

CHAPTER 1

Origin and Development

Relationship with native Indian and Malaysian Fowl.
Similarity of bone structure and feathering. Original stock
brought to Cornwall. Legend of the Phoenicians
supported by facts. Probable later importations.
Development of the breed by environment and selection.

CLOSE RELATIONS

The origin of the Indian Game Fowl has been a matter of conjecture over the years, but its close relationship to the native fowl of India and Malaysia has never been in doubt. Its bone structure, being such as to provide a framework to carry great muscular development, is dissimilar to that of other breeds, as are also the shortness and hardness of feather and typical vulturine head. The general type of modern stock still owes much to the Aseel, the original fighting fowl of India which, though smaller, has a similar boldness of breast, quality of feather and length of leg. Again, similarities

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Illustration opposite

Figure 1.1 The Aseel and Malay (from *The Book of Poultry*, Wright, L).

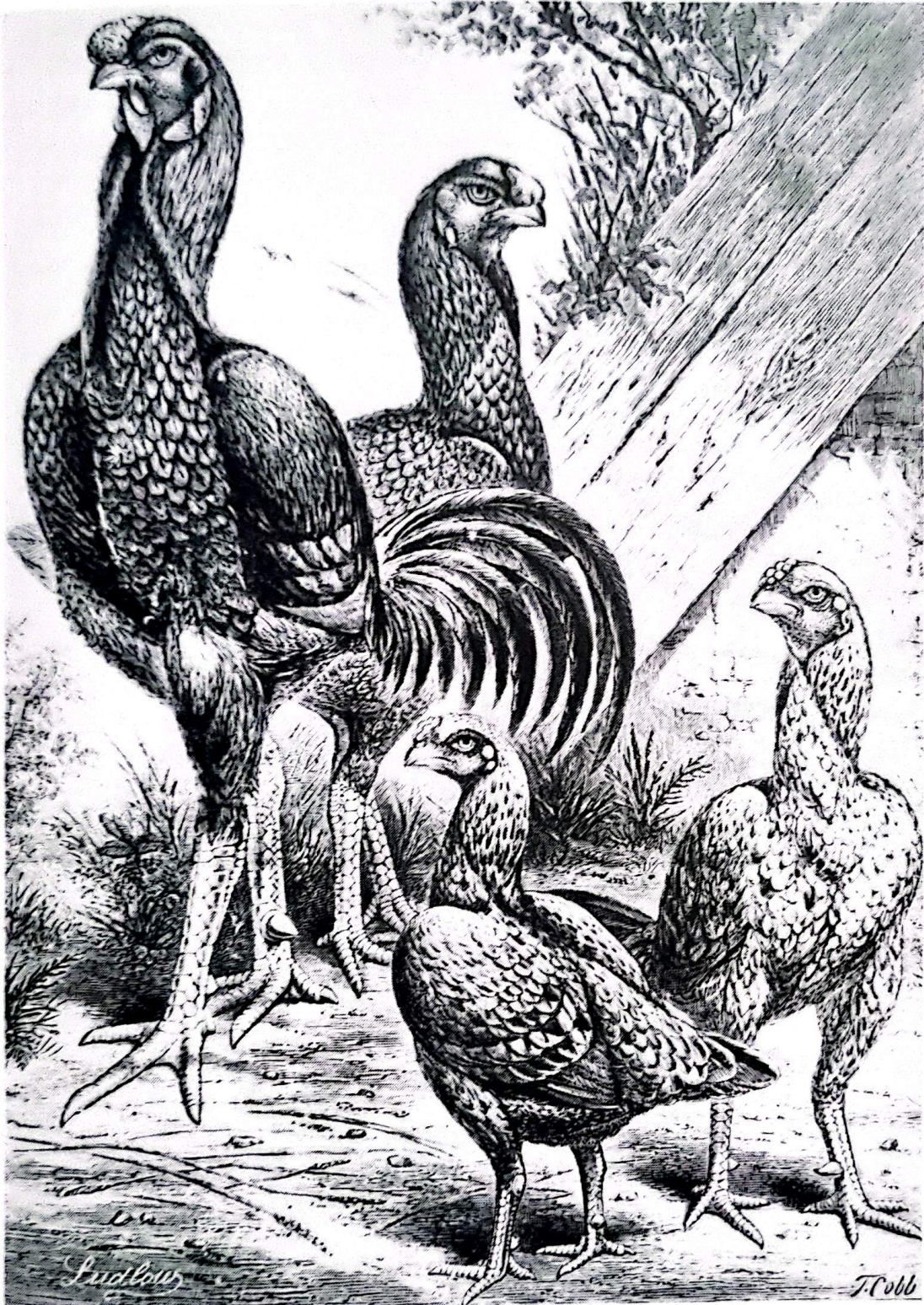
ANCESTORS OF INDIAN GAME

Although the *exact* make-up of Indian Game is the subject of debate there seems little doubt that the following breeds were involved:—

