

The Orpington Ducks

(A cautionary tale)

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The history of the Orpington Ducks, as related by numerous authors up to the present time (Oct. 2008), has been the misconception that the Buff form of the Orpington Duck preceded the other colours of this breed, and that it was presented to the public at around the same time as, or even after, the introduction of Mrs Campbell's khaki-coloured ducks in 1901.²

Chris & Mike Ashton, *The Domestic Duck* (2001), in the chapter on Orpington Ducks, correctly give the colour-forms of this breed as being Buff, Blue (2 forms), Black, White, and Chocolate; stating: "all surfacing in the first half of the twentieth century," which is imprecise, and cite an advertisement placed by William Cook and Sons in *The Feathered World* of 19th January 1900, offering ". . . Pekins, blue Orpingtons, and buff Orpington Ducks. . ." The "blue Orpingtons" in the advertisement refers to the *duck*; the *fowl* of this colour was not introduced until 1907, making the statement that follows somewhat suspect, as these authors report: "The original Blue Orpington was developed by William Cook's son around 1910."¹

It will be shown that a great many authors have been misled by the imprecise and, sometimes, blatantly untruthful claims of earlier writers; most often through lack of investigation on their own part. Primarily, this was brought about because, by 1904, members of the Cook family were entangled in a disagreement, the precise cause of which remains un-known, that would divide them for all time. To understand how this would affect the history of the Orpington Duck, it is necessary to also study the family history.

The firm of 'William Cook' was established in 1873, and by 1884 had London offices at Queen's Head Yard, 105 Borough, S.E.; it traded from 'Tower House,' on Sevenoaks Road, Orpington, until the 10th July 1889, when it removed to 'The Waldens', St. Mary Cray, Kent, off Crockenhill Lane, between St. Mary Cray and Swanley. By the August of that year the address under-went two changes; firstly, it became 'Orpington House', Waldens, St. Mary Cray; and finally to simply 'Orpington House', St. Mary Cray, Kent. In times to come the use of the name 'Orpington' in the address would prove problematic.^{5 & 15}

William Cook was a businessman, out to promote his own livestock and make money; this he did through promotional tours, lectures and the monthly publication of the *Poultry Journal*, to which he was both a contributor and the Editor. Started in June 1886, under the title of *William Cook's Poultry Journal* and changing to *William Cook & Sons' Poultry Journal* in October 1904, it was the mouth-piece and advertisement for the firm.⁵

Ducks and how to make them pay was first published by William Cook in 1890. It is not until the fourth edition (1895) that Indian Runners, in both coloured and White forms, are included among the breeds described; however, there is no mention of Orpington Ducks in any edition of this work.^{6 & 7}

By the 1890's, the firm of 'William Cook' involved all of Cook's children; his eldest child, Elizabeth Jane; eldest son, William Henry, as manager; younger sons, Messrs. Albert Lockley

and Percy A. Cook; and youngest daughter, Lily (married to Art. C. Gilbert). The trading name became 'W. Cook & Son' briefly from March 1895, before changing to 'W. Cook & Sons' in November 1896; which was then retained until the firm ceased trading.⁵

It is in the November 1896 issue of *The Poultry Journal* that the earliest information on any Orpington Duck is found, and this relates to the Blue Orpington Duck (Fig. 1 & 2).⁵

