

The Stanley O'Neill letter on Pewcroft Plague

Yellow Flatcoats had probably appeared now and then since the days when the breed was born. When the Golden Retriever, at least partially being a Flatcoat, was established in the beginning of the previous century it was registered as Golden Flatcoated Retriever for some time. The fact that there is a yellow long coated Retriever is probably the major reason why yellow Flatcoats haven't been accepted, unlike the Labrador, where the colours black, yellow or liver / chocolate are accepted, with the addition that yellow range from light cream to red fox. During the nineteen sixties the odd yellow Flatcoats started to appear more frequently in several countries and a quite natural reaction was that it must be caused by a Flatcoat/Golden or a Flatcoat/Labrador mix made sub rosa. Most probably it was to some extent, even if the "hidden" yellow gene had been there all the time.

Mr Stanley O'Neill (Pewcroft) was one of the most influential breeders at that time. The aging Mr O'Neill wanted to ease his conscience and decided to tell the true story about his interbred bitch Pewcroft Plague, being a Labrador/Flatcoat mix, born in 1939, and with an immense impact on the post war Flatcoat. The letter below was written to his friend Joan Mason (Heronsflight) who made an extract of the vital parts in 1984.

I've written in depth about the Pewcroft Plague story in two articles, being published on workingflatcoatedretriever.com, and I'm quite sure that Mr O'Neill wasn't fully true when telling the story. He was the most concerned, solid and knowledgeable supporter of the breed for sure and one of the greatest Flatcoat breeders of all times. But for some reason he couldn't be fully open with what obviously, and according to his own words, was an Interbred but for some reason being registered as a pure bred. Looking backwards Pewcroft Plague played a dominant role in the reconstruction of the breed after world war II, adding must valuable outcross blood to a narrow gene pool and strengthening the working qualities of the breed.

It sounds likely that the frequent occurrence of yellow Flatcoats today is affected by the continuous linebreeding back to Plague, not the least via influential sires like Tonggreen Sparrow Boy, with six lines back to Plague, appearing countless times in the pedigrees of most (probably all) modern Flatcoats.

Ingemar Borelius, 2018-01-01

The extracts from O'Neills' letters have been given in entirety, ^{certain} certain factors need consideration. Stanley O'Neill was writing from a hospital bed an elderly man, ill, nearly blind (which in no way affected his mental faculties) with no recourse to records so whilst the gist is accurate there could easily be some discrepancy in dates in harking back over some thirty years. The most important factor to remember is that O'Neill was never able to verify his hunch regarding the bitch he had back, it remained a supposition on his part, a "pricking of the thumbs" so, like any responsible breeder, which he undoubtedly was, he kept the possibility in mind in future breeding plans, as far as possible, to 'off-set any possibility of "Labbiness" emerging. BUT, he never knew for sure, "the man who liked to make a quick fiver" always maintained that the bitch was the one he had which matched the pedigree returned with her.

O'Neill was dedicated to the furtherance of Flatcoated retrievers, he was not an easy man, but no-one could doubt his integrity as a breeder which is the reason behind attempting some clarification of circumstances. Also, O'Neill aimed for and produced very typey Flatcoats with correct head moulding and body conformation that is un-like the more "match-boxy" type. Obviously the returned bitch, whatever her breeding was not his type, hence the doubts which arose in his mind.

Remember, all this happened about fifty years ago, the breed was at such a low ebb that there was very close breeding of necessity so that if the "yellow" factor was likely to emerge from this particular source then it would have been evident long before the occurrences over the past five to ten years. As O'Neill himself says, many working dogs were the result of one good worker being mated to another regardless of pedigree, he and others like him were in the minority in breeding to a thoroughbred line. As late as 1969 (I have no exact date without contacting the Kennel Club) "Inter-breds" were still accepted for registration and entered in the breed record supplement, there are Labrador/ Goldens registered in October 1969.