- (a) **Malays †**
The breed is Asiatic in origin. Some say it originated in India, but the greater weight of opinion seems to be that they first came from Java and Sumatra. There is no evidence of when the first birds arrived, but it seems likely that they arrived late in the eighteenth century.
- (b) **Aseels †**
The Aseel is a bird of great antiquity. The cocks were used for cockfighting in India and other countries from very early times possibly as long ago as 1000 B.C.
Some believe that Aseels are one of the oldest breeds of poultry. The name means “aristocratic” or “highly bred”, being kept by Indian princes from time immemorial.
- (c) **Old English Game**
An ancient breed steeped in history, bred originally for the sport of cockfighting (see Figure 1.2).
For a detailed description see *Understanding Old English Game* Batty. J., Spur Publications.

† *Understanding Modern Game* Batty J., and Bleazard J.P., Spur Publications.

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exist between the Indian Game and the ancient Malay with regard to bone formation and feather. It would seem that early this century the Malay infusion was particularly strong, in the light of the tendency at that time for a high proportion of each year's young stock to be 'leggy' and unduly light in bone.

STOCK BROUGHT TO CORNWALL FROM AFAR

That the Indian Game as we know it originated in Cornwall there can be no doubt. That fowl with its particular characteristics were not to be found in other parts of the country, seems to rule out any suggestion that it could be indigenous in its origin. Thus it seems certain that the original stock was brought from afar. One must look then for maritime travellers who would be likely to include livestock among their wares, travellers whose ships were of sufficient size and strength to make long inter-oceanic voyages with a view to empire expansion and trade. It is in this context that the legend that 'Indian Game were brought to Cornwall by the Phoenician tin traders' begins to assume some significance, albeit this brings the probable date of the first importations to a far earlier period than has generally been assumed.

THE PHOENICIANS

The Phoenicians were most active in their world-wide explorations, colonising and trading well before the Roman era. Highly civilised and organised, they were supreme as ship-builders, navigators and merchants, so becoming the 'masters of the civilised world'. Based in Lebanon, it was from the ports of Tyre and Sidon they set out upon their voyagings.

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The famous cedars of Lebanon provided the timbers from which their ships were built, ships of great size, high at bow and stern, able to undertake voyages that often lasted for years.

Despite their position of power and influence, the Phoenicians were peaceful in their approach to the peoples of other lands. The appearance of the great square sails of their ships became a welcome sight, coming as they did with trade goods of many kinds, items of glassware and jewellery, fabrics and metal, all strange and welcome to the people to whose shores they came. It was this peaceful approach, along with great organising ability, which enabled this race, comparatively small in numbers, to establish many towns as trading bases along the coasts of many seas.

It was the Phoenicians' practice to not only land for trading purposes but also, after investigation of the possibilities, to settle down and, with the cooperation of the native population, work the mineral resources and farm. Thus, in Cornwall, they worked the tin mines, exporting tin in exchange for their trade goods, and produced crops and livestock to provision their ships for the return voyages.

It is known that Phoenician trading and exploitation of resources covered a vast amount of territory, estimated to be a quarter of the world. From this the salient facts emerge that regular trading with India existed and working of the Cornish tin mines by the Phoenicians was carried out over a considerable period of time. Thus, in the knowledge of the special anatomical similarities between the native fowl of India and present-day Indian Game, and the obvious means by which stock could have been transferred, the origin of the breed would seem to be in little doubt.