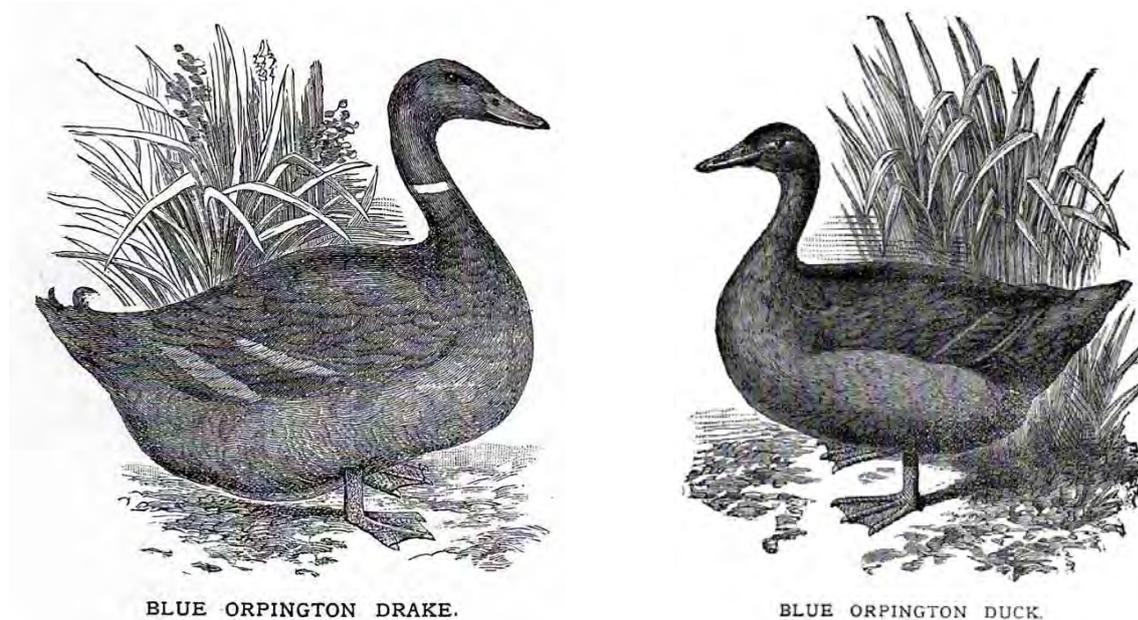


Fig. 1

Fig. 2

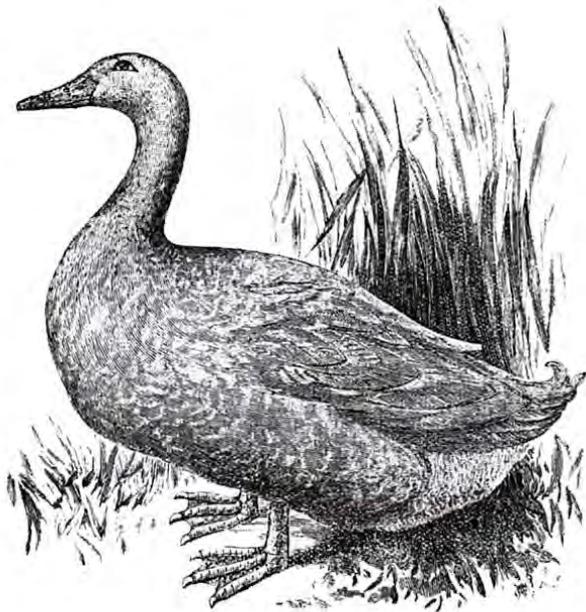
William Cook's Poultry Journal 1896.

The article states that by crossing Aylesbury, Rouen and Indian Runner Ducks in about equal parts, William Cook eventually produced birds which were (1) blue throughout, (2) blue variegated with brown (geneticists state Blue and Buff are two colours that are inextricably paired), and (3) blue with a white patch on the breast, which Cook calls "the water mark"; and either blue or white egg-shells could be expected from any of these birds. All of the above mentioned colour phases were available for sale in 1896; the solid coloured birds being "rather more expensive the first season."

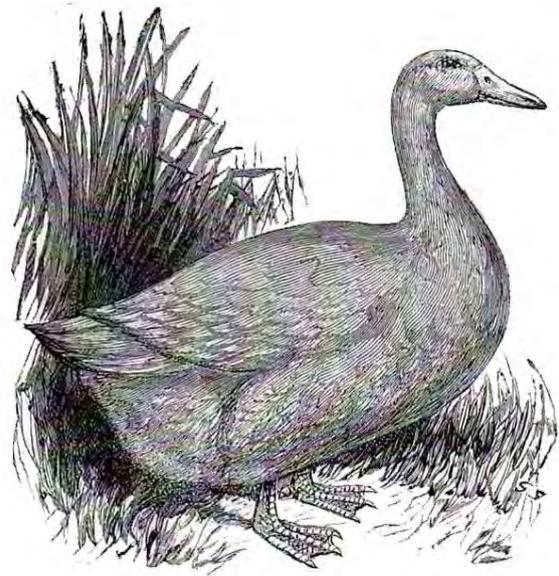
Blue Orpington Ducks were first exhibited, both on Cook's trade-stand and in the 'Open Class,' at the Agricultural Hall, Islington, London, in October 1896, where: "several were purchased at the Dairy Show at long prices."⁵

The creation of the Buff Orpington Duck was announced to the public in October 1897 (Fig. 3 & 4.):

"The colour too is quite distinct. Nothing like it has been seen in ducks before. Of course the Buff Ducks will not breed true for a few years. They will come some of them a little mixed. . ."⁵



BUFF ORPINGTON DRAKE.



BUFF ORPINGTON DUCK.

Fig. 3

Fig.4

William Cook's Poultry Journal 1897.

The Buff Orpington Duck was put on public display for the first time at the Dairy Show in October 1897; one year after the appearance of its Blue counter-part. William Cook writes:

“The Dairy is the only show in England where birds are allowed which are not for competition, and we availed ourselves this year of the opportunity, as we have in years gone by, of introducing this new breed to the public.

We exhibited a duck and drake in the open class; the birds at our stand were subjected to close scrutiny and careful examination by many judges and experts, as well as amateurs, who handled and examined them closely, and of all the new varieties we have introduced, none seems to have created so much interest as the Buff Orpington Duck.

