Dorking

Chris Graham investigates the famous, five-toed fowl from the Home Counties which, despite its quintessentially British image, actually has Italian roots

There can be few poultry breeds packing as much historical punch as the Dorking. This practical, British utility bird simply knocks the opposition into the weeds when it comes to its documented past. Forget 100 years old, forget 200 years old, this breed can be traced back some 2,000 years, to the time of the Roman conquest of Britain!

Of course, precise details of the breed’s early development are lost in the murky past, but it does seem likely that the Romans, who we know were partial to eating chicken, brought a large, square-framed, short-legged and five-toed fowl with them. Nowadays the Dorking is available in five distinct plumage colours, but the version introduced by the Romans was probably the forerunner of today’s red version.

It took a long while before some concerted crossing with Sussex and Surrey fowl set in train the development of the ‘modern day’ Dorking family, which now consists of the rose-combed white, the dark (formerly called ‘coloured’), the red, the silver grey and the cuckoo. In terms of overall purity, it’s either the white or the red that holds the crown, depending on which reference book you read. However, both are rarities now, and it’s the silver grey which has assumed the mantle of most popular Dorking, although red numbers have recently risen.

Victorian fancy

The Dorking became a popular exhibition breed among Victorian fanciers, with the silver grey proving a particular favourite. But it was the breed’s success as a meat bird that really put it on the map. The white was most desirable ‘coloured’, the red, the silver grey and the cuckoo. In terms of overall purity, it’s either the white or the red that holds the crown, depending on which reference book you read. However, both are rarities now, and it’s the silver grey which has assumed the mantle of most popular Dorking, although red numbers have recently risen.

There are important comb differences between the colours (refer to table). Single combs, as on this dark male, should be upright, reasonably large, broad at the base and evenly serrated. Avoid those with side sprigs.

Dark Dorkings should have dark grey ear tufts like this. On the silver grey, these will be white; an obvious recognition point.

Neck hackle feathers on the dark Dorking should show obvious striping like this, but are plain, silvery-white on the silver grey.

Good length of back is important. Too short is a problem, and can indicate that the bird has been crossbred with something else. Bird should feel substantial when handled, not simply a ball of fluff.

A little white in the on the primary sickle feathers in a dark’s tail is permissible, but white in the side hangers (seen here at the base of the tail) is not desirable from an exhibition point of view.

Dorking tail should be full and sweeping, with broad, well-curved sickle feathers. Watch for – and avoid – birds with wry or squirrel tails. These conditions can point to a deformity with the back; another serious exhibition fault.

Legs must be pure or pinky-white. Any dustiness or yellow is a sign of cross-breeding. Avoid ‘leggy’ birds and look for ‘fine’, strong bones, not big and coarse. Leg bones should be rounded, not ‘squared’. Check the position of the leg spur on male birds. They should be growing out on the inside of the leg, but sometimes you’ll find them doing the opposite.

Straight toes are important. Crooked ones can result from a hatching problem, but can also be hereditary, so it’s best not to take the risk in the first place if you’re intending to breed. Also make sure that all the toes have nails. Sometimes these can be missing (could be an inherited problem) and while this isn’t a desperate problem for the bird, an exhibition judge will spot the defect immediately. Darks are allowed horn-coloured toenails (matching the back), while all the others should have light nails matching the legs.

Make sure the breast bone is straight. Crookedness may have been caused by perching problems when the bird was young, or it may be something more fundamental. Silver grey, dark and red must have pure black breast feathering – no white feathers at all. A slight greyish mottling is acceptable on older birds.
Despite being a large, heavy and relatively hardy breed, the Dorking is quite sensitive to environmental conditions. Damp, draughty and dirty housing is a real no-no; it’ll promote all sorts of respiratory problems. The falling comb on this silver grey hen is part of the Standard.

Buying guide

Dorking at a glance…

PLUS POINTS
✓ Ancient roots
✓ Docile nature
✓ Utility performance
✓ Great table bird
✓ Excellent Breed Club
✓ Decent colour choice

MINUS POINTS
✘ Respiratory weaknesses
✘ Limited supply
✘ Red mite vulnerability
✘ Bantams still scarce

SIZE
heavy, soft feather

ORIGIN
England

WEIGHT
Large
♂ Male, 4.55-6.35kg (10-14lb)
♀ Female, 3.60-4.55kg (8-10lb)

Bantam
♂ Male, 1.130-1.360g (40-48oz)
♀ Female, 910-1.130g (32-40oz)

EGG LAYING
150pa

COLOURS
Colours: Silver grey, dark, red, white, cuckoo

Above: Dark Dorking hen with rose comb. Note typically massive body, low on legs and very good overall type.

Below: Rose comb found on dark, cuckoo and white Dorkings should be moderately broad and covered in small, coral-like points of even height. The leader at the back should be distinct and straight out.

the problem may also have been that a lot of out-crossing went on in the past, with breeds such as Old English Game and Dutch bantams being added to the mix. This, as you might imagine, had a very detrimental affect on the Dorking type. Consequently, it’s been a hard slog pulling type back into line but, once again, the Club has come to the rescue. Overall numbers, though, remain relatively low.

