

## The Origins of the Marans

What did this landrace hen, which originated in the swampy farm country near Marans & La Rochelle; look like before being crossed with non-local fowl? We will probably never know. These farmyard fowl had very little selection, and this 'swamp' hen didn't really receive any particular care.



Typical marshland habitat around the Marans-La Rochelle area

## The first out crosses

In the 12<sup>th</sup> century, with her marriage to Henri of Plantagenet, Duke of Anjou, who became Henri II of England, Eleanor of Aquitaine brought to England a dowry consisting of a part of South-west France: Poitou, Paintonge, Aunis, Perigord and Limousin.

This English domination lasted two centuries. English ships often stopped over at La Rochelle (near Marans) and unloaded gamecocks, which had survived the cockfight, at that time highly prized by sailors to cheer up their sea isolation. In return, poultry, which furnished fresh food and eggs, were taken on board the ships.

The gamecocks were naturally crossed with local landrace hens. The products born of these crossings had a more stocky figure and laid darker coloured eggs. The fighting cocks, of many varied colours, are the origin of various present Marans varieties and are responsible for the proud bearing, heavy figure and of the sometimes quarrelsome character of the cocks, they would have more game characteristics if it were not for the original hens.



**Old English Game**

Other French breeds that played a part in the development of the Marans included the feather legged Cocou de Malines including the pea combed 'turkey head', the clean legged Cocou de Rennes, & the Gatinese.



**Turkey-headed Cocou de Malines**



**Gatinaise**



**Coucou de Rennes**

## Introduction of the Asian breeds

The second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century was a decisive time for the evolution of the French Marans breed often linked to the introduction of the Brahma and Langhans.



**Brahma**



**Croad Langshan**

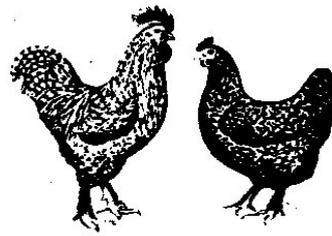
Mr Geoffrey Saint Hilaire and Mr Foucault imported some Croad Langshans.

Mr Louis Rouille, famous amateur breeder, was fascinated by an Asian breed that didn't possess yellow feet, whose fleshing qualities weren't negligible, and laid nice highly coloured eggs. Louis Rouille farmed a lot of Langhans hens in Fouras, situated at 12.43 miles south from La Rochelle. These birds spread in the area and it was by this way that the second crossing processes of the Marans took place.

From that moment on, the main characteristic of the breed was set: big red egg.

It was not the same however for the totally heterogenous plumage colours dating back from the ancestral origins of very numerous game varieties.

## The first Marans presentations



In 1914, at the national exhibition in La Rochelle, took place the first presentation of this poultry under the name of "a country hen".

In 1921, Mrs Rouse from Ile d'Elbe seriously selected the future Marans for the size and the colour of its egg.

In order to make its plumage a little bit uniform, in 1928, Mrs Rousseau showed in La Rochelle a pen of homogenous Cuckoo variety hens and their big extra reddish-brown eggs.

Fortunately for the future of Marans, the editor of the "Aviculteur Français" ("French poultry farmer"), Mr Paul Waroquiez, visited this exhibition and was very interested in the unknown producers of such nice eggs. He published, in this respect, some articles in this magazine notably on July 1<sup>st</sup> 1929 on the "Maransdaise" breed origin.

In 1929, in order to protect the breed qualities, a "Marans" section was created within the Aunis Saintonge poultry farmer society, and the Marans hen was accepted at the local poultry exhibitions.

Mr Waroquiez suggested the creation of a club. The Marans Club Français presided over by Mr Bouyer, and it was created in September 1929.

In 1930, the Marans was presented at the exhibition in Liege, Paris, Lyon and Lille. During this same year, the standard commission made up of Professor Sebileau, Mr Waroquiez, Mr Sangalli and Mr Mace, visited about hundred farms that raised Marans fowl.

From these observations a standard, which called for a feathered shanked bird, was produced. A committee gathered at the Aulnoie Manor studied this at the end of 1930. The Standard was defined by the commission of April 2<sup>nd</sup> 1931, & was published in various poultry farming magazines, the Général Assembly ratified it on November 22<sup>nd</sup> 1931 and it was noted down in the SCAF catalogue.

From that moment on, the Marans breed spread almost over France and especially in the Nord Pas de Calais department, which sent eggs in England, and in the Seine, & Oise regions.