Their appearance at the Dairy Show caused quite a sensation, similar to that which was seen when the Buff Orpington fowl was introduced a few years ago.”⁵

However, the truth relating to the history of the breed was set to take a twisted turn. In the same year, William Henry borrowed the sum of £780 from his father to purchase ‘Elm Cottage’, Derry Downs, St Mary Cray, Kent; the conveyance took place on 30th June 1897, and describes William Henry as a “Gentleman, of Orpington House, St. Mary Cray.”. The property was soon after re-named ‘Elmdene,’ and, remarkably, still stands today.^{22&23}

When William Cook visited Australia, he took with him his famous Orpington Fowls and Ducks. An Australian writer on the Buff Orpington Duck states: “This bird was introduced into Australia by the late Mr. W. Cook, on the occasion of his visit to this country. Mr. S. Ellis, of Botany, secured the pen for £20, a few days after the writer had his first introduction to them. . .”⁴

Around 1900 a family disagreement had developed; quite possibly over the non-payment of the debt. An indenture for £260 at 5%, dated 4th May 1900, records a loan from Katharine Mary Cook to her husband, William Henry, describing him as a ‘poultry farmer.’²² It is not known whether he had set up in his own business around this time; *Poultry* July 5th 1901,

gives an account of 'Wm. Cook and Sons' comprising of William Cook, two of his sons, four clerks, two foremen and twelve poultry hands; suggesting one of the sons is no longer attached to the business.

Writing on the Buff Orpington Ducks, in 1901, William Cook states that the birds were also marketed, under a different name, by another party. There are a number of suspects – Mrs. A. Campbell and Miss N. Edwards, being the first to come to mind; both of these ladies are reported to have launched their respective Khaki and Fawn creations on the public in 1901. Mrs. Campbell recalls: "Mr. Cook was just bringing out his Buff Orpingtons, and I thought of getting buff too, but failed. They would come Khaki. Just then the South African War was on, . ." ¹² Mrs. Campbell's memory is either a little shaky on the Buff Orpington Duck's introduction—which was later than the first Boer War (1880-1881) and too early for the second Boer War (1899-1902)—or she refers only to the latter period in connection with the development of her khaki namesake. Of Miss Edwards' duck, an observer later writes that: "Where the Coaley Fawn pens ended and the Buff Orpington's commenced was a task often too difficult for us to define without reference to the entry forms."¹⁴ However, J. W. Cook (no relation), of Lincoln, is the most likely culprit, as he is named in a disclaimer published in *Ducks* (1895) and the *Poultry Journal* of January 1896.⁵ &
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The firm thrived, both in England and world-wide, with poultry farms in South Africa and the USA. Following the cessation of hostilities in South Africa in May 1902, by the January of 1903, young A. Lockley Cook was representing 'W. Cook & Sons' at the Stamford Hill Poultry Farm, Nr. Durban. William Cook visited America and South Africa that year; he and Lockley were away when, in England, tragedy struck the family.⁵

On Saturday, 27th June 1903, William Cook's wife, Jane, was with her son, William Henry, and his wife Catherine, visiting her youngest daughter (who was married to Mr. A. C. Gilbert) at Derry Downs, St. Mary Cray; later going on by dog-cart to view the repairs and re-decoration recently made to William Henry's property, 'Elmdene,' an elegant eleven-roomed villa, in the same vicinity. The property had been vacated for the commencement of such works since the 19th June, 1903. Upon entering the property, Catherine investigated the first floor level and called out from an up-stairs window that there was a smell of gas in the house. William Henry noticed a gasolier (telescopic gas chandelier) was lowered in the dining-room, and, on raising it to its appropriate position, there was an explosion that shook the neighbourhood. "The room was suddenly filled with flames," said William Henry, later. He caught up his wife and carried her to the safety of the street, before returning to the hall-way to bring his mother out of the wreckage and lay her on the path-way. The fashionable light summer attire of the women burned through almost instantly. All three suffered dreadful burns; but none more so than Jane. She lingered on in excruciating pain until, mercifully, she expired at 05.20 on the Sunday morning, the 28th June 1903.

The inquest looked into the possibility that William Henry had been smoking when he entered the property; this was refuted and did not enter into evidence. The decorator, Mr. George Gane, was brought to the stand, and found to be unaccountable. The Coroner's verdict was given as "Accidental Death".

Dead at the age of fifty-six, Jane was two years senior to her husband: "Better born and more prosperous than most, she never made one feel it."²¹

In all probability, William Henry and his family had been staying at Orpington House unbeknown to William Cook; and this event could have further soured relations between William Henry and his father.

