

= Aylesbury duck =

The Aylesbury duck is a breed of domesticated duck , bred mainly for its meat and appearance . It is a large duck with pure white plumage , a pink bill , orange legs and feet , an unusually large keel , and a horizontal stance with its body parallel to the ground . The precise origins of the breed are unclear , but raising white ducks became popular in Aylesbury , Buckinghamshire , England , in the 18th century owing to the demand for white feathers as a filler for quilts . Over the 19th century selective breeding for size , shape and colour led to the Aylesbury duck .

Duck rearing became a major industry in Aylesbury in the 19th century . The ducks were bred on farms in the surrounding countryside . Fertilised eggs were brought into the town 's " Duck End " , where local residents would rear the ducklings in their homes . The opening of a railway to Aylesbury in 1839 enabled cheap and quick transport to the markets of London , and duck rearing became highly profitable . By the 1860s the duck rearing industry began to move out of Aylesbury into the surrounding towns and villages , and the industry in Aylesbury itself began to decline .

In 1873 the Pekin duck was introduced to the United Kingdom . Although its meat was thought to have a poorer flavour than that of the Aylesbury duck , the Pekin was hardier and cheaper to raise . Many breeders switched to the Pekin duck or to Aylesbury @-@ Pekin crosses . By the beginning of the 20th century competition from the Pekin duck , inbreeding , and disease in the pure @-@ bred Aylesbury strain and the rising cost of duck food meant the Aylesbury duck industry was in decline .

The First World War badly damaged the remaining duck industry in Buckinghamshire , wiping out the small scale producers and leaving only a few large farms . Disruption caused by the Second World War further damaged the industry . By the 1950s only one significant flock of Aylesbury ducks remained in Buckinghamshire , and by 1966 there were no duck @-@ breeding or -rearing businesses of any size remaining in Aylesbury itself . Although there is only one surviving flock of pure Aylesbury ducks in the United Kingdom and the breed is critically endangered in the United States , the Aylesbury duck remains a symbol of the town of Aylesbury , and appears on the coat of arms of Aylesbury and on the club badge of Aylesbury United .

= = Origins and description = =

The precise origin of the Aylesbury duck is unclear . Before the 18th century , duck breeds were rarely recorded in England , and the common duck , bred for farming , was a domesticated form of the wild mallard . The common duck varied in colour , and as in the wild , white ducks would occasionally occur . White ducks were particularly prized , as their feathers were popular as a filler for quilts .

In the 18th century selective breeding of white common ducks led to a white domestic duck , generally known as the English White . Since at least the 1690s ducks had been farmed in Aylesbury , and raising English Whites became popular in Aylesbury and the surrounding villages . By 1813 it was remarked that " ducks form a material article at market from Aylesbury and places adjacent : they are white , and as it seems of an early breed : they are bred and brought up by poor people , and sent to London by the weekly carriers " . The duck farmers of Aylesbury went to great lengths to ensure the ducks retained their white colouring , keeping them clear of dirty water , soil with a high iron content and bright sunlight , all of which could discolour the ducks ' feathers . Over time , selective breeding of the English White for size and colour gradually led to the development of the Aylesbury duck .

A rather large duck breed , the Aylesbury duck has pure white plumage and bright orange legs and feet . Its legs are placed midway along the body and it stands with its underside parallel to the ground , giving it a body described as " boat @-@ shaped " . It has a relatively long and thin swan @-@ like neck , and a long pink bill which comes straight out from the head .

An Aylesbury duckling incubates in the egg for 28 days . Until eight weeks after hatching , the time of their first moult , ducks and drakes (females and males) are almost indistinguishable . After moulting , males have two or three curved tail feathers and a fainter , huskier quack than the female . By one year of age , females and males grow to an average weight of 6 and 7 pounds (2 @. @ 7

and 3 @. @ 2 kg) respectively , although males can reach around 10 pounds (4 @. @ 5 kg) .

Unlike the Rouen duck , the other popular meat variety in England in the 19th century , Aylesbury ducks lay eggs from early November . Aylesbury ducks fatten quickly and by eight weeks after hatching weigh up to 5 pounds (2 @. @ 3 kg) , large enough to eat but still young and extremely tender . Consequently , their meat came onto the market from February onwards , after the close of the game season but before the earliest spring chickens were on sale . Rouen ducks , whose mallard @-@ like coloration made them less valuable , lay eggs from early February and take six months to grow large enough to eat . As a consequence , Aylesbury ducks were sold primarily in the spring and summer , and Rouen ducks in the autumn and winter .

