

WHAT IS CRABBET?

WHERE IT ALL BEGAN

The story of Crabbet would make a fascinating screenplay. It has everything – larger than life characters, complicated relationships, exotic settings, travel in distant mysterious lands. Against this rich tapestry of colour and excitement was played out a more practical and far-sighted mission, the acquisition of Arabian horses of the finest types and bloodlines available for a Stud in England which would preserve the horse of the desert. That mission was accomplished and the Stud, at Crabbet Park in Sussex, operated for almost 100 years, breeding horses that were sent to all parts of the world where fine horses are bred, leaving a legacy that is unmatched by any other Arabian stud in history.

The Crabbet Stud was founded by two extraordinary people – Lady Anne and Wilfrid Scawen Blunt. Each was the product of an interesting, accomplished and privileged family background. She was the grand-daughter of Lord Byron from a family of writers, mathematicians and artists. Her mother was a noted scientist. Lady Anne's beautiful water-colours and the detailed diaries of her travels and the horses she saw during them, enable us to flesh out the amazing life she led. Wilfrid was a charming, sensitive, charismatic, if “difficult” man whose interests included politics, art, music and poetry. They married in 1869. “Crabbet”, a stately home set in rolling parkland at Crawley in Sussex became their base, but in fact the pair spent much of their stormy marriage travelling abroad. In her later life Lady Anne retreated to her beloved villa Sheykh Obeyd in Egypt.

In November 1877 the Blunts began the first of their journeys into the Arabian desert, in search of the horses of the Bedouin tribes. Their plan was to acquire the best of the desert blood wherever they could find it and their journeys took them to exotic destinations like Baghdad, Damascus, Hail, and into the valleys of the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers. They travelled across vast deserts mounted on camels or horses, living simply under the stars, experiencing the rigorous lives of the tribesmen at first hand, as well as earning their respect. They recorded their adventures in diaries, water-colours and poems, which are an invaluable record in themselves. They also began to purchase, not without some difficulties, the first horses for their Arabian Stud. When Lady Anne died in 1917, the Crabbet horses comprised the largest group of Pure Arabian horses held outside the desert. The dream had been realized.

The Blunts purchased their early breeding stock throughout the deserts of [the then] Persia, Syria and Turkey, in India and Egypt. Their first Arabian, a yearling filly eventually known as DAJANIA was purchased at Aleppo in Syria on Christmas Day 1877. On this first trip they also bought their first stallion, the impressive KARS who later came to Australia. Dajania became a foundation mare of their stud and of the Arabian breed. The splendid mare QUEEN OF SHEBA was first seen being ridden in the desert on January 9th 1878 when they were returning from Damascus. The seminal stallion MESAOU, a Seglawi, was bought in a group of three youngsters, two colts and a filly, from the stud of Ali Pasha Sherif in Egypt on December 30th 1888 when Ali Pasha was in financial difficulties. The stud was built on excellent desert bloodlines.

The Blunts' only surviving child Judith, Lady Wentworth, was born in 1873. She inherited her parents' talent for the Arts, as well as an eye for fine horses, breeding both Thoroughbreds and Arabians. Her master-stroke was the addition of the classical white stallion SKOWRONEK to the Stud in 1920. She also bred some of her Arabians taller and reachier than they had been. People called them the “Superhorses”. They were horses like ORAN, GRAND ROYAL, SILVER DRIFT and SERAFIX, though in fact some of them were not as tall as their reputations. RIFFAL, the tallest of them all was actually bred by Lady Yule, but of Crabbet stock. Lady Wentworth also used her smaller stallions such as Skowronek's son NASEEM and DARGEE. Like her parents she understood the art of blending types and bloodlines successfully.

Lady Wentworth died in 1957. She left the Stud to her manager Geoffrey Covey, but as he had predeceased her, his son Cecil inherited Crabbet which then included magnificent stallions such as BRIGHT SHADOW and INDIAN MAGIC. Though forced to reduce the stud numbers dramatically, Cecil continued breeding Arabians at Crabbet until 1971 when a motorway was cut through the Crabbet fields. The stud was dispersed, but its history and influence continues to this day, in many parts of the world.

