



THE FLEMISH CUCKOO

Searching for their origin

Text and photos:
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PART 3 CHICKEN BREEDS AND EXHIBITIONS

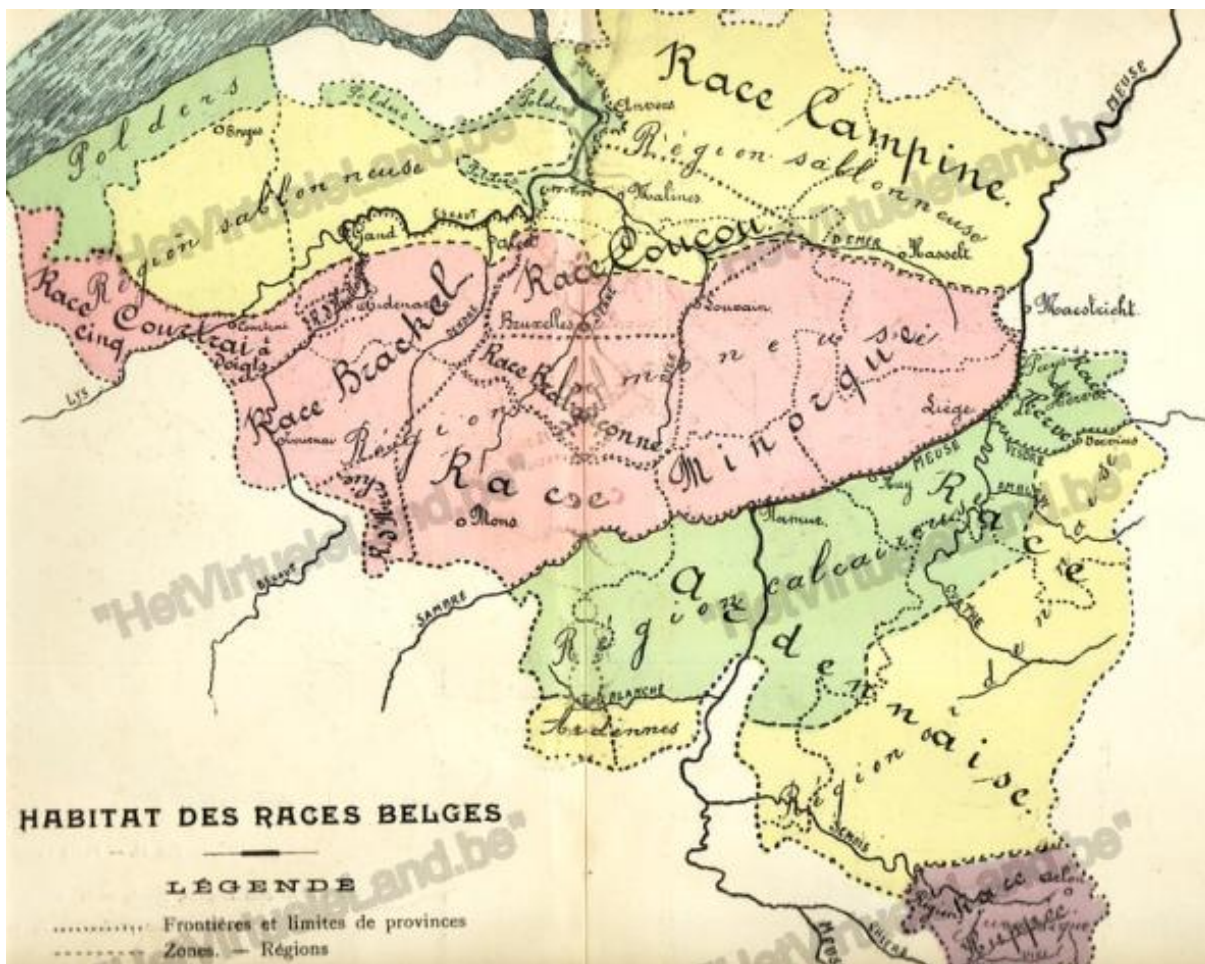
From the middle of the 19th century, we see a shift towards greater consumption of imported products and again more meat. The advances in farming techniques by selecting and crossbreeding also followed out in the poultry world. But it was still the better middle class who could afford the keeping and breeding of purebred fowl. From this time, in America, Britain and the European mainland, distinguishable breeds of chicken got a breed name. The upper middle classes was developing an interest in keeping chickens for their ornamental value. The exhibitions of farmyard animals became popular.