= = Aylesbury duck farming = =

The white Aylesbury duck is , and deservedly , a universal favourite . Its snowy plumage and comfortable comportment make it a credit to the poultry @-@ yard , while its broad and deep breast , and its ample back , convey the assurance that your satisfaction will not cease at its death . In parts of Buckinghamshire , this member of the duck family is bred on an extensive scale ; not on plains and commons , however , as might be naturally imagined , but in the abodes of the cottagers . Round the walls of the living @-@ rooms , and of the bedroom even , are fixed rows of wooden boxes , lined with hay ; and it is the business of the wife and children to nurse and comfort the feathered lodgers , to feed the little ducklings , and to take the old ones out for an airing . Sometimes the " stock " ducks are the cottager 's own property , but it more frequently happens that they are intrusted to his care by a wholesale breeder , who pays him so much per score for all ducklings properly raised . To be perfect , the Aylesbury duck should be plump , pure white , with yellow feet , and a flesh coloured beak .

Unlike most livestock farming in England at this time , the duck breeders and duck rearers of Aylesbury formed two separate groups . Stock ducks ? i.e. , ducks kept for breeding ? were kept on farms in the countryside of the Aylesbury Vale , away from the polluted air and water of the town . This kept the ducks healthy , and meant a higher number of fertile eggs .

Stock ducks would be chosen from ducklings hatched in March , with a typical breeder keeping six males and twenty laying females at any given time . The females would be kept for around a year before mating , typically to an older male . They would then generally be replaced , to reduce the problems of inbreeding . Stock ducks were allowed to roam freely during the day , and would swim in local ponds which , although privately owned , were treated as common property among the duck breeders ; breeders would label their ducks with markings on the neck or head . The stock ducks would forage for greenery and insects , supplemented by greaves (the residue left after the rendering of animal fat) . As ducks lay their eggs at night , the ducks would be brought indoors overnight .

Female Aylesbury ducks would not sit still for the 28 days necessary for their eggs to hatch , and as a consequence the breeders would not allow mothers to sit on their own eggs . Instead the fertilised eggs would be collected and transferred to the " duckers " of Aylesbury 's Duck End .

= = Rearing = =

The duckers of Aylesbury would buy eggs from the breeders , or be paid by a breeder to raise the ducks on their behalf , and would raise the ducklings in their homes between November and August as a secondary source of income . Duckers were typically skilled labourers , who invested surplus income in ducklings . Many of the tasks related to rearing the ducks would be carried out by the women of the household , particularly the care of newly hatched ducklings .

The eggs would be divided into batches of 13 , and placed under broody chickens . In the last week of the four @-@ week incubation period the eggs would be sprinkled daily with warm water to soften the shells and allow the ducklings to hatch .

Newly hatched Aylesbury ducklings are timid and thrive best in small groups , so the duckers would divide them into groups of three or four ducklings , each accompanied by a hen . As the ducklings

grew older and gained confidence , they would be kept in groups of around 30 . Originally the ducks would be kept in every room in the ducker 's cottage , but towards the end of the 19th century they were kept in outdoor pens and sheds with suitable protection against cold weather .

The aim of the ducker was to get every duckling as fat as possible by the age of eight weeks (the first moult , the age at which they would be killed for meat) , while avoiding any foods which would build up their bones or make their flesh greasy . In their first week after hatching , the ducklings would be fed on boiled eggs , toast soaked in water , boiled rice and beef liver . From the second week on , this diet would gradually be replaced by barley meal and boiled rice mixed with greaves . (Some larger @-@ scale duckers would boil a horse or sheep and feed this to the ducklings in place of greaves .) This high @-@ protein diet was supplemented with nettles , cabbage and lettuce to provide a source of vitamins . As with all poultry , ducks require grit in their diet to break up the food and make it digestible . Aylesbury ducklings ' drinking water was laced with grit from Long Marston and Gubblecote ; this grit also gave their bills their distinctive pinkish colour . Around 85 % of ducklings would survive this eight @-@ week rearing process to be sent to market .

While ducks are naturally aquatic , swimming can be dangerous to young ducklings , and it can also restrict a duck 's growth . Thus , although duckers would ensure the ducklings always had a trough or sink to paddle in , the ducklings would be kept away from bodies of water while they were growing . The exception was shortly before slaughter , when the ducklings would be taken for one swim in a pond , as it helped them to feather properly .