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LATER IMPORTATIONS

Assuming that the original imports of Indian Fowl were brought by the Phoenicians, there is no doubt that further stock came from India at various later dates, so providing additional infusions of blood lines to assist with the development of the breed. Extracts from an article by C.S. Baldrey, published in 1953, lend credence to this assumption:

"In the United Provinces and parts of North India pea comb fowl or Aseel are exclusively found. They are very similar to Indian Game in size." The article continues: "I have come across several of them with exactly the same colouring as the Indian Game Fowl of Great Britain, in fact I had hens of this type coloured and marked like an Indian Game and these were purchased in the Indian State of Rampur, famous for its Aseels, thus we come to the first stage of connection between the Indian Game and the Aseel." He continues: "The birds should be so sensitive to the human touch that, when lightly tickled under the tail, the bird should immediately start to preen itself, this being considered a true test of Aseel or 'pure breed'. No other breed of fowl responds in the same way except our own Indian Game, which proves the close relationship with the Aseel". Mr. Baldry states: "As old records in India mention the sport of cock fighting, in which colonels and others of the Indian Army took part, it is fairly certain that they took back to England several of the Aseel breed".

Indian Game breeders will know that the induced 'preening' as mentioned above is typical of the breed. It is noticeable too that the more 'vulturine' the bird the more readily and vigorously it responds in this way.

A more extensive history of Indian Game is contained in *Poultry Breeding and Production* by Edward Brown. This gives a summary of the views of various writers and for this reason is reproduced.

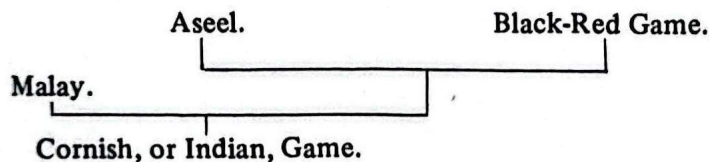
Origin. —Statements as to the origin of the Cornish are very conflicting, that is, of the Dark Cornish. It has been suggested that the breed was a direct importation from the East Indies. The only evidence in support we have found was from 'Game Cock' (the late John Harris, of Liskeard, Cornwall), who stated (27): 'A working man, who had been in the army and had seen service in India,

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visited my yards, and on being shown the pens of Indian Game, said, "Why, I've seen lots of those in India, and the natives fight them." ' The consensus of opinion, however, is that whilst undoubtedly the breed owes much to Asiatic influence, it was produced in Cornwall.

Mr. C.F. Montessor, writing several years ago upon the Aseel, another Asiatic breed, but of true Game nature, stated that Aseel is the name by which that breed is known and styled in India, 'and has been adopted in England for some years in order to distinguish it from that which is designated "Indian Game" (a breed not known to the natives of India), and originated in England by the late Sir Walter Raleigh Gilbert upwards of sixty years since, when he imported from India some red "Aseel" into Cornwall, and there crossed them with the Derby Black-reds. Sir Walter (then General) Gilbert personally gave me this information in 1846.'

The Indian or Cornish was very different at first from what we now see. Mr. Harrison Weir quotes (22) a long letter from a Cornish correspondent in proof of the claim that the breed is not 'Game,' referring to the older type, which is of no moment, as they were not bred for fighting. About the earlier 'seventies of last century a cross was introduced, evidently of Malay, or what Mr. Lewis Wright called 'Pheasant Malay,' for he says (9): 'From this cross was derived a solid black breast and darker colour in the cocks, and greater richness of colour and more iridescence of the lacing in the hens; and we suspect the double lacing also, which we never remember to have seen before. What this Pheasant Malay itself really was we are at the present date unable to say.' The following table will give the composition of the breed:



DEVELOPMENT

It is fascinating to speculate just how and why Indian Game developed along the lines that ultimately produced the breed as we know it today. It is certain that it always possessed a dominant factor, enabling it to pass on its conformation to others when used for inter-breeding. Such dominance must stem, it would seem, from a long history of careful breeding,

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Illustration opposite

Figure 1.3 Colonel Mordaunt's famous Cock Match
(from *The History of Cockfighting*, Scott G.R.,
Spur Publications).

COCKFIGHTING IN INDIA

Colonel Mordaunt's cock match is immortalised by the print after the painting by Zoffany. It is alleged that the Colonel took birds to Lucknow where the scene was painted. No doubt the Indian birds were Aseels.

Significantly the first Indian Game were developed as fighting birds by the Cornish miners. This aim seems to have been short lived because, within a few years, "heavy weights" were being created which were unsuited for battle.