William Cook worked continuously and industriously; although not a well man, he visited both America and South Africa twice between 1902 and 1904.¹¹ On returning to England, from a trip to America in 1904, William Cook was fatigued. He attended the Royal Show and one week later went for a holiday to Skegness, where his health worsened the day after his arrival. He died from emphysema on 25th June—almost one year after the death of his wife, and was laid to rest with her in Star Lane Cemetery, St. Mary Cray on the 30th June, 1904.²² Part of the obituary notice states:

“The business will be carried on as usual by Mrs. R. W. Clarke [Elizabeth Jane], his eldest daughter, Messrs. A. L. and P. A. Cook his younger sons and Mr. A. C. Gilbert his son-in-law [married to the younger daughter]; Mr. W. H. Cook his eldest son having relinquished his connection with the business a little time before his Father’s death.”⁵

So acrimonious had their relationship been, that William Henry was to receive nothing in the terms of his father’s Will, and later that year ‘Elmdene’ was sold to one F. W. Powell, for the sum of £950. The sale was possibly to pay off the debt and settle his father’s estate. A note, dated 14th December 1904, signed by Elizabeth Jane Clarke and the executors of William Cook’s Will, acknowledges the repayment of the loan to the amount of £780. In the conveyance, dated 22nd December 1904, William Henry is described as “Poultry Farmer, of the Model Farm, St. Pauls Cray.”²² “The Model Poultry Farm” was situated with the railway stations of St. Mary Cray just 1 mile, Sidcup 1½ miles, and Orpington 3 miles distance.⁸

Gloves were off! William Henry sought any and every opportunity to attract as much business as possible in his direction. Whether aimed at his family, or at J. W. Cook, William Henry advertises he has no connection with any establishment bearing the same surname; although he is not beyond sharing in his father’s kudos, in stating he is Cook’s eldest son and was his manager up to 1903, although the date is also given as 1904 in some adverts.⁸ Elizabeth Jane countered by regularly publishing announcements such as:

“Orpington House, St. Mary Cray, Kent, is the ONLY ADDRESS to which letters should be sent; as during the last few months a number of letters have been received from those who intended to purchase from William Cook & Sons, who, having mistaken advts. for theirs had sent their orders to other people of the same name, and had occasion to regret it”⁴

The original firm of ‘William Cook & Sons’ continued to prosper; by the January of 1905, young Percy A. Cook was in residence at the American branch of the firm at Scotch Plains, New Jersey. Mr. A. C. Gilbert returned to England from the USA in February 1905, having exhibited the Cooks’ birds at the Madison Square Garden Show, N.Y., gaining fifteen First, eleven Second and fourteen other prizes. A reviewer of the British establishment, in 1906, lamenting the lack of use then made of the splendid stable-block, says: “Mr. A. Lockley Cook believes more in the power of the motor car and the cycle than in the horse.”⁴

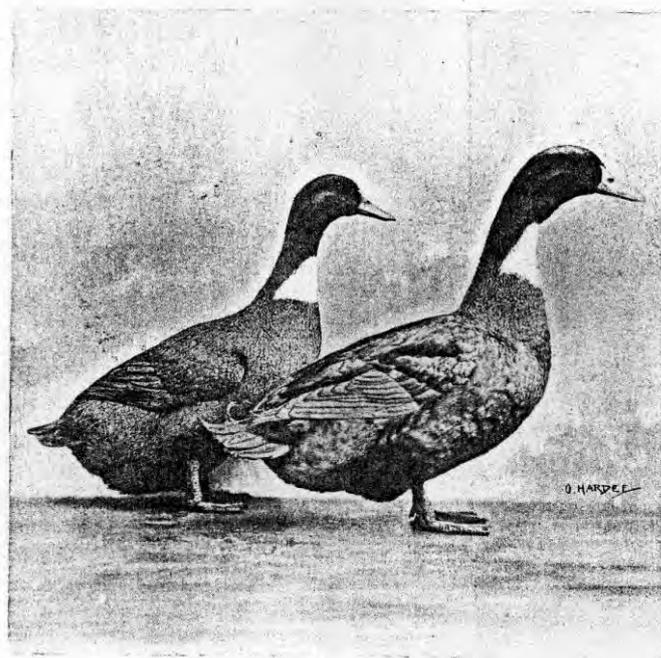
In *Feathered Life*, 1906, Mr. Gilbert praises the Buff Orpington Duck as an egg producer, based on the Australian trials of 1903. This is followed in the February issue, with a response from one signing himself “Vigilo”:

“Dear Sirs.—In your issue of January 29th, in the short article on buff Orpington ducks, Mr. A. C.

Gilbert, in recounting their very high laying qualities, claims that buffs won three years ago and the following year. If Mr. Gilbert happened to have the *Australian Hen*[a periodical], I think he will find the *first* twelve months duck competition was won by blue Orpingtons, with an average of 221 eggs each for the whole pen of six; Indian Runners next four positions, averages 219, 217, 212, 206, the winning hens average at the same period being 216. As, no doubt, the blues emanate from the same noted source, Mr. Gilbert is probably entitled to add another feather to his cap."