Each of the owners of Crabbet was a strong individual, though the history of the stud and the horses it bred is an evolution, not the sectional history one might imagine. To begin with, Lady Anne gathered together as many of the best desert horses whose provenance she trusted, as she could. She was greatly helped by her gift for languages, when talking with the native tribesmen in their own tongues. She was prepared to go into dangerous situations, in little-travelled places, in search of the very best mares. Later she gathered up many of the fine Abbas Pasha horses from the stud of Ali Pasha Sherif, as they had fallen on hard times and would otherwise have perished. In the early days of Crabbet, horses were culled ruthlessly, and their ability as saddle-horses was paramount in the selections. The Blunts and their daughter Judith were fine and fearless riders. Large numbers of mares were always present at Crabbet, matched by large numbers of stallions, some of whom bred very few stock. Some truly excellent stallions left far fewer stock than one would hope. The Crabbet stallions were not available at public stud until Cecil Covey's time, but Lady Wentworth did exchange services with particular contemporaries such as Lady Yule and Miss Ianthe Bell.

THE WORLDWIDE INFLUENCE

This short history can only touch on the enormous influence of Crabbet Arabians on the history of Arabian breeding world-wide. In general, Arabians from The Crabbet Stud were exported to such diverse places as Holland, Spain, Russia, Poland, Portugal, Italy, India and Pakistan, Egypt, South and North America, South Africa, Australia. Most of these sales were of individuals or small groups of horses, but some larger groups that included both mares and stallions formed significant breeding bases in Russia, Spain, Egypt and the United States.

The importation of a group of 25 Crabbet Arabians [6 stallions and 19 mares] provided a significant input into what is now known as the "Pure Russian" branch of the breed. The most important among the consignment of stallions that included FERHAN, RASEEM and SHAREER, was NASEEM [Skowronek/Nasra] who was used at the Tersk Stud for 17 years. His sons NEGATIW, NABORR and SALON, and Negatiw's son BANDOS, have all been significant breeding giants, especially in Poland and the United States. Of the mares shipped to Russia in 1936, RUELLIA [Nuredin II/Riyala], RUANDA [Najib/Rythma], RIXALINA [Raseem/Rissla], RISSALMA [Shareer/Rissla] and STAR OF THE HILLS [Raswan/Selima] all established strong families.

The Duke of Veragua's importation of four Skowronek daughters in 1930, added a huge influence to Spanish breeding. Unfortunately with the demise of their owner during the Spanish Revolution, the Stud was in limbo for a long time, but when the horses came back together [with the daughters of the old Veragua mares prefixed "Vera" because of the difficulty of identifying each individual one], they bred on into modern Spanish pedigrees including that of the great modern broodmare and producer of Champions, ESTOPA. She is descended from Verana [1934].

Crabbet breeding returned to its roots when the Royal Agricultural Society of Egypt purchased 19 Crabbet Arabians in 1920. Almost half the foundation stock of the Egyptian Agricultural Organization was bred either at Crabbet Stud in England or at Lady Anne's Sheykh Obeyd outside Cairo. As the saviour of many of the important bloodlines of the Ali Pasha Sherif stud, she is as pivotal in the bloodlines of Straight Egyptian breeders as she is in the Crabbet world. Among the stallions in the 1920 group was KAZMEEN who was foaled at Crabbet in 1916. His daughter BINT SAMIHA became the dam of the celebrated Egyptian stallion NAZEER, thus ensuring that

all Nazeer descendants carry the blood of the great Crabbet sire Mesaoud, and the mares Queen of Sheba, Sobha and Nefisa. The most significant mares used in Egyptian breeding were GHADIA [Radia], BINT EL BAHREYN, BINT ROGA, RAZIEH [Bint Rissala], RISAMA [Bint Riyala], and EL DAHMA.