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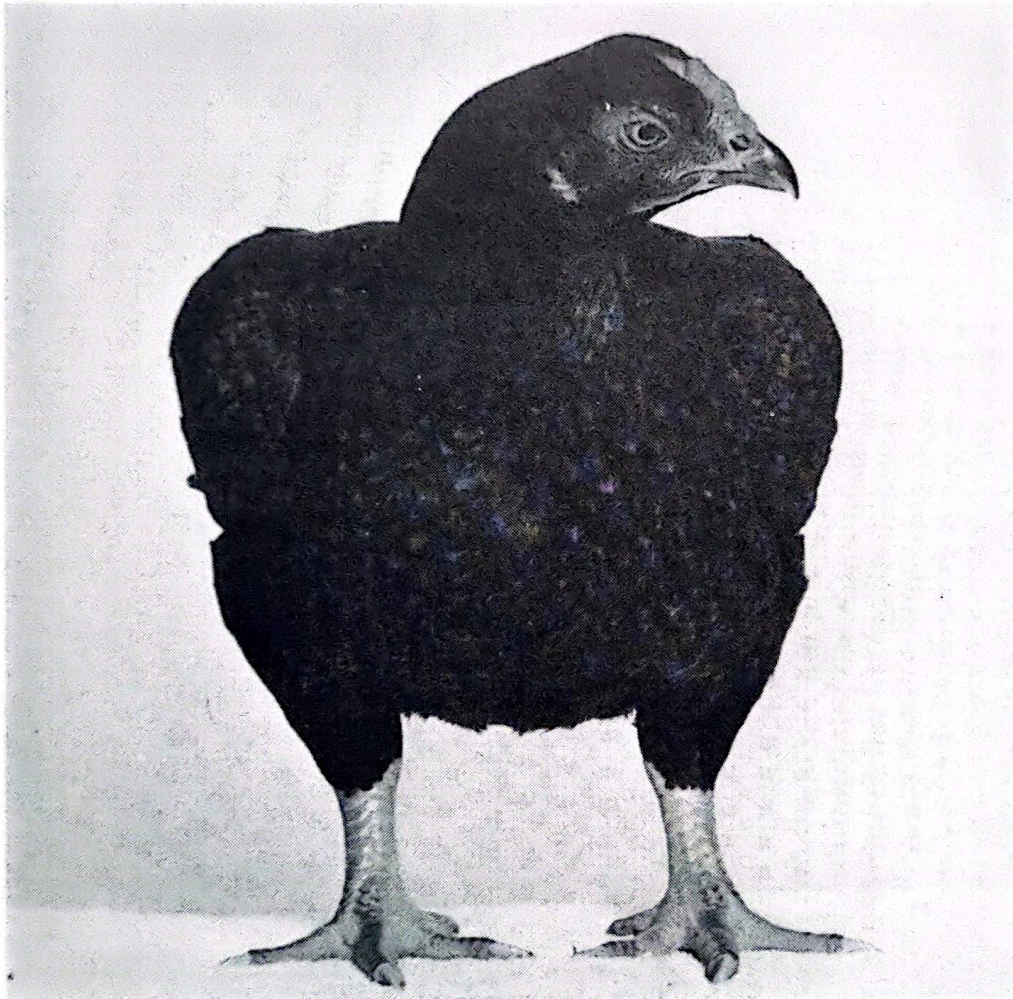
probably before its importation and possibly for fighting purposes. Though more a 'beak fighter' than a 'striker' it is known that the Aseel has always been greatly valued for its gameness and pugnacity. It may well be that after its arrival in Cornwall it was still bred for fighting use, but in course of time its meat-producing qualities and exceptional flavour came to be appreciated and the Malay was introduced into certain strains to effect an increase in size.

STANDARDISATION FOR SHOW

At a time when recreation and interests had to be devised, when travel was limited and 'provided' entertainment unknown, it was natural that competitive pursuits such as cockfighting, wrestling, foot and horse racing and the production of superior animals and birds should rank highly among the activities of mining and agricultural communities. The beginning of standardisation of breeds and varieties of livestock was a natural result, individuals attempting to breed and rear specimens of the greatest perfection for their own satisfaction and the admiration of their neighbours. It will have been at that stage, working to an agreed standard of shape, markings and weight-for-age, the true development of Indian Game began. General type, strong bone and sparseness of feather will have been quickly established and constantly improved upon and, with the advent of the first shows, the popularity of the breed must have speedily increased. For a long period, however, it was to a great extent restricted to the West country and even as late as the 1920's the reports of shows and the names of prominent exhibitors, were featured equally with reports of wrestling and football in the press.