Although there were a few large @-@ scale duck rearing operations in Aylesbury , raising thousands of ducklings each season , the majority of Aylesbury 's duckers would raise between 400 and 1 @, @ 000 ducklings each year . Because ducking was a secondary occupation , it was not listed in Aylesbury 's census returns or directories and it is impossible to know how many people were engaged in it at any given time . Kelly 's Directory for 1864 does not list a single duck farmer in Aylesbury , but an 1885 book comments that :

In the early years of the present [19th] century almost every householder at the " Duck End " of the town followed the avocation of ducker . In a living room it was no uncommon sight to meet with young ducks of different ages , divided in pens and monopolizing the greatest space of the apartment , whilst expected new arrivals often were carefully lodged in the bedchamber .

The Duck End was one of the poorer districts of Aylesbury . Until the end of the 19th century it had no sewers or refuse collections . The area had a number of open ditches filled with stagnant water , and outbreaks of malaria and cholera were common . The cottages had inadequate ventilation and lighting , and no running water . Faeces from the duck ponds permeated the local soil and seeped into the cottages through cracks in the floors .

= = = Slaughter and sale = = =

When the ducklings were ready for slaughter , the duckers would generally kill them on their own premises . The slaughter would generally take place in the morning , to ensure the ducks would be ready for market in the evening . To keep the meat as white as possible , the ducks would be suspended upside down and their necks broken backwards , and held in this position until their blood had run towards their heads . They were kept in this position for ten minutes before being plucked , as otherwise their blood would collect in those parts of the body from which the feathers had been plucked . The plucking was generally carried out by the women of the household . The plucked carcasses would be sent to market , and the feathers would be sold direct to London dealers .

The market for duck meat in Aylesbury itself was small , and the ducks were generally sent to London for sale . By the 1750s Richard Pococke recorded that four cartloads of ducks were sent from Aylesbury to London every Saturday , and in the late 18th and early 19th centuries the ducks continued to be sent over the Chiltern Hills to London by packhorse or cart .

On 15 June 1839 the entrepreneur and former Member of Parliament for Buckingham , Sir Harry Verney , 2nd Baronet , opened the Aylesbury Railway . Built under the direction of Robert Stephenson , it connected the London and Birmingham Railway 's Cheddington railway station on

the West Coast Main Line to Aylesbury High Street railway station in eastern Aylesbury . On 1 October 1863 the Wycombe Railway also built a line to Aylesbury , from Princes Risborough railway station to a station on the western side of Aylesbury (the present @-@ day Aylesbury railway station) . The arrival of the railway had a powerful impact on the duck industry , and up to a ton of ducks in a night were being shipped from Aylesbury to Smithfield Market in London by 1850 .

A routine became established in which salesmen would provide the duckers with labels . The duckers would mark their ducklings with the labels of the firm to whom they wished them to be sold in London . The railway companies would collect ducklings , take them to the stations , ship them to London and deliver them to the designated firms , in return for a flat fee per bird . By avoiding the need for the duckers to travel to market , or the London salesmen to collect the ducklings , this arrangement benefited all concerned , and ducking became very profitable . By 1870 the duck industry was bringing over £ 20 @,@ 000 per year into Aylesbury ; a typical ducker would make a profit of around £ 80 ? £ 200 per year .

= = Developments in the late 19th century = =

In 1845 , the first National Poultry Show was held , at the Zoological Gardens in London ; one of the classes of poultry exhibited was " Aylesbury or other white variety " . The personal interest of Queen Victoria in poultry farming , and its inclusion in the Great Exhibition of 1851 , further raised public interest in poultry . From 1853 the Royal Agricultural Society and the Bath and West of England Society , the two most prominent agricultural societies in England , included poultry sections in their annual agricultural shows . This in turn caused smaller local poultry shows to develop across the country .

Breeders would choose potential exhibition ducks from among newly hatched ducklings in March and April , and they would be given a great deal of extra attention . They would be fed a carefully controlled diet to get them to the maximum weight , and would be allowed out for a few hours each day to keep them in as good a physical condition as possible . Before the show , their legs and feet would be washed , their bills trimmed with a knife and sandpapered smooth , and their feathers brushed with linseed oil . While most breeders would give the ducks a healthy meal before the show to calm them , some breeders would force @-@ feed the ducks with sausage or worms , to get them to as heavy a weight as possible . Exhibition standards judged an Aylesbury duck primarily on size , shape and colour . This encouraged the breeding of larger ducks , with pronounced exaggerated keels , and loose baggy skin . By the beginning of the 20th century the Aylesbury duck had diverged into two separate strains , one bred for appearance and one for meat .