The United States had the lion's share of Crabbet breeding beginning with such purchases as those of Mr J.A. P. Ramsdell in 1895. Some of the better-known importers of Crabbet stock were Spencer Borden, W.R. Brown, Homer Davenport, Lothrop Ames, Roger Selby and Mr W.K. Kellogg. Mrs Bazy Tankersley of Al Marah Arabians brought to America the largest single consignment of Crabbet horses [32], in one single group in 1957 after the deaths of Miss Gladys Yule [Hanstead] and Lady Wentworth. These included ROYAL DIAMOND, SILVER SHADOW, SILWA and SILVER GRAND. Mrs Tankersley also owned COUNT DORSAZ and later bought SILVER VANITY in partnership with Mr Prange. Her stud continues to this day.

Among other celebrated Crabbet Arabians exported to the United States were the stallions RODAN, ABU ZEYD, ASTRALED, BERK, RASEYN, RAFFLES, NASIK, SERAFIX and SILVER DRIFT. Among the mares were ROSE OF SHARON, GHAZALA, FERDA, SILVER CRYSTAL and so many more.

Despite all these impressive importations, it is Australia today which has the strongest Pure Crabbet lines, since in most other countries the Crabbet lines have received more recent substantial infusions of blood from other sources. Still, many of those new infusions trace to a Crabbet ancestry. Very few Arabians in the world today have no Crabbet blood at all, though many are now many generations away from this source.

AUSTRALIA

The great early Crabbet sires KARS and HADBAN travelled to Australia together in 1885 to the stud of Mr D.Mackay in the Hunter Valley, but none of their stock was registered and so they were "lost" to breeding.

The Kars daughters DAHNA and ROSE OF JERICHO later came to Australia and established large families still extant to this day. The two mares, together with a stallion RAFYK [Azrek/Rose of Sharon] were imported to "Quambi" in South Australia in 1891 by Sir James Penn Boucaut, Supreme Court Judge and Governor of the State. In 1901 he imported a second stallion FARAOUN Mesaoud/Fulana], together with the mares NAMUSA and EL LAHR. These six were the real beginning of Crabbet breeding in Australia, and their stock was sold far and wide throughout the country.

The largest single importer of Crabbet stock to Australia was Mrs A.D.D. Maclean of Fenwick Stud in Victoria. From her first importation in 1925 of a mare RAFINA [Rustem/Risala] with colt foal RASEEL by Nureddin II at foot, she established a large stud of all-Crabbet lines, which involved many importations as well as the gathering up of the remnants of the earlier Boucaut lines left in Australia. Horses she bred are the principal source of Pure Crabbet lines today. Stallions she imported between 1925 and 1961 were INDIAN LIGHT {Naseem/Nisreen}, FAYRIAL [Fayal/Raxina], RIFFAL [Naufal/Razina], ELECTRIC SILVER [Raktha/Silfina], SILVER MOONLIGHT [Indian Magic/Silver Fire], SHAFREYN [Royal Diamond/Sharfina], ROSSFENNICK [Indian Magic/Rosinella], SINDH [Silver Vanity/Silfina]. The mares were NASIRIEH [Skowronek/Nisreen], NURALINA [Hazzam/Nasira], CARLINA [Rissam/Shamnar], RIZALA [Rissam/Ghezala], GREY CORONET [Oran/Grey Royal], ROSINELLA [Oran/Rosalina], and ROYAL RADIANCE [Royal Diamond/Silver Gilt] with her colt foal GREYLIGHT at foot. Fenwick bred numerous Royal Show winners [no Arabian Shows in those days] and the stud continues today in its third generation of owners of the Maclean family.