Bad blood
Out-crossing has affected the large fowl too, over the years, with less scrupulous keepers attempting to boost various characteristics by introducing fresh blood from other breeds. For example, Welsummers have been crossed with the red, in a mistaken attempt to improve fertility and/or colour. In reality, all this achieved was to create long-lasting type, feather colour and leg colour problems. Another common mistake often made by inexperienced keepers is the mixing of silver greys with darks, mainly to try to increase size in the silver greys.

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1. When inspecting the Dorking feathering, look for tall, wide feathers in the wings and tail.
2. Five toes are obviously essential, but take time to check for bumblefoot-like swellings or the subsoil of the feet; birds, which regularly perch too high, can suffer from this painful condition. Caring bad cases can be difficult. Toe nails should be kept short at all times, as this can induce twisted toes if the birds are not able to free range around a coop short by scratching. Legs must be completely featherless.
3. Females silver greys can often show a ‘towy’ red-brown colour in the wings, which seems to creep around from the breast. Male silver greys with any brassy red colouring on their back or hackle feathers should not be used for breeding, as this can breed-on into the females, on their wings.

which creates an undesirable halfway house between the two. Traditionally, the dark should have striped neck hackle feathers, while those on the silver grey are clear, and as near white as possible. These important two characteristics bleed into each other, following careless crossing.

Bearing all this in mind, great care is needed when we bring Dorkings, especially if you’re new to the breed. Everyone should aim to source the best stock possible, which means buying your birds through the Breed Club. It’s unlikely that you’ll find a breeder with countless examples to choose from and, in some cases, you’ll probably have to place an order months ahead of delivery.

As far as prices are concerned, expect to pay around £20 for typical, back garden stock and, in some cases, you’ll probably have to place an order months ahead of delivery. While a drab, free-flying environment is important for any breed of poultry, it seems especially so for the Dorking. These birds are prone to respiratory problems (including mycosalpia). Colds, sneezes and ‘ratty’ breathing can all be common occurrences if the birds are forced to endure poor ventilation in their housing conditions.

Shelter is important, too. This tendency towards respiratory complaints means that Dorkings can suffer unnecessarily if they’re allowed to get wet and cold. Unfortunately, they aren’t the cleverest birds around, and have been known to simply stand and get well if there’s no obvious shelter available.

Clean bedding is another vital requirement. Once again, although this should be a given as far as good husbandry is concerned, Dorkings are even more sensitive than usual to the polluting, ammonia-generating effects of dirty and sodden house litter. Perch height is an important factor as well; it must never be too high because the weight of the large fowl can stress their feet as they jump down, promoting the onset of bumblefoot. Check feet regularly, and use a preparatory treatment such as Stockholmar Tar to help prevent skin breaks. A final word of warning to prospective keepers is that Dorkings seem to be extra sensitive to the effects of red mite infestation; anaemia can set in at an early stage if they’re not kept in control.

Day-to-day

The Dorking is a generally good bird to keep, although it’s worth noting that any of the males can sometimes be a little aggressive, particularly during the mating season, or if handling has been minimal. These birds love to free-range and, perhaps surprisingly considering their size, large fowl Dorkings are pretty good fliers; they’ll happily take to the trees if they feel like it. The hens can make good, attentive mothers, but age is a factor in their ultimate reliability. To be sure, don’t attempt natural incubation with hens that are less than two years old.

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Good breeders

Paternity levels are typically good among young birds, but expect a dramatic fall with birds older than three years. The females tend to come into lay early in the year (January), but males are often slower, needing a bit of sun on their backs before they get going (March/April). If you’re aiming to produce birds for exhibition, then you’ll have to hatch early (never later than May) to ensure the youngsters have enough time to reach maturity before the big winter shows.

Chicks tend to be strong and healthy straight out of the shell, however, watch out for feather-pecking among youngsters, especially if space is limited, as they react badly to being overcrowded and/or too hot. They’ll need to be kept occupied to avoid any bad behaviour; use fresh turfs/greens, wild bird seed bells, pecker blocks etc. to offer distractions.

If you’re not interested in breeding, and simply want to keep a few Dorking hens as a source of eggs, then you can expect 150 a season from a healthy young hen. They’ll usually maintain this production rate for about three years, then numbers will fall away. The eggs themselves will be medium-sized and should be white-shelled but this can vary between the colours and they could be slightly tainted. Then, of course, there’s always the meat aspect to be considered. As increasing numbers of poultry keepers are beginning to think about the option of rearing a few birds for the pot – as an alternative to the supermarket-supplied, chemically-enhanced alternative – the

Dorking springs to mind as a very useful all-rounder, although it takes several months to achieve a good carcass. With plenty of meat on male birds, especially with growth of secondary feathers, decent laying ability and plenty of historical interest, what’s not to like? Furthermore, with the five colour options available, there should be something in the range to suit most tastes!

Silvery-white hackle feathers and ear tuft characterise the silver grey Dorking; still the most popular colour, Dorking hens can be kept should be large and stately but, at the same time, fine. Single comb on male Dorkings must be upright.

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