= = = Pekin ducks = = =

In 1873 the Pekin duck was introduced from China to Britain for the first time . Superficially similar in appearance to an Aylesbury duck , a Pekin is white with orange legs and bill , with its legs near the rear , giving it an upright stance while on land . Although not thought to have such a delicate flavour as the Aylesbury , the Pekin was hardier , a more prolific layer , fattened more quickly , and was roughly the same size as an Aylesbury at nine weeks .

Aylesbury ducks , meanwhile , were becoming inbred , meaning fertile eggs were scarcer and the ducks were more susceptible to disease . Exhibition standards had led to selection for an exaggerated keel by breeders , despite it being unpopular with dealers and consumers . Poultry show judges also admired the long neck and upright posture of Pekin ducks over the boat @-@ like stance of the Aylesbury . Some of the breeders in the Aylesbury area began to cross Pekin ducks with the pure Aylesbury strain . Although the Aylesbury @-@ Pekin cross ducks did not have the delicate flavour of the pure Aylesbury , they were hardier and much cheaper to raise .

Until the mid @-@ 19th century duck rearing was concentrated on the Duck End , but by the 1860s it had spread to many other towns and villages in the area , particularly Weston Turville and Haddenham . Contamination of Aylesbury 's soil by years of duck rearing , and new public health legislation which ended many traditional practices , caused the decline of the duck rearing industry

in the Duck End , and by the 1890s the majority of Aylesbury ducks were raised in the villages rather than the town itself . Population shifts and the improved national rail network reduced the need to rear ducks near London , and large duck farms opened in Lancashire , Norfolk and Lincolnshire . Although the number of ducks raised nationwide continued to grow , between 1890 and 1900 the number of ducks raised in the Aylesbury area remained static , and from 1900 it began to drop .

= = Decline = =

By the time Beatrix Potter 's 1908 *The Tale of Jemima Puddle Duck* ? about an Aylesbury duck although set in Cumbria ? caused renewed interest in the breed , the Aylesbury duck was in steep decline . The duckers of Buckinghamshire had generally failed to introduce technological improvements such as the incubator , and inbreeding had dangerously weakened the breed . Meanwhile , the cost of duck food had risen fourfold over the 19th century , and from 1873 onwards competition from Pekin and Pekin cross ducks was undercutting Aylesbury ducks at the marketplace .

The First World War devastated the remaining duckers of Buckinghamshire . The price of duck food rose steeply while the demand for luxury foodstuffs fell , and wartime restructuring ended the beneficial financial arrangements with the railway companies . By the end of the war small @-@ scale duck rearing in the Aylesbury Vale had vanished , with duck raising dominated by a few large duck farms . Shortages of duck food in the Second World War caused further disruption to the industry , and almost all duck farming in the Aylesbury Vale ended . A 1950 " Aylesbury Duckling Day " campaign to boost the reputation of the Aylesbury duck had little effect ; by the end of the 1950s the last significant farms had closed , other than a single flock in Chesham owned by Mr L. T. Waller , and by 1966 there were no duck breeders or rearers of any size remaining in Aylesbury . As of 2015 the Waller family 's farm in Chesham remains in business , the last surviving flock of pure Aylesbury meat ducks in the country .

Aylesbury ducks were imported into the United States in 1840 , although they never became a popular breed . They were , however , added to the American Poultry Association 's Standard of Perfection breeding guidelines in 1876 . As of 2013 , the breed was listed as critically endangered in the United States by The Livestock Conservancy .

= = Legacy = =

The Aylesbury duck remains a symbol of the town of Aylesbury . Aylesbury United F.C. are nicknamed " The Ducks " and include an Aylesbury duck on their club badge , and the town 's coat of arms includes an Aylesbury duck and plaited straw , representing the two historic industries of the town . The Aylesbury Brewery Company , now defunct , featured the Aylesbury duck as its logo , an example of which can still be seen at the Britannia pub . Duck Farm Court is a shopping area of modern Aylesbury located near the historic hamlet of California , close to one of the main breeding grounds for ducks in the town , and there have been two pubs in the town with the name " The Duck " in recent years ; one in Bedgrove that has since been demolished and one in Jackson Road that has recently been renamed .