

# The Orpington -a Grand Old Breed in an Exciting New World

## Preamble.

The Orpington Club of Australia was formed in 1985 with its core responsibility to preserve, protect and promote this stately breed which came into being with so much fanfare into the UK poultry scene in 1886.

So while the Orpington fowl has been most successful for over 130 years both on the show bench and in the back yard as you will see from this article the breed has been plagued with some common issues over many years. Some of these issues relate to interpretation of the written word of the breed as contained in the Australian Poultry Standards but in recent times mostly arising from the proliferation of images of show winning birds -both good and sometimes very bad - on social media.

Never has the Club motto rung truer as it has now with the Club Executive having taken on the task to develop a visual representation of the Breed which we hope will better inform Club members and the general Poultry community about what a true Orpington (as outlined in the Australian Poultry Standards) should look like!

## Where did the Orpington come from? Is that part of the problem?

When we think of the Orpington we think of a breed steeped in tradition and majesty. Tradition – the Orpington was one of the first chicken breeds introduced into Australia. With regards to majesty, the Orpington was the breed of choice of the late Queen Mother. From a poultry perspective, the breed cannot get a higher endorsement than the one provided from an internationally recognised, member of the royal family.

In stark contrast, the origins of the Orpington did not start along these grandeur lines. In fact, the origin of the Orpington could be more closely aligned with a new variety of Holden motor car being launched to take on rivals Ford in the competitive car market. William Cook the originator set out to capture a market opportunity to produce a utility fowl capable of filling the egg basket as well as providing the Sunday roast. He could see that American poultry producers had got the jump on their British cousins with the Wyandotte and Plymouth Rock, which were set to take over the British poultry scene.

William Cook's entrepreneurial business skills enabled him to foresee the financial gain in providing poultry products to the rich and poor alike as eggs and poultry meat were only affordable by the wealthy in the 1800's. This meant that William Cook and his Orpingtons were not always held in high esteem with other poultry men, however despite this, Cook prevailed and he became incredibly successful. Why you may well ask? Cook was more than a poultry breeder he was first and foremost an entrepreneurial business man. William Cook took the good characteristics of his rivals, the American Plymouth Rock and Wyandotte (i.e. meat and egg production) and bred them into versions/models that the British poultryman and consumer preferred. Instead of a chicken with yellow flesh that laid white eggs, he created a high producing brown egg layer with plenty of white

flesh, both traits preferred by the British pallet. Cook combined the black Plymouth Rocks, clean legged Langshan and a little bit of Minorca to develop the Black Orpington. The Buffs soon followed and there has always been much dispute as to their composition and origin, which is not part of the brief of this article.

I think it is fair to credit Cook with being one of the first to apply modern marketing techniques to the Commonwealth poultry industry. By 1886, these big black fowls made their appearance at the three big shows the Dairy, Crystal Palace and the Birmingham shows. It was two years later that separate classification was given for the Black Orpington at the 1888 Dairy Show at Islington where there were 14 cockerels and 19 pullets exhibited in the two classes.

The UK Orpington Club was formed in 1887 so promotion was rapid, but it was not until 1900 that the black was anything at all approaching a distinct kind. The commercial and exhibition future for the Black Orpingtons under Cooks guidance seemed high indeed.

However in 1891 that Joseph Partington and friends transformed the Black Orpington, by decidedly increasing bulk and feather to the standard and hallmarks we have long since become accustomed to. The so called Partington Orpington were bred from a Cochin base. They won big on the show bench, changed hands for many hundreds of pounds but took away many of Cooks intended utility qualities. Interestingly, it was Australian poultry men and women who stuck to the original Cook type, which eventually became the Australian Orpington or Australorp. The utilities qualities of the Australian Orpington being so superior to the British Black Orpington that by 1920 Australian Orpingtons had been imported back to the old country and a British Australorp Club formed.

## **Time Warp back to 2018**

While I have been fortunate to have been around Orpingtons all my life unfortunately the breed has been limited/plagued by the following;

1. *The blacks/blues and buffs have very little breed resemblance.* Whilst this has always been the case due to the different founding makeup of the birds, this does not make the occurrence correct.
2. *Many Black Orpingtons which have been exhibited and successful on the show bench, do not comply with the written standard.* This applies mostly to the area of the underline which the standard states. The legs short and the thighs almost covered by feather. No reference has ever been made to the shanks being covered by feather, like a Pekin bantam. Many Blacks just do not conform to the standard.
3. *Many newer breeders need clarification as to what makes the ideal Orpington as set down by the Australian Poultry Standards.* I think it is fair to say that this applies to all breeds of poultry and that people may not study the written standards as they should. Standards can be misinterpreted, or breeders are unable to apply the knowledge in practice. This problem is being compounded by the internet and the obsession with social media such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Snapchat and the like.

It is quite common to see an average quality fowl win an award at a little show in Timbuctoo with little or no competition. A badly posed photo is then taken on the smart phone and immediately uploaded on to social media, posted as a Grand Champion for all the world to marvel at. Many

unsuspecting new breeders see this photo, like what they see and decide that “THIS ORPINGTON is what I want my Orpingtons to look like”. Despite of the fact that the Timbuctoo Champion’s place in life is perhaps better suited to the Sunday roast.