During the Belle Epoque, in 1900, the consumption of eggs doubled and the famous 'poulets de Bruxelles' were in great demand on the rich urban tables. The triangle Aalst - Mechelen - Brussels acquired fame with his fatteners which produced up to 1000 chickens per year. It was the heyday of the Belgian breeds, which locations we can see on a map from 1903 "Habitats des races Belges" (courtesy of the Image store of the CAG).

In the north, the *Campine*; in the east the *Braekel* and *Courtrai à cinq droits* (The Courtrai or Kortrijk Fowl was a short-legged Braekel with 5 toes, that according to Edward Brown was a descendant of the Dorkings); in the south the *Race Ardennaise* and the *Race Herve* (the Ardenner and the Herve fowl) and in the centre a large region with *Minorca* (a Spanish variety with black plumes, which was seen in 1783 for the first time in England and in 1880 already was bred in Germany), the *Race Coucou* (The Cuckoo coloured chickens) and *Brabançennes*.

Those who look closely will see small corners with the *Race D'Hutteghem* (left side, above the town Oudenaarde); middle, far left, the *Race D'Herchie* (the current French breed *Poule D'Hergnies*) and on the southern tip the *Race Huppée* (the Brabançonne that was so called there).

It is remarkably that the Minorca was allocated such a large area, especially since all other breeds are native and the Minorca is an introduced breed. Apparently they were imported en masse during that period, especially in Brabant and Liege.



Above: A map, showing the regions where the various chicken breeds were kept in Belgium, dated 1903. Photo: Beeldbank CAG.

So, according to this map, the 'Race Coucou' (cuckoo coloured chickens) were mainly kept in the region between Brussels and Malines. The Malines is the most prized meat chicken on the rich tables. They are fattened and marketed as the renowned heavy '*poulets de Bruxelles*'. Cocks of 6 kg are no exception.

In the magazine *Vlaamsch Neerhof* from 1895 is stated that the 'Brussels kicken' at the beginning of the century was also sold under the name 'Lombards Kicken'. Already in the 13th century the word *lombaerd* or *lombard* was meaning: banker, money changer, money broker or lender. Maybe this name is a reference to the fact that the Malines in their early years were bringing in a lot of money?

The fattening was done with a mixture of grains, often buckwheat, and skimmed milk - the remains of the thriving butter production. During fattening the chickens spend their last weeks in small cages, called *epinettes*.

The ideal broilers region was situated in the outskirts of Brussels. Chicken breeders from Londerzeel and Merchtem travelled with baskets filled with chicken by train to the wealthy metropolitan market of Brussels. But also internationally the demand for Belgian chickens was increasing.



Above: Chicken fatteners around 1900. In these *epinettes* the 'poulets de Bruxelles' passed their last days before they were sold on the Brussels market. (Photo: Beeldbank CAG)



Above: Chicken breeders from Londerzeel and Merchem travelled with baskets filled with chicken by train to the wealthy metropolitan market of Brussels. Photo: Beeldbank CAG.

Together with the first 'intensive' forms of chicken farming - a large poultry farmer kept about 300 chickens in a coop - also epidemics were cropping up. Pullorum disease (an infectious, bacterial disease caused by a bacterium named *Salmonella pullorum*) was called the "*maladie de Londerzeel*"- the disease of Londerzeel. (Country Life - Segers Y. & L. Van Molle)

The Flemish cuckoo, which is at the basis of the Malines, is still called the old type Malines in these years. Given the success of the Malines there was no need any more for the rustic Flemish cuckoo and we don't hear about this breed anymore, at least not in Belgium. But in France, Mr. Labbe was fully occupied breeding and exhibiting this breed (under the name: Coucou de Flandres).