Here are some facts concerning the Marans representation at this time during the Paris exhibition :

**In 1931 : 16 trios , 16 class entries, 8 exhibitors,**

**3 varieties : Silver Cuckoo, White and Black Copper-neck.**

**In 1932 : 10 trios , 43 class entries, 9 exhibitors,**

**6 varieties : White, Ermine, Golden Cuckoo, Silver Cuckoo, Red, Black Copper-neck.**

**In 1933 : 9 trios, 51 class entries,**

**all the varieties were exhibited.**

## **The decline of the Marans in France**

**From 1934, the Marans were in decline.**

**In 1936, in the Paris exhibition there were only 2 trios, 11 class entries, and 2 exhibitors.**

**During the Second World War, the Germans occupied the Marans area and, due to restrictions on movements, farming was almost reduced to nothing, marketing was impossible.**

**In 1946, just after the war, the situation of the Marans in its birthplace was the same as it had been in 1929.**

**In 1950, a cooperative poultry-farming centre for the Marans breed was created in Lagord, in order to try to remedy the situation. (Faubourg of La Rochelle) with the Marans club, the SCAF and the regional poultry farming organizations.**

**This centre was then moved to Dompierre sur Mer (commune of Belle Croix) near La Rochelle.**

**It functioned under the direction of the Departmental of Agricultural Services.**

**It practised selection by a hatched-nest system, birth records by individual pedigree, & the systematic study of the genetic factors. It furnished eggs for settings, and chicks to the agricultural cooperative members.**

**In the first year of selection, the egg average was of 168 eggs per hen.**

**In 1952, it nearly reached 200 eggs.**

**In 1953, the centre possessed 150 Silver-cuckoo Marans and 150 White Marans hens.**

**In 1954, the projects to have between 500 & 1000 birds but this target never come into being. The centre, which was at the time managed by a person who found more advantages in farming ordinary commercial chicks than in Marans, collapsed.**

## **Chronicles of 1960 – 1970...**

In spite of the setbacks met the 50's and the 60's, the research and the selection of the Marans were continued thanks to the MCF president, Mr Bachelier. So he took on Mr Priouzeau, in Marans, who selected and setting activities went on the two following decades.

With an impeccable constitution, a good conformation and laying more than 200 eggs a year, the Silver-Cuckoo Marans had already started to lose the darker eggs that were characteristic of its ancestors.

### **... a decline aspect**

This period foreshadowed the Silver-Cuckoo Marans decline.

The productivity was going to destroy the unquestionable qualities of the Marans on the one hand, because there is a certain negative relationship between the produced egg quality by a given age flock and the shell colour, (as Bernard Sauveur from the NIRA said), and on the other hand, because the natural possibility of the Marans to lay very big eggs represents a certain handicap for an excellent hatching.

It was also at this time that in France a lot of industrialists widely used the Marans hens to produce foundation birds for sex linked crossbreds, tending to make people forget this bird as a pure bred hen.

About 1970, a supply of Russian hens having a phenotype close to the Black Copper-neck Marans contributed to improve size in this variety but unfortunately it was at the expense of the egg, and shank color. The birds, which were born of these crossings, had to be eliminated.

Fortunately, some amateurs carried on, in obscurity, taking an interest in the Marans and especially of the Black Copper-neck Marans, which has already had the reputation of laying the darker eggs.

The fancy that was born for the Black Copper-neck Marans went on but the vagueness of the Standard, notably in the description of the plumage, represented quite a handicap.

Some farmers even specialized in the production of exhibition subjects, developing both separate cockerel and pullet breeding lines. Others accepted the extreme heterogeneousness of the types and plumage as a fatality. They solely dedicated themselves to the extra reddish-brown egg production, and thus ignoring all the improvements of the type characteristics of the Marans.

We have to wait until the 1990s that the breed, supported by a hundred or so of selector farmers spread all over France and Belgium, guided by the work of a renewed practice of the MCF. In 2000, the MCF was made up of more than 400 members and delivered more than 12000 official rings to its farmers.

## **Marans in England**

During 1929, an Englishman, Lord Greenway, attracted by the particular qualities of the Marans, bought, at the Paris exhibition, some Black, Cuckoo, & White birds. In England there was difficulty differentiating between the Cuckoo Marans and other Continental Cuckoo breeds, unless the eggs could be seen so after some years, he concentrated

his efforts on the selection of the Cuckoo variety exclusively. At that time both clean & feathered shanks were common & he decided to breed clean shanked birds. Due to the instability of the plumage of this variety, he subdivided it into three sub-varieties: Dark Cuckoo, Silver Cuckoo, & Golden Cuckoo. These English Marans were developed with clean shanks, as breeders had difficulty differentiating them from other feathered shanked European breeds that laid cream/tinted eggs, some Barred Plymouth Rock & Light Sussex being used in their makeup, they were accepted into the British Standard in 1931, together with the Blacks, unfortunately the Whites had died out. Black Copper-necks were also imported from France in the 1930s but were never accepted into the British Standard.