This scenario happens quite often and many a new breeder is getting off on the wrong foot, and as such eventually finds out their birds are not what the standard calls for, gets upset when their beloved chicken doesn’t do as well on the show bench as they had hoped and leaves the poultry fraternity and breed in disgust.

All this needs to be and can be prevented.

## **Perhaps The Orpington Club of Australia has developed the Solution?**

As outlined in the preamble The Orpington Club of Australia was formed in 1985 with the responsibility to preserve, protect and promote this stately breed. At the 2018 National Orpington Show at an impromptu catch up of the Club Executive and the State Representatives present discussed the looming updates to the Australian Poultry Standards, the issues raised above and how we might come up with a number of combined solutions to address the issues and ensure the written words of the Australian Poultry Standards could be reflected visually.

The example of how previously the Australorp Club of Australia had used drawings to depict the ideal Australorp was raised and offered as something the Club should look at. So on 30<sup>th</sup> June 2018 the Club Executive agreed to embark on project to develop drawings that depicted the ideal male and female Orpington and that would compliment the written word of the Standards.

Wow what a task that has turned out to be. And where to start!!!!???

The Orpington Club is very fortunate to have Dallas Smith involved in the organisation. His nomination as Club Patron in 2018 was heralded by the thunderous acclamation of the Club members such is his standing as the doyen of the Orpington breed. Previously Dallas held the Orpington Club of Australia Secretary role for 10 years, has bred numerous national show winners- not just in Orpingtons- as well as having written what are regarded globally as two of the most seminal and well-regarded books on the modern Orpington Fowl. Dallas Smith is one of those rare poultry men who combines the ability to breed top class poultry and dissect and understand the written word of the standard. He combines this with 70 years of experience, memories and history in the Australian poultry fancy.

So with the start point for this monumental task being the 2018 National Orpington Show, the Orpington Committee immediately engaged with Dallas to be involved in commissioning a painting which could be used as the Standard Illustration for all Orpingtons, both male and female as described in the Australian Poultry Standards.

Trying to find the right artist was a difficult task but this was only part of the challenge. Right from the start it was important for the back line to be perfect, the fronts to be full, legs to be correct, toes the right length, head colour and detail correct, comb to be the right size and right number of points- the list of elements to get right went on and on and on.

Lots of nit picking was necessary. Minor details that could be considered trivial when illustrating an

art piece were dissected and discussed at length, for this illustration of an Orpington needed to conform to breed standard in every aspect. The final painting included in this article is now presented to all and sundry as representing the Ideal Orpington (in Australia). Considering the perfect Orpington has never been bred, Dallas's input was critical for the success of this difficult yet paramount project.

The final result of all these combined efforts is the painting of the ideal male and female Orpington contained in this article and which has the endorsement from Dallas as representing the Ideal Orpington.

The plan going forward is that this painting will be submitted to the Standards committee with the Club recommendation and request that this picture be used as the sole illustrated reference for the breed, along with the written word on the ideal Orpington. The Club will then use the images on all social media platforms along with Club merchandise, to help reinforce to all what an Orpington should look like.

The Club appreciates that experienced breeders and experienced judges might have their own pre-formed ideals and their own interpretation of the written words of the breed standard. By developing this illustration of the Orpington Breed Standard, we hope it will help clarify the standard by depicting the perfect Orpington, which in turn will help breeders breed a better fowl. This initiative will hopefully be reflected on the show bench and we hope will only serve to protect, preserve and promote the Orpington breed further.

The Orpington Club is a dynamic club of men, women and little ones, who are passionate about the breed, love their chickens and are committed to promoting and improving the Orpington whilst having fun at the same time.

New breeders are always welcome, and 2019 is shaping up to be a big year with several breed shows around the country and the National in Dubbo in June. Go to [www.orpingtonaustralia.com](http://www.orpingtonaustralia.com) for more details.

Ross Gibson - President Orpington Club of Australia

#### *Acknowledgements;*

*To our Artist Sharon Ingersole, who did an amazing job translating many years of poultry experience into a drawing that reflects that was always in our aficionado's mind's eye.*

*To the eminent Australian Poultry judges who provided feedback -both good and 'what the' -and their encouragement to the Club to progress with these drawings for the intent intended.*

*To the Executive and State Representatives of the Orpington Club of Australia whose energy, commitment and support for the project has been integral to its final success and to Club members for approving their development (Please note that all costs associated with this project have been covered by several anonymous donors)*

*For more information on the context and use of these Orpington Drawings please contact The Orpington Club of Australia President Ross Gibson via email ([gibsonfamilyfarm.gff@gmail.com](mailto:gibsonfamilyfarm.gff@gmail.com)) or phone 0447 971 836 or Secretary Martin Doultton via email ([secretary@orpingtonaustralia.com](mailto:secretary@orpingtonaustralia.com)) or 0409 948 682*

*And Finally. The approved picture presenting what an Ideal Orpington full grown male and female should look like as interpreted from the wording contained in the Australian Poultry Standards.*