The basis of the cuckoo coloured chickens

The question remains whether the Flemish Cuckoo did not only served as the base model for the Malines but for all Cuckoo chickens in the Netherlands, Belgium and northern France, including the Poule de Rennes and Scotch Grey and - indirectly - the North Holland Blue, because the latter was created by crossing local breeds with the Malines (and who was the ancestor of the Malines ...?) Also the Poule de Rennes had the Flemish Cuckoo as a base, but instead of breeding them the way Mr Labbe did, Mr. Rame from Rennes decided the cock and hen had to have the same colour and by selecting he created a different variety, as evidenced by correspondence which we will discuss later in the article.

According an article published in *Chasse et Pêche* 1/12/1889, **the Scotch Grey**, was well presented at the Belgian Exhibitions and Mr Nijpels, director of the Genth Zoo, specialized in the breed.

"... We regard this breed as being the forerunner of the Malines (author's note: thus the Flemish) neglected in Belgium since the introduction of the Asiatic breeds and picked up again in England and Scotland for the purpose of the exhibition. We think that this breed will be very useful to cross with the modern cuckoo varieties to regain the original type and colour when they become too pale or yellowish."



Left: Mounted Scotch Grey cockerel, Musée d'Histoire Naturelle de Lille, donated by Mr Detroy in 1900.

This is what the 'Revue van Toegepaste Wetenschappen' stated about the Scotch Grey, according to the *Fancier's Gazette*: "This new chicken variety looks a lot like the Dorking although they don't have a fifth toe. A cockerel weighs 3.5 to 4 kilos; the hen 3 to 4 kilos. The plumage is grey to bluish with black markings, without any difference between male and female (like the Poule de Rennes). As a table fowl it lacks size, being smaller than the Dorking, still they are very hardy which makes them



outstanding backyard chickens. They can live without problems in wet soil where other chickens would get sick". (See also *Chasse et Pêche*, issue 44, dated 1/08/1897 page 431.)

Left: Mounted Scotch Grey hen, Musée d'Histoire Naturelle de Lille, donated by Mr Detroy in 1900.

All these predicates might as well refer to the Flemish Cuckoo, making it more obvious that they are the ancestors of the Scotch Grey.

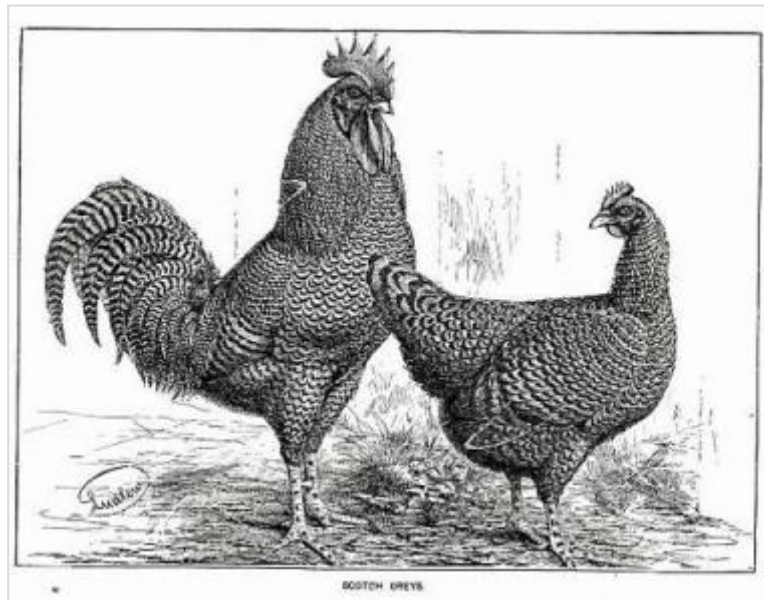
The Scotch Grey Club relies on the fact that their fowl has existed since the 1500s, when it was widespread in the area of Lanarkshire in Scotland. Over a long period of time the Scots Grey has been known by many names in different districts including: Chick Marley, Shepherds Plaid, Chickmalins, Mauds, Greylings, Greylocks and were mostly kept by Cottagers and farmer's wives.

In Wright's *New Book of Poultry* we find an article about the Scotch Grey in which the author is very enthusiastic about this breed. He has often wondered why the breed has not been more popular in England. "..... It has been called the Scotch Dorking, but is entirely different in carriage and shape from that fowl, The comb is single and moderate in size, upright in the cock, usually falling over in the hen, (Note by the author: just like the Flemish) the ear-lobe red, The plumage in general resembles that of the barred Rock, but has a tendency to finer marking, Compared with birds we saw at the Scottish shows in 1869-75, those of the present day have gained considerably in size, typical shape, and absence of white, black, or rust in the plumage."