The popularity for the dark egg lead to indiscriminate breeding over the next 20 years to try and improve the identification of pullets and cockerels as day old.

Good pure Marans can be devilishly difficult to sex when young - and the cockerels eat a lot.

Day old sexing meant the breeders didn't have to rear the cockerels so they could rear more pullets at reduced costs.

This was done by using other breeds such as the Light Sussex - their offspring were then put to a pure Marans and the resulting Marans-looking young sold as Marans. The cockerels were much lighter at day old so easier to cull them out. Successive years of breeding from these stocks produced a paler egg; poorer productivity and more white in the feathering (from the Light Sussex).

Good pure Marans are now very difficult to find as a result, as it can be very difficult to distinguish between these birds and they have become incorporated into some people's stocks.

Recent importations from France into the UK have resulted in both clean shanked & feathered shanked birds being available. The Poultry Club refuses to recognise the feathered birds, and the Marans Club of the UK has adopted the French Standard.

The impasse is unlikely to be resolved in the next 5 years, until the 7<sup>th</sup> Edition of the British Poultry Standard is published.

### **Marans in the USA**

The earliest imports all came from the UK and Australia & were mostly the Cuckoo varieties, Whites & Blacks. These are all clean-shanked birds. Recent importations of Black Copper-necks (Wade Jean line) & Wheatens have been from France, augmenting a few Marans imported from Canada, these are the French type feathered shanked birds. The birds imported from Australia were all Cuckoo Marans, and are known as the 'Perth' line, being from that city in Western Australia. A current US breeder stated, "*I don't know when or from where the Perth Line came to this country. The only type I was ever aware of where the Cuckoo pattern and they did have a problem with side sprigs. I'm not sure who has them now or if they even are still around. I believe Lester Stocker used to have them and has since dispersed or combined all the various Lines he once maintained.*"

The following was taken from the Marans of America Club website.

The cuckoo Marans was the only variety in the U.S. until the last few years. The first importation was by Isaac Hunter of Michigan at the end of WW2. He brought them from England. In 1963 John Fugate imported the cuckoo Marans from France to Athens Tenn. He later moved to Mexico and his marans were spread to several people. John later formed a partnership with Mr. Wilburn of Alabama. I talked to Mr. Wilburn a few years ago, he was 92 years old at the time but his mind was very sharp. He told me that Mr. Fugate had brought him cuckoo marans eggs from all over the world with the

darkest being from Belgium. I also had several conversations with Mr.Fugate and he confirmed what Mr.Wilburn had told me.

They also had a genetics man in Iowa working with them whose name I have forgotten. I don't know what year it was but Mr.Lowell Barber of North Carolina who talked Bill Fitch into breeding Marans to help get them going in the U.S. Mr. Fitch didn't like the Marans but bred them for a short while because of his respect for Mr.Barber. He sold out to Terry Kellerman of Kansas.Terry had brought Marans in from Canada from the Lake View Fowl Trust owned by Mr.Jim Hopkins which he crossed with the Fitch Marans.

The Hopkins Marans were feather shanked and the Fitch Marans were clean shanked so the off spring were both clean and feather shanked birds. About this time Mr.Mick Murphy brought cuckoo Marans from England. Mr. Murphy was a exhalant breeder and was a very strong supporter of the Cuckoo verity. He worked exclusively with cuckoos. I cant think of the fellows name that was the curator at the Smithsonian institute but he brought the Ripley line from England. When he died they sold his flock.

Mr.Ron Presley worked with that line for several years and did a great job with them. I don't know how the Perth line got here but they are from Perth Australia. The Leriquin line was brought in by a man whose name I wont mention but this line was not what we were told it was and we got some mighty sorry birds from them. We do have to credit them with getting all the different colors of Marans started.I have always regretted using that line at all and have bred it out of my Marans. I used seven different lines to developed my line of cuckoos.

I used the Fugate,Ripley and Kellerman lines very heavily and the Fitch and Murphy lines lightly and the Perth and Leriquin lines extremely lightly. The Fugate line had very nice egg color and was a large bird. The Ripley line in my opinion had the best egg color.The Kellerman line was extremely large hardy,vigorous birds but the egg color wasn't as good as the Fugate or Ripley. I really liked these three lines.The Murphy line had really nice egg color. The Perth and Leriquin lines I don't care for. I must thank the following breeders for their help in developing the line I have had for the last ten years. Mick Murphy,Tom Brown,Mr.Wilburn,Terry Kellerman,Ron Presley and Cari Shaffer

Marans are not Standardised in the American Poultry Standard.