The Feathered World, March 20th 1908, prints a standard for the Cuckoo Orpington Fowl from the pen of W. H. Cook; William Henry appears to make this creation his own, while there were several other claimants. Elizabeth Jane, in the *Poultry Journal* of March 1910, states: "It is now three years since we sent notice to the poultry press that we had added another variety to the Orpington family, viz.; the Cuckoo;" However, the general acceptance is that A. C. Gilbert developed the Blue and the Cuckoo Orpington Fowl at the Cook's farm at Wilmington, Kent.

Possibly the first written standard for the "buff Orpington duck," appears in the form of the letter from Mr. Art. C. Gilbert, in *The Feathered World*, May 1st 1908. In this year the Buff Orpington Duck Club accepted the Blue Orpington Duck into its ranks, and the Buff Orpington Duck made its debut at the Madison Square Garden Show, N.Y; although it remains unclear which branch of the Cook family actually entered the breed, it was most probably not William Henry, as it is thought he would have had difficulty in funding such a venture at this time. In 1914, the Buff Orpington Duck was admitted into the American Standard of Perfection under the name "Buff Duck."



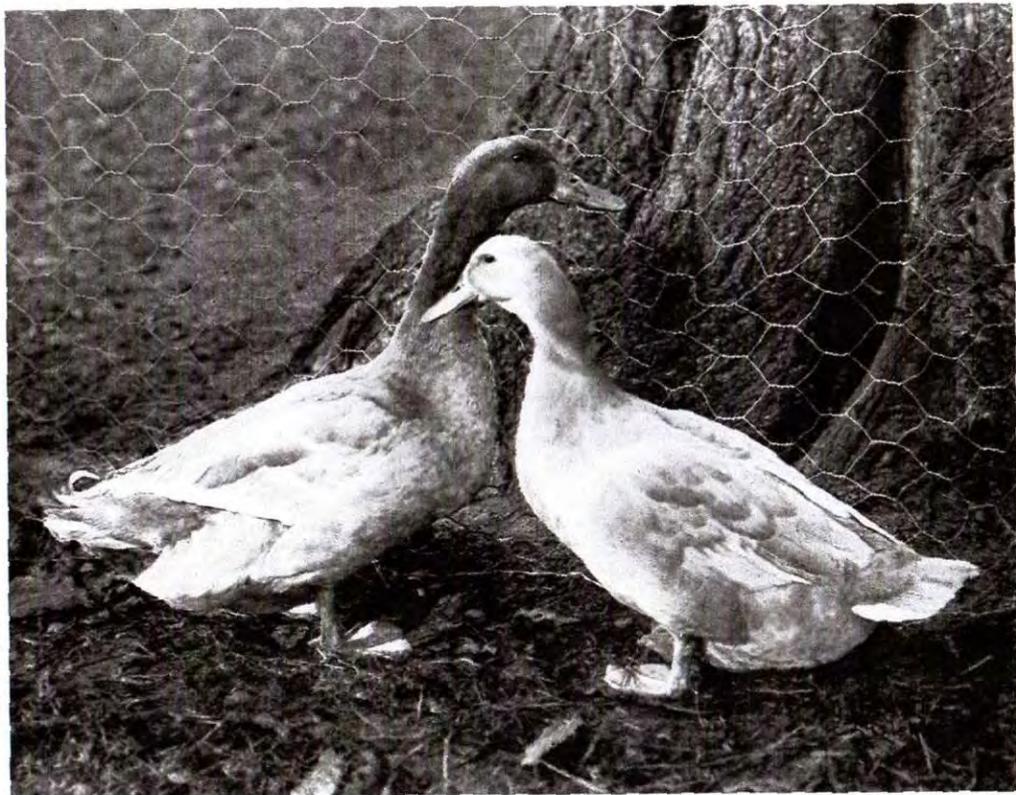
Blue Orpington Ducks.
The property of Mr. Art C. Gilbert, Swanley Poultry Farm, Wilmington, Kent.
Winner of two 1sts Eynesford, only time shown.

Fig.5. *The Encyclopædia of Poultry*, 1909.

In 1909 Mr A. J. Thompson became a partner in the firm of William Cook & Sons of St Mary Cray, Orpington. He had started work with the firm around 1899/1900 and was later married to Elizabeth Jane Clarke (née Cook). He died in December 1924 and Elizabeth Jane married for a third time, in 1926, to become Mrs. William James Taylor. ¹⁶

The, now re-named, Orpington Duck Club, Blue or Buff, held its Club Show at the Crystal Palace, in 1909, at which Mr. W. Woods judged three classes containing thirty-seven entries. Mr. W. H. Cook won the Buff Drake and Blues classes.^{19&20} In the same year, J. T. Brown, F.Z.S., in *The Encyclopædia of Poultry*, features images of both the Blue and the Buff Orpington Ducks; in both instances citing Mr. Art. C. Gilbert as their owner (Fig.5 & 6). Brown states the Blue Orpington Duck “is an offshoot from the Buff Orpington duck.” On regarding the earlier evidence, Brown’s version of the creative events is incorrect, though often quoted by later authors.