The author also quotes from an article upon this valuable Breed, kindly supplied by Mr. John Carswell, Falkirk, N.B., the then Secretary of the Scotch Grey Club: ".... When mating birds for breeding, one has to be very careful about the strains, or you may have a large percentage of both black and very light chickens. Strange to say nearly all the blacks are pullets, and the very light-coloured ones are cocks". (Note by the author: In those days they had no clue about the inheritance of the B (cuckoo) gene; however the described inheritance is the same as in our Flemish cuckoo.)

Carswell continues: "I never would breed a cock with a lot of white in its tail, though all his other qualities were nearly perfect; you simply can't get rid of white tails if you once get them." Also today we have to select for the same details.

Right: Cock and hen Scotch Grey, Ludlow, 1899.



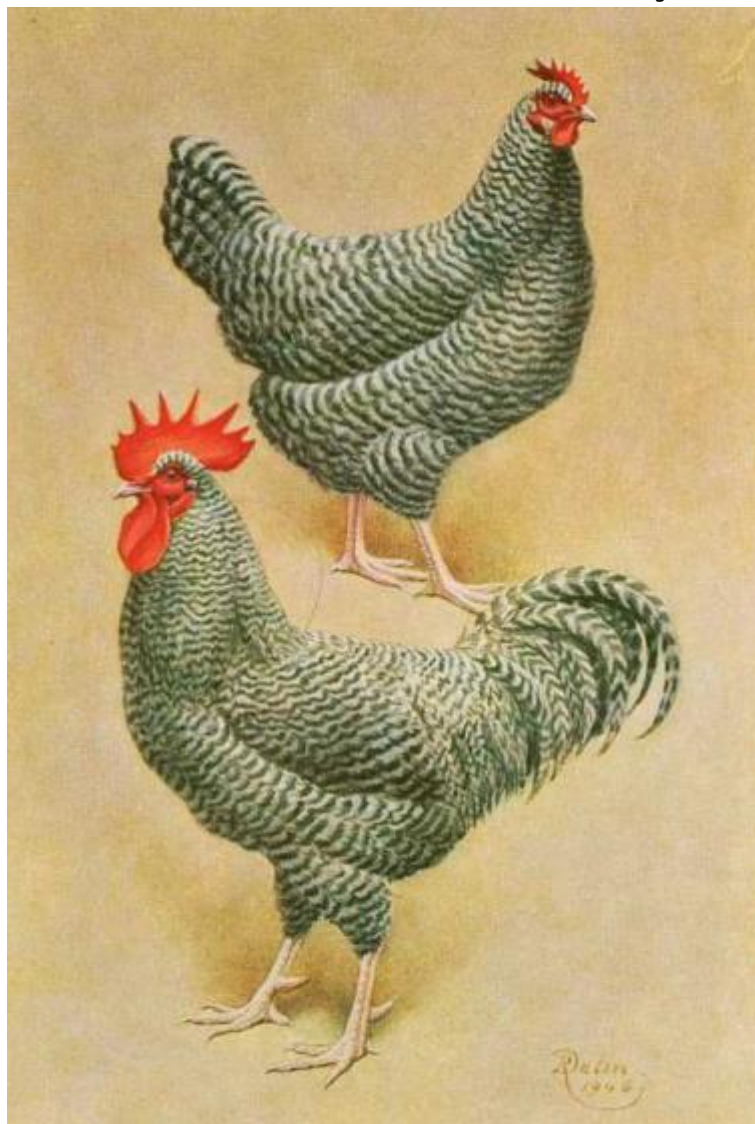
Another book, published in 1862, dealing with poultry on the farm makes it clear that the Scotch Grey was quite popular (*The Henwife*, by Mrs Fergusson Blair). Harrison Weir travelled to Dumfriesshire regularly between 1862 – 1864 and studied in depth the local poultry. The fowl kept in the area he travelled were the old sort, square and plump, and short in thigh and medium in shank. They had single combs, relatively large heads, ear lobes white to light pink, shanks and beak white, and an upright carriage.