## Marans in Australia

Marans were included in the 1<sup>st</sup> Edition of the Australian Standard in 1998. There was, and still is, considerable conjecture as to whether they had ever existed, and if so were there any left. As the Australian Standard is a word for word copy of the British Standard it can be assumed the early birds were of the English clean-shanked types, the feathered shanks of the French type being a disqualification. It is presumed that the Standards Committee would not have included Marans unless they knew they existed, but unfortunately requests about the history & known birds has received no response. Dr Don Robertson of Gidegannup, WA advised he had re-created a Cuckoo Marans type, with the egg genetics based on Welsummers, but he was unable to obtain the deep Marans egg colour. He had these birds until about 10 years ago. He stated he could remember, as a lad, reading articles on sexing day old Cuckoo Marans in the WA Poultry Tribune in the late 1940 or early 1950s.Others also carried out searches for

Marans or remnants of the breed in other States, whilst others carried out searches for the dark egg genetics. A breeder in Victoria, Anne Frankel obtained some English type Marans about 2001, Anne advised her line came from the deceased estate of an elderly man. He had had the flock for an unknown time, and nothing more is known of their origin.

Anne had a number of breeds but kept the Marans apart and values them. She said, "They were all pretty similar & I found in my years of breeding that they were mostly straight cuckoo or gold or silver cuckoo.

Some had rather lemon legs, others white mottled with black as is acceptable in a cuckoo bird, but they stayed pretty true to type".

This leg colour is a sign of birds that could go back to the 1930s. Judy Witney, of the Victorian New & Rare Breeds Society worked with some of the Frankel line birds for some time but was unable to achieve the depth of egg pigmentation she wanted. Stock from Judy was dispersed to breeders in WA, Victoria, Queensland & Tasmania, but all appear to have died out. Anne also sold birds to WA, Tasmania & other Victorian breeders but they seem to have suffered a similar fate. A breeder from the Gold Coast hinterland stated on a US Marans forum that he /she had French type feather shanked Gold & Silver Duckwing Marans, unfortunately they did not give their name or email address and failed to respond to a Personal message, so this must be considered to be very dubious. In the 1999 Kory Chapman had a feature article in the Australasian Poultry magazine on the re-creation of Marans, he advised he had sold 60 breeding trios in 2000, but all seem to have disappeared. They had eggs a little lighter in colour than the Welsummers that were included in their original make-up.

A second search, based on egg colour identified, in Victoria a Cuckoo dark egg-laying remnant Marans that had been in the same family for over 40 years, and in the hands of their original supplier, from Eskdale in the Mitta Valley Victoria, for a least 15 years prior. This takes us back to the 1940s, so it can be safely assumed they were here pre the Second World War. This is born out in that the earliest birds known were a mixture of clean & feathered shanks, white & yellow legs, and single and 'turkey headed' pea combed birds. Some of these turkey headed birds, from Coucou de Malines blood, still exist. The egg colour is not as dark as the French Black Copper-neck or Wheaten, but on a par with Double Laced Barnevelders & Welsummers.

A breeder advised he had seen an exhibit of brown eggs at an Agricultural show that were several shades darker & redder than either of his Double Laced Barnevelders or Welsummers, on talking to the exhibitor he found the eggs were from backyard commercial Isa Brown type birds. This led to a project, to select for the dark red egg genes, from fowl of this type. A Wheaten strain with eggs in the 4-6 range have now been produced & are being further developed. At this time both clean & feathered shanked birds are being produced, but the latter are favoured.

A documentation search of records of poultry imports, especially Marans, was also carried out for the period 1930 -1952. From the time Marans were Standardised to the implementation of the total import ban on poultry. AQIS advised that at this time they had no interest in animal quarantine, only human quarantine, and that it had been the responsibility of the States.

AQIS advised they were not involved in animal quarantine until 1956, and prior to that it was a State responsibility. All State Depts of Agriculture/Primary Industries were contacted WA & Tas failed to respond; NSW acknowledged the request but did not respond; SA, Qld & Vic stated they had not provisions in place to monitor poultry imports until the import ban in 1952.

SA advised poultry often arrived accompanying migrants & returning Australian tourists, in crates as deck cargo. On inspection they were either admitted without documentation or destroyed. Vic suggested records might be held by the Rare Breeds Trust of Australia, but this proved not to be so. Qld suggested records might be held by the National Archives of Australia, who have not responded to date.

The future, numerous breeders have subscribed to the import syndicate which if successfully taken to fruition will introduce French type feathered shanked Black Copper-necks, Blue Copper-necks & Splash Copper-necks.

**The Australian Standard follows, word for word, the British Standard and disqualifies French type feathered shanked birds. It is felt that breeders who have spent thousands of dollars in an attempt to import Marans will be somewhat upset to find they are not recognised, and would be disqualified from exhibition. A submission has been made in the respect to the Australian Standards review Committee for the second Edition. However no response or recognition of receipt has been received to date.**