In 1909 the Buff Orpington [Fowl] Club sought to expel W. H. Cook and A. C. Gilbert from its membership on the grounds they brought the Club into disrepute by alleged collusion over the judging at a major Show; the two last named brought court actions against the Club—and won, with full costs.¹¹



Buff Orpington Ducks.

(The property of Mr. Art. C. Gilbert, Swanley Poultry Farm, Wilmington, Kent, England.)

Sires of all the 1st prize winners in 1908 at Hayward's Heath, the Dairy Show, the Palace, Manchester, Paris International, Brussels, etc.

Fig.6. *The Encyclopædia of Poultry*, 1909.

In 1910, Mr Gilbert, then Secretary of the Orpington Duck Club (1910-1911), states: “Buff Orpington ducks were made some twelve or fourteen years back, but not brought into prominence in England until two years ago.” This puts the date between 1898 and 1896, making this statement reasonably accurate. Gilbert states Buff Orpingtons won the Australian trials, in spite of being corrected on this point some four years earlier. On the matter of their composition, he adds Cayuga and Pekin Ducks into the mix. Furthermore, Gilbert asserts that from Buffs “with a lot of blue on the back, wings, thighs, and portions of the neck” the Blues were produced.¹⁹ This

statement is imprecise according to William Cook's writings. However, the Buff Orpington Duck was the first of its tribe to enter into the British Poultry Club Standards in 1910; the Blue Orpington Duck appears in the 1922 edition. Gilbert's article is also quoted in *Wright's Book of Poultry* (1912).¹³

Around this time, 1912, there are accounts of the White Orpington Duck being available to the public, although the writer has found no published evidence they were offered for sale by either of the Cook firms.¹⁸

In February, 1912, William Henry commenced publication of a periodical of his own, *The Poultry Keeper's Journal* and, having prepared from the June, in the October of 1912 he brought off an audacious coup; he removed his farm from St. Pauls Cray to Tubbenden Lane, Orpington, Kent, in the vicinity of his father's original farm.⁷ By this time it was a case of 'no holds barred!' His new establishment was to be known as:

"COOK'S - AT - ORPINGTON."

Under the entire personal management of William H. Cook.
(Eldest Son of the late William Cook, Originator of the Orpingtons).

WILLIAM H. Cook, Ltd, Orpington, Kent.

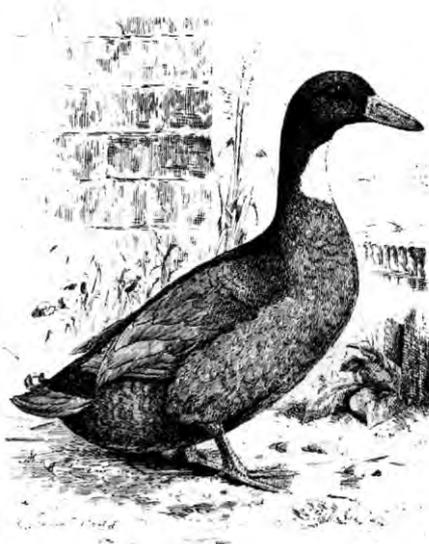
And at LE TOUQUET, FRANCE. Telegram: Cook Orpington.

The farm was on a busy route and within sight of Orpington Railway Station, which had been rebuilt and enlarged in 1904 to cater for six platforms; there were links to five major stations in central London alone. The Orpington and the St. Mary Cray Stations are on different train lines; anyone in search of 'William Cook & Sons' who, mistakenly, arrived at Orpington would be directed to young William's establishment.^{9 & 10}

In 1913 The Orpington Duck Club became two Clubs, each catering for a specific colour. Mr. A. E. Brown of Staplehurst Poultry Farm, Staplehurst, Kent, became Secretary of the Buff Orpington Duck Club and Mr. J. E. D. Moysey of Venton, Totnes, Devon, took on the secretariat of the Blue Orpington Duck Club.¹⁹ After this date, nothing further is heard of Mr. Art. C. Gilbert, who did so much to promote the Orpington Ducks; he simply vanishes from the scene.

William Henry, writing on the Blue Orpington Duck in 1914 states: "As soon as the Buff had been properly landed on the fancy the Blue came out, and has made very good headway." This statement, again, reverses the true order of introduction.⁸

Like-wise, the editor of *Poultry World* takes the same erroneous line as many previous authors when, in 1919, he writes: "The Blue Orpington [Duck] is similar in shape to the Buff, and the latter was largely responsible for its production."²⁵



