third quarter of the 20th century the Burgschelde silted up and, with the Grachtschelde, disappeared from the cityscape. The Scheldt was widened and straightened at De Ham. The late 19th-century branch of the Scheldt also filled up southeast from the bridge in the Bergstraat. This caused the marshy meadows to

completely disappear, and with them the Huttegem Chicken and Duck.

A Comeback

Slowly, but surely, new commercial varieties of ducks came on the market. Probably some of the Huttegem Ducks were preserved by fanciers, as the duck with the magpie markings is still around, or maybe it is a comeback? The breed is still included in the Poultry Standard, although they are now bred by a handful of breeders and only occasionally seen at the shows. One of the current Huttegem Duck breeders is the Belgian, Paul-Emile De Wulf, who is an enthusiastic duck breeder and studied the 'new' history of these ducks. Is there possibly an original blood running in the now-a-days population? Paul-Emile has done extensive research and in the next article you can read more about it.

Below: Huttegem ducks anno 2016. Photo: Paul-Emilie De Wulf.



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