Other significant importers of Crabbet rootstock included Mrs Elwyn Bligh of Bostocks Stud in Queensland with the stallions COUNT MANILLA [Count Dorsaz/Namilla], CRYSTAL FIRE [Dargee/Rosinella] and ABIRAM [Noran/Rythoura] and the mare SCHERZADE [Irex/Shammar]. Mrs Mary Leicht of Sydney brought in the stallions SPINDRIFT [Silver Drift/Silver Grand] and SILWAN [Dargee/Silwa] and the great show mare SILVER MAGIC [Indian Magic/Silver Fire]. The NSW Department of Agriculture imported RAZAZ [Champurrado/Rahab] and SALA [Grey Owl/Hama II]. Mrs Molly Legoe of South Australia imported the stallion RISHEEM [Irex/Rishka]. The Queensland Agricultural College imported Lady Wentworth's Supreme Champion GRAND ROYAL [Oran/Sharima]. The last Pure Crabbet stallion imported to Australia was PRINCE RASHEYD [Silvern Idyll/Princess Rubi'a] from the stud of Rosemary Archer. In recent years three Pure Crabbet Arabians have been exported to the UK, and four to the USA. Australia's Pure Crabbet stock is beginning to be in demand overseas.

People would remember some of the prominent Australian-bred show horses of years past – BANDEROL, RUBERTO, ARABIAN QUEEN, ARABIAN PARK PHAETON, AETHON, DELOS, FANTASY, SIROCCO, BIRUBI AURA, RALVON PILGRIM, RASHAM, WELLWORTH MORNING STAR, KYREMI ILLUSTRAA, SHADOWY NIGHT. Some of the acknowledged great endurance sires are AETHON and his sons such as POLDARK, SHAFREYN and his sons, CHIP CHASE SADAQA a Silwan* grandson, members of the Sindh* family, and horses originally sourced at the NSW Department of Agriculture which trace back to Boucaut lines. Hundreds of Australian-bred endurance horses, many of them of Crabbet breeding, have been exported overseas to the United Arab Emirates and Asia in the past 15 years.

CONCLUSION

There is no single Crabbet “type” as such, although similarities of breeding families to their much older forebears are quite startling where horses have been bred for many years in dedicated programmes. The main difference between Crabbet horses and other bloodlines in today's world is that Crabbet horses have been bred principally as riding animals with the qualities of sound structure, good feet and legs, movement and temperament, uppermost in mind. As such they have been most immune to the fashions for lighter bone, “straight” topline, exaggerated heads, etc, that are essential in the halter show animal of the 2000's. Unfortunately they are not often represented in halter classes these days, although people would enjoy seeing the superb Crabbet sires and youngstock of Australia. They are however very well-represented in the saddle rings of the shows.

Most of the world's great modern Arabians owe some of their ancestry to Crabbet Stud. Apart from the El Shaklan horses, and the Straight Egyptians with Nazeer breeding, that is. The American-bred Polish stallion MONOGRAMM has 25% Crabbet blood. European Champion KUBINEC is 24.22% Crabbet. PADRON's PSYCHE is almost 40% Crabbet – his sire Padron was from a Crabbet/Old English mare.

So it is that a Stud in the UK which began collecting its seedstock 130 years ago, still makes an enormous difference, all over the world. It is impossible to imagine what the breed would have been today, without Crabbet.

CORALIE GORDON 2008

Based on material from the Preface of “The Crabbet Arabian Imports to Australia” written by Joan Flynn and Coralie Gordon [1988] Sadly out of print.

Recommended Reading List:

- “The Crabbet Arabian Stud – Its History and Influence” - Rosemary Archer, Colin Pearson, Cecil Covey [1978]
- “Lady Anne Blunt – Journals and Correspondence 1878 – 1917” - Archer and Fleming [1986]
- “The Crabbet Arabian Imports to Australia” - Joan Flynn and Coralie Gordon [1988]
- “The Arabian Horse in Australia” - Volume One [1978]
- “The Authentic Arabian Horse” - Lady Wentworth [1945]. Third Edition 1979.
- “The Swift Runner” - Lady Wentworth [1957]
- “Imported Foundation Stock of North American Arabian Horses” - Vols 1,2,3 : Carol Mulder
- “The Arab Horse” - Peter Upton [1989 and Revised]
- “Desert Heritage” - Peter Upton [1980]