The question of "Yellows" can be simplified to the fact that the accepted colours are black and liver therefore any other colour is the equivalent of a fault comparable to a mis-marked King Charles or Bernese. One reaches a standard by selective breeding be it type, colour or whatever.

Joan Mason
23-10-84

From a letter from Stanley O'Neill to Joan Mason circa: February 1967

The breeding of Pewcroft Peg and Plague.

"Writing in bed at the Northern General Hospital, Sheffield I have no documents to refer to and cannot claim to detailed accuracy.

At Crufts in 1930 or '31 I bought a young bitch bred by W. Skerry by Ch. Specialist from one of his Towerwood Bitches (T. Flo?). This bitch was not at the show but her sister ran up a string of wins and must have been reserve for the bitch c.c.. I knew this bitch was on offer very cheap and drove over that night and bought her. I didn't like her but it was 11pm. so I took a chance. The more I saw of her the less I liked her. I used her to give my young dog Pewcroft Plug his first experience of a bitch and then gave her away. I kept none of the pups myself but one or two dogs turned out moderately decent at a time when there were few Flatcoats about. None of the bitches were any use.

Flatcoats were dead but I had bred a very decent litter by Puzzler from my favourite Pewcroft Pat sister to Budge who won the C.C. at Birmingham about 1932. Pat died two days after the pups were born but we reared the whole lot by hand, in the incubator room---- we were rearing a lot of chickens at the time. I was heartbroken by Pat's death and went a bit barmy. I sold all the pups. One of the bitch pups was very good and when she came out she made a good impression in a poor entry at Birmingham. Without saying a word the owner sold her to the South and I never discovered where. Before selling her, he mated her to one of Phizaklea's dogs, probably a full brother to Puzzler. I never heard anything of the litter and doubt if there were any show ring pups. There were one or two knocking about the Worcester district till the war but none interested me, perhaps being too closely bred.

In 1933 Phizaklea judged at Birmingham and I think only nine dogs were entered. Most of us thought that was the end. Some-one who had had a pup from me asked for "one like the last" this turned my thoughts to the "Specialist" bitch I'd given away. The owner told me he still had her but wanted a fiver for her. He was a great man for turning a "sharp" fiver or a quick bob. After ^{some} years from youth to maturity I couldn't be too sure, before I'd had her a day I knew she was not the "Specialist" bitch, I didn't waste time comparing their working ability but should say the new one was more determined, she was "Labby" but her stile and hock were better. The Flatcoat streak in the bitch I may have guessed from her length of body and maybe a little shaping and fineness in flank. Her feet were better than Flatcoat feet. I mated her to Puzzler and got one of the most remarkable workers I ever knew in any breed. The only pedigree I had was the original Skerry pedigree I had first given with her and which was returned to me when I was buying her back. So, I registered her as Pewcroft Plague. She was so outstanding I did all I could to find out what I could of her breeding in a district where few good and thoroughbred gundogs were bred one could

one could/

not get accuracy, but one could be fairly sure that so and so's dog had thrown pups to a bitch that was related to a dog that was useful and so on. After a year or two it became clear that the "pseudo Pest" was pretty well pure Labrador, not the heavy headed strain but with a decided line of yellow blood of some distinction.

This fact was well known in 1945. In 1945 we mated Plague to Phizakleas' Atherbram Warrior who was the best looking and most Flatcoaty of all Phizakleas' dogs. Peg was in this litter. In 1945 in response to Mrs. Murray Grovers' pledge that there would be a Flatcoat pup for every Keeper coming back from the war and wanting to start again we mated a bitch to Bryants' Ponsbourne Peter and had six pups, I think the dam was Peg. Miss Meeson had two, she wanted to mate them to a Specialist/ Southam dog that she had. I assured her there was no "Specialist" blood in my bitches. Dr. Laughton knew this too but like others just couldn't see beyond Atherbram Nobbie and Waterman.

We squandered a lot of good blood in those days etc-----.

The remainder
is not relevant.
SM.