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Again, in the 1920's, an important step forward was the perfection of ground colour and double-lacing in the females of the breed, accomplished without loss of breed character or size. Then onward, through hard competition, Indians began to attain the breed-points and quality by which they are judged today.



**Figure 1.4. A Large Pullet. Cup Winner,
Cornwall Indian Game Club Show, 1977
(T. and R. Etherington)**

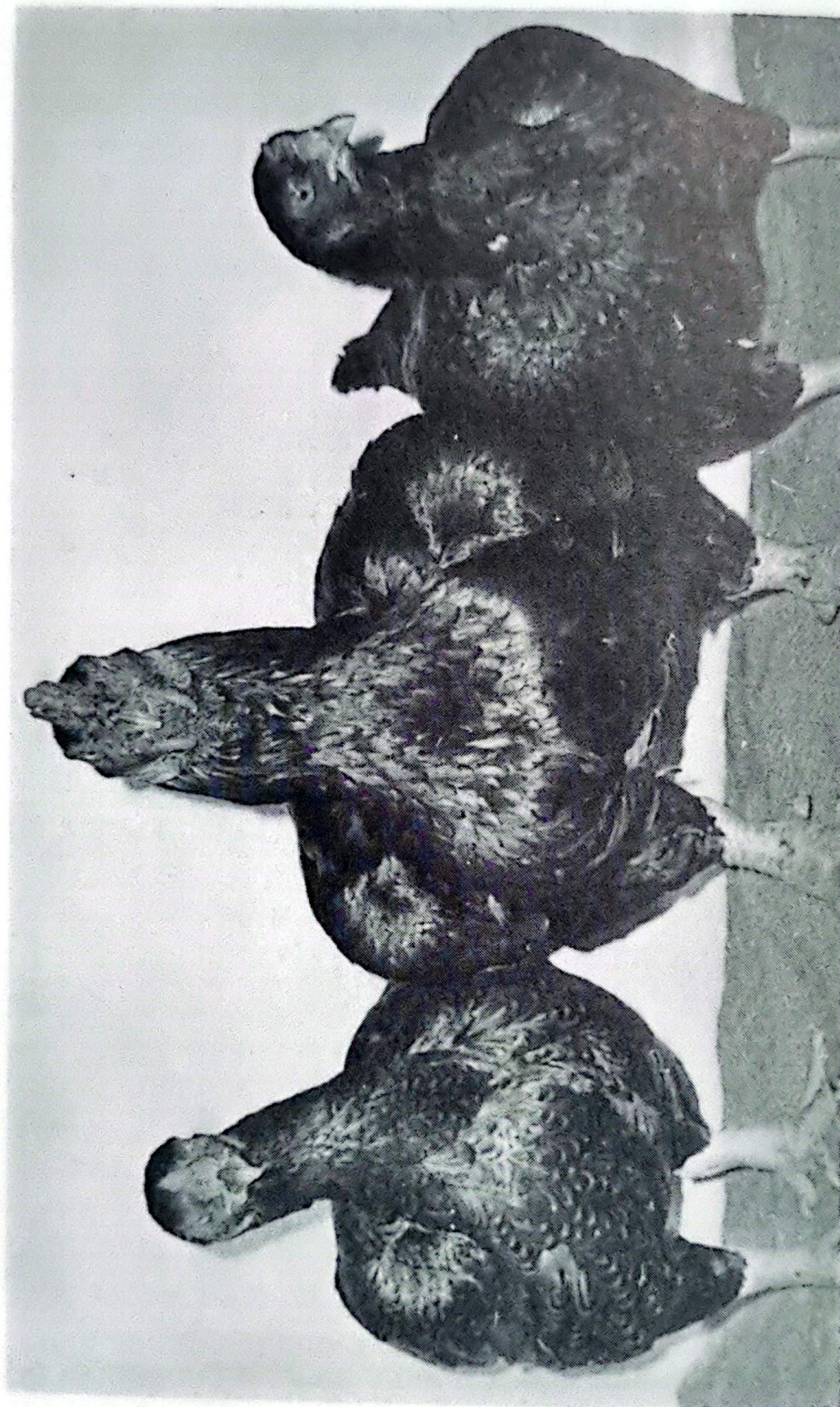


Figure 1.5. A Prizewinning Trio from the Stud of S.J.G. Jones of Haverfordwest, Dyfed.