The overall colour was a cuckoo grey, with a large and full tail of the cocks a dark or mottled black and white. Sometimes there other colours mixed in such as straw and, occasionally, red. The hens had a brown colour on the body, or a grey-brown, with darker hackles. These birds, he noted almost 50 years on, are what became known as "Scotch Greys" – now known as Scots Greys. They were modified and looked more Gamey. Possibly there had been a cross with Old English Game or an Asian breed. He felt quite positive from his knowledge and experience of the Dorking with its five toes, that they had never been crossed with the Scots Grey.

These crossings would thus have taken place only in 1900 to give the breed a new impetus. Earlier, the Scotch Grey was -just like the Flemish Cuckoo and the Poule de Rennes- a farmer's chicken about which there was nothing to tell.

Right: Poule de Rennes, by R. Delin in 1946.

Source: Beeldbank CAG.



Finally we read the following in the 'Mentor agricole et acclimatation illustrées' from 1891, page 199, in an article by E. Bouvet on "la poule coucou" (the cuckoo hen):

"The Scotch Grey of the British Islands is nothing more than a derivative of our Cuckoo native fowl, which is to be found on farms, just like the Dorking is a derivative of the Picardy, only with five toes. The increasing of the volume and making it more susceptible to fattening have been obtained at the expense of the rusticity and fertility of this breed. Our own unaltered cuckoo is infinitely more practical and always preferred to those Scotch Grey and other derivatives."

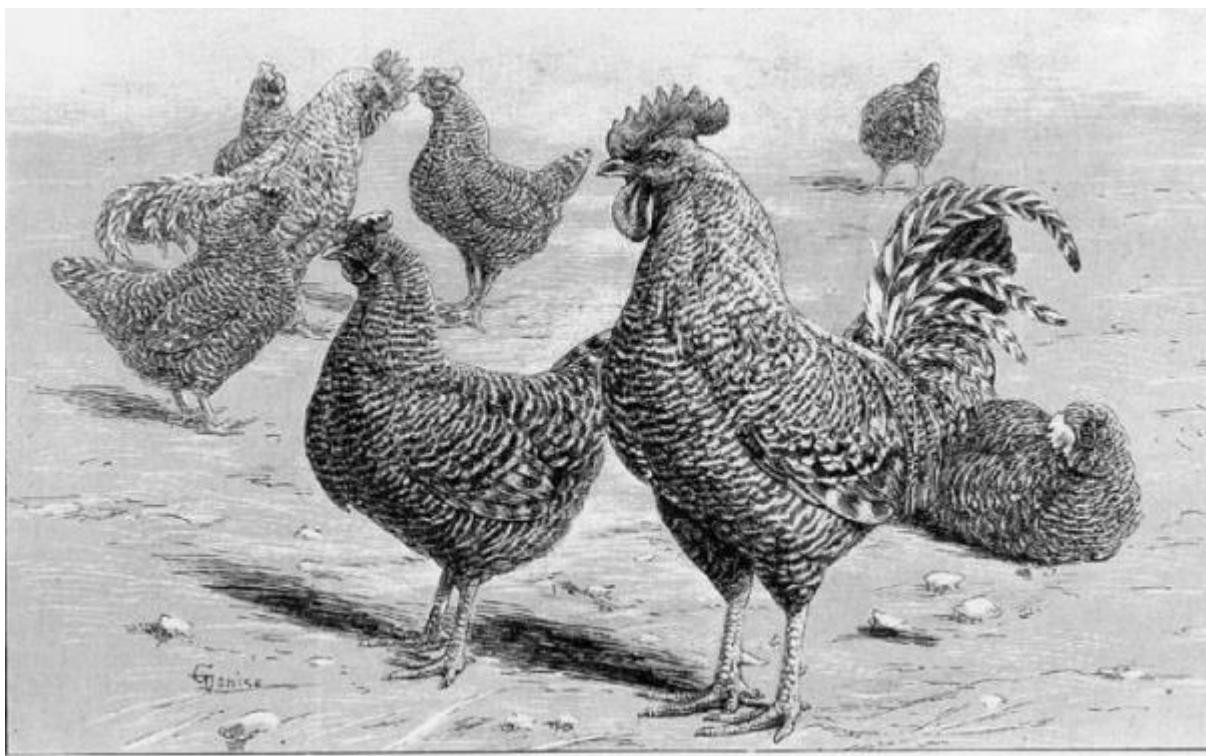
Some authors are just guessing, like Larbalétrier in his book "Les animaux de basse cour" stating that the Scotch Grey is a crossing of the Dorking and a Game fowl breed.