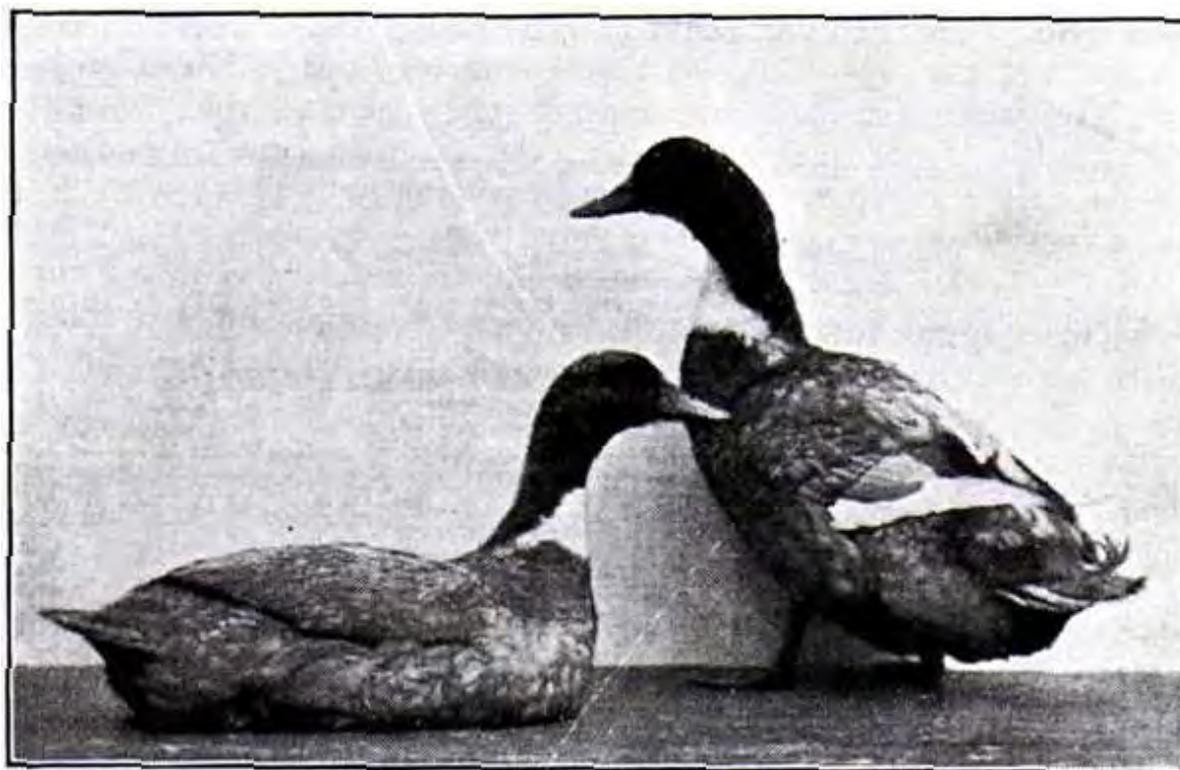
BLUE ORPINGTON DRAKE

The Blue Orpington, 1919. Published by Messrs. W. & A. Cook, Ltd.

Fig.7. *The Feathered World Year Book* 1919.

Writing a critique on the shows in 1920, Mr. Clem Watson says: “The fancy is always open for new things, and at the Dairy Show Mr. W. H. Cook put down a Black and a Chocolate Orpington, the latter causing a lot of comment for the unusual colour, which however, was quite attractive.”¹⁶

It has been stated that William Henry kept all five colour-forms of the Orpington Duck at the Tubbenden Lane farm.²³

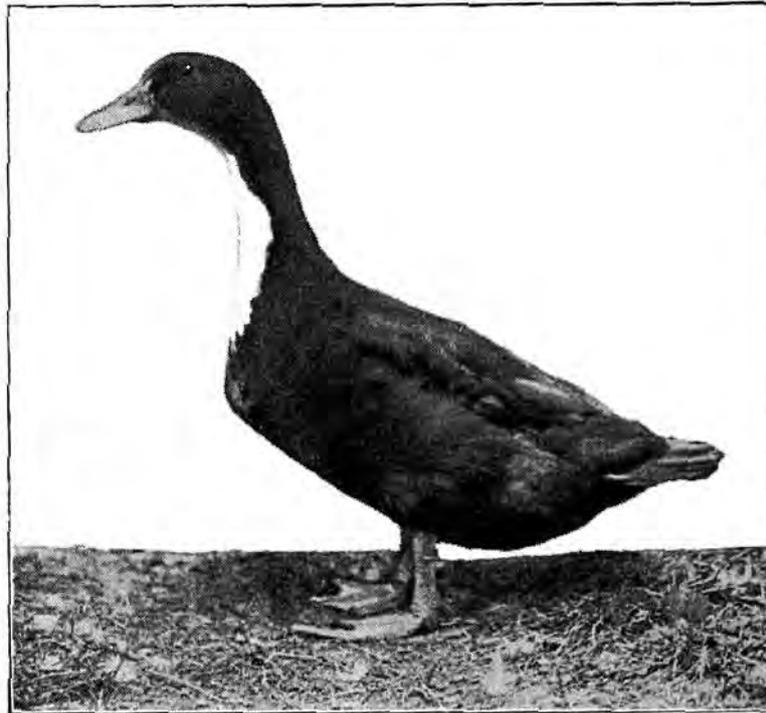


WINNING BLUE ORPINGTON DUCK AND DRAKE

The property of Messrs. Wm. H. Cook, Ltd.