Concerning the Plymouth Rock he is right when he indicates that this was the result of a crossing between Cochin and Dominique, which is true, but a little

further he states that the Dominique originated by crossing the Dorking with a Leghorn.

Delamarre de Monchaux in his book "Toutes les Poules", 1924, goes one step further and writes that the Scotch Grey originated by crossing local fowls with Minorca, Spanish and Italian Leghorns. Also U. Hoepli in his book "Animale da Cortile" from 1905 explains the creation of the Dominique as being a cross Leghorn x Dorking.

Can you still follow?



Coucou de Flandre, 1906, the ideal type, according to the 'Société des Aviculteurs du Nord'. Source: <http://www.la-basse-cour-du-nord.fr>

No documentation

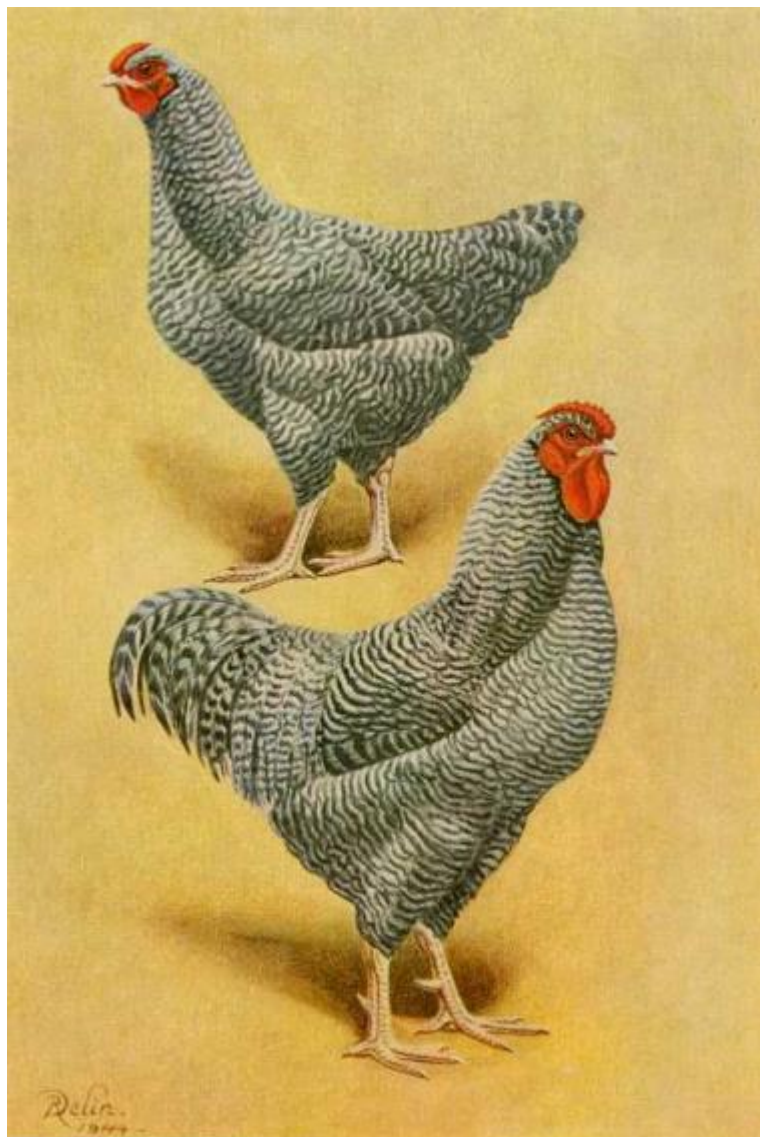
It's actually hard to grasp, but in all (Flemish-speaking) documents about poultry and chicken breeds, the name Flemish Cuckoo is never mentioned.