Fig.8. *World's Poultry Congress*, 1921. (Formerly published in *Feathered Life*, 1909)

No mention is made of Black Orpington Ducks in *British Poultry* (1921), which correctly states the Orpington Duck “owes its origin (as to the Buff and the Blue varieties) to the skill of the late Mr. William Cook, . . . The Chocolate variety was evolved by his son, Mr. Wm. H. Cook, who has very kindly supplied us with some notes on his long experience with the breed.” The article states that Aylesbury, Rouen, Cayuga and Indian Runner Ducks were inter-mated to “produce the Buff and then the Blue variety.” This furthers the imprecision regarding both the make-up of the two earliest varieties, and the order of their introduction. The Buff (Fig.6) and Blue Orpington Duck images of 1909 are reproduced, this time with William Henry claiming ownership (Fig.8.). At the World’s Poultry Congress, held at The Hague in 1921, Messrs. Wm. H. Cook, Ltd., exhibited a pen each of Buff, Blue and Chocolate Orpington Ducks (Fig.9.).¹⁴



CHOCOLATE ORPINGTON DUCK, AGED 12 WEEKS
The property of Messrs. Wm. H. Cook, Ltd.

Fig.9. *World's Poultry Congress*, 1921.

Early in 1924, it is announced in the poultry press: "Mr. W. H. Cook is again sole proprietor of Cook's Poultry Farm at Orpington" (which indeed he was; and by this time, Wlm. Cook & Sons had dropped 'Orpington House' from their address, possibly to further differentiate the two firms.) and, that William Henry had sold his entire stock of Black Orpington Ducks to Mr. G. H. Wenham, of Stone Green Farm, Appledore.¹⁶

Various 'Experts' contributed articles in *Ducks* (1926), which presents a chapter on "Blue, Black and Chocolate Orpington Ducks," by W. H. Cook, stating: -

"Blues are perhaps the largest of all the Orpington Duck varieties, and they were originated about 1910. . ." This statement is highly questionable (as so many made by William Henry have proved to be), considering previous evidence, as the colour was catered for by the Orpington Duck Club in 1908, and William Henry received awards for Blues from 1909.

He continues:-

"Blacks followed the Blues and were originated at Orpington in 1913, . . ."

Chocolates are the latest variety, being brought out in 1918, . . ."

There is little doubt William Henry produced the Chocolate Orpington Ducks and introduced them to the public, along with the Black, in 1920. Whether he 'originated' the Black variety is open to speculation, as this and the White variety are most likely to be linked to the Blue Orpington Duck created by his father. It seems probable that William Henry could have 'fixed' the Black variety with an infusion of Cayuga blood into birds occurring as a by-product in the production of the Blues; but why did he wait seven years before exhibiting them, only to part with them four years later?

William Henry makes a final 'imprecise' statement, when, with a total disregard for all that history relates on the breed, he writes: "They were all originated by the writer, whose father was the originator of the Buff Orpington Ducks."²⁴

In 1930, Elizabeth Jane re-wrote the last two editions of her father's book, *The Practical Poultry Breeder and Feeder*, and ran the original firm of William Cook & Sons until it ceased trading in 1936, when the firm was put into bankruptcy. She continued to live at 'Orpington House' until her death, from a severe stroke, in January 1947.^{22 & 23}

The firm of W. H. Cook Limited continued producing poultry through-out the Second World War; William Henry retired from business in 1949, at 75 years of age, and the land developed for housing. He died at the National Hospital, London in 1950.^{22 & 23}

Over the years, William Henry Cook claims to have been the originator of many varieties of fowls and ducks; only one, however, deserves any credence. He set out to deceive—for whatever reason—and the authors who follow, and unquestioningly repeat what has gone before, also mislead their reader. It is, therefore, little wonder the precise history of this breed and its colour-forms has appeared in an inaccurate state, following on from the primary accounts, when, prior to the writer's endeavours, no exact investigation of the facts had taken place.

Acknowledgements: For all the help and encouragement I received in my quest for the truth about these ducks, I express my sincere gratitude to the staff of numerous libraries in the UK, America and Germany; and to the trustees of the late Mr. A. G. Turner's Estate for kindly allowing access to his notes on the Cook Family. Also, my special appreciation goes to Mr. John Vale of Kent, who has a biography of the Cook family in preparation for publication, for generously imparting his knowledge of the subject and clarifying my own misunderstandings.

I shall be grateful to hear from anyone with any information on the Cook family, they are willing to impart at: jonathanmichael_thompson@yahoo.co.uk.

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