For instance in the following works:

In his book "Geschiedenis van de landbouw in België" (*I have not been able to trace the original, only a refer in an article of 'De Biekorf' volume 60 by L. Van Acker*) P. Lindemans describes the old Belgian chicken breeds: the original chicken, that he calls the *Gallische ras* (La Gauloise, in quail colour), the Brabançonne with the small crest, and "...the current native breeds, such as the Malines and the Braekel", according to him both hybrids that were created in the former century.

A more comprehensive and detailed list of poultry species which especially in West Flanders existed around the years before the First World War can be found in the paper of A. Develter, then an agriculture teacher in Esen - Diksmuide, titled 'De Eiermijn. Volledig handboek over Hoenderkweek bij werkman, burger en landbouwer', 1919, 95 pages.) (*Again I have not been able to trace the original book, only a refer in an article of 'De Biekorf' volume 60 by L. Van Acker*) According to Van Acker, A Develter was a man of the practice in every way, who only described the situation just before the World War. The ancient native breed he called "... **the Flemish farmer's hen**, resistant to all weather, sturdy, heavy, and laying many and large eggs". This breed was then already almost completely degenerated and hardly to trace in its pure form. Is he talking about the Flemish cuckoo?

In the booklet of Develter the following breeds are mentioned as layers: the Brabançonne, the Braekel and the Campines, and as table fowl: the Malines, together with a typical West-Flanders crossing, the so-called 'Izegem cuckoo'. The latter must be a reconstruction of the breed that was decimated after the war, because the Izegem has a much older history than the Malines. It is known that when the St George's Guild of Oudenaarde in 1554 celebrated its fourth *gaeydach* festivity on July 1, the menu of the guild members included among others: 'meat... four pigs, one sheep, **six pairs of Yseghem chickens**' (E. Vander Straeten, Aldenardiana II 50; Gent 1894 in Chasse et Peche n° 47 van 04/09/1898, and a refer in an article of 'De Biekorf' volume 60 by L. Van Acker.)



Left:
Izegem cuckoo, drawing by R. Delin in 1944.
Source: Beeldbank CAG.

The Izegem cuckoo could thus be traced back to 1554. But should we simply assume here that we are dealing with the breed as we know it today? I rather doubt it and think the name of the chickens had only a culinary reason.

In the region of Oudenaarde, home of the St George's Guild, no meat chickens were kept; it was the region of the Braekel, a layer. This chicken was at that time also not the size that it is today and obviously there was no interest in a lean chicken for a festivity meal. Moreover, it was already practiced in Roman times, to use a heavy capon for a banquet. Of course, we don't know for certain, but it would be possible that there was a meat-type chicken in the

Izegem area which was known for its fine taste and on a special occasion like this, it was particularly suited for the guild members. So, six couples of chickens from the area of Izegem and not necessarily the Izegem cuckoo breed that we know today.

However, on Chasse et Peche we read (in the earlier mentioned issue of 04/09/1898):

"The people of Oudenaarde have neglected the Izegems cuckoo which caused it to fade away, together with the associated industry of breeding and fattening. The Izegem, with five toes and white legs, has found a new home in England where it developed into the Dorking breed. However, in the region of Kortrijk, this Izegem cuckoo left his traces in many farms and the traders in that region who are doing business in Brussels distinguish this type of chicken perfectly. We have been asking for a long time to open an exhibition

class for this breed. Recently, several specimens have been exhibited, but we have to admit, of very poor quality, and entered under the name of 'la poule flamande a cinq doigts' (Flemish chicken with five toes)."

Should it be that this Izegem as it appears in 1554 is indeed the pure Izegem breed that we know today, then this would only mean that our Flemish cuckoo is even older. At first, the Flemish has an single comb and the Izegem a rose comb. Rosecombs are dominant over single combs, so this means that the Flemish must have existed earlier, otherwise they would all have a rose comb. Furthermore the Izegem is a hybrid created as a meat-type breed by crossing an existing cuckoo coloured land fowl (the Flemish?) with the Bruges Game. Since the cuckoo colour is dominant, it will take just a few generations to have only Cuckoo coloured chickens.

In order to learn something more about the state of the Flemish Cuckoo in the 1850s, it turned out we had to search in France. You can read about that in Part 4.

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