

Origin of the Yellow Retriever

by The Earl of Ilchester

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For some years I have been intending to put on paper my recollections of the earliest history of the yellow, wavy-coated retrievers, which have, in recent years, become so numerous and so popular in this country. Up to the end of the last century they were a rarity, and I am probably the only person alive who can remember even the second generation of the yellow breed which belonged to Sir Dudley Courts Marjoribanks, of Guisachan, Inverness-shire. Sir Dudley, who was brother to my grandmother, the Hon. Mrs. John Fox-Strangeways, was born in 1820, was created Baron Tweedmouth in 1881, and died in 1894.



Ada, Originator of the Ilchester Breed of Yellow Retrievers. A painting by L. G. Goddard, 1872.

The name yellow retriever was the original name of the breed, but this has been largely superseded in later years by that of golden retriever, one coined by the late Lord Harcourt, after he had bought one or more puppies from a keeper, and after he had been given a number of those dogs which remained in the Guisachan kennels by Lord Tweedmouth, when he sold the property in 1905 or 1906. Lord Harcourt immediately began to exhibit his dogs on the show-bench, and was no doubt in search of a new title in order to form a new class, for neither Tweedmouth nor Ilchester breeds had ever been shown. However, it is fair to add that the Guisachan dogs had generally become darker in colour in the intervening years.

Even at the beginning of this century, there was confusion about the origin of the breed. Black, wavy-coated retrievers, and in certain circles in the south of Scotland, black Labradors, were in great vogue. Indeed, except among member of the Tweedmouth and Ilchester families and their intimate friends, yellow retrievers were little known. Consequently their subsequent spread to all parts of the country was not easily foreseen.

It is late in the day, therefore, to try to re-assemble facts and search out the truth. But unless I set about it now, it may never be done and the true story will be lost forever. Fortunately, one unimpeachable source of information is still available. Sir Dudley Marjoribanks kept a studbook from 1835 onwards in which he recorded the name and breeding of his setters, his pointers, his greyhounds and his spaniels. Beagles come into the story in 1838 for a year or two; a retriever, evidently black, is mentioned in 1842 and not another till 1852. Irish spaniels are mentioned in 1843; and deerhounds supersede greyhounds for the first time in 1848. In 1854 he bought Guisachan; and thenceforward his kennel records were greatly increased.

Our business, however, is with retrievers. The sources whence they came were carefully set down, but colour was not mentioned. After 1868 the omission scarcely matters, for the names of the dogs give a clue to what we want to know. This book is now in the possession of Lady Pentland, a grand-daughter of Sir Dudley, and a daughter of the late Lord and Lady Aberdeen, and she has most kindly placed at my disposal, with other important and interesting papers connected with the problem. From these I am able to give new facts, which clearly conflict with certain suppositions that have been circulated in recent years, and also to introduce an entirely new line of thought.

One story is that Sir Dudley purchased at Brighton about the year 1868, from a dog trainer in a travelling circus, three yellow dogs. These animals, no doubt sheep dogs, were said to have been brought from the Region of the Caucasus and one of them, specified as *Nous*, was said to have been taken to Guisachan, and in due course to have become the first of the yellow breed. Everyone, I think, agrees that *Nous* was yellow, and that he was the *first*. But the belief that a Russian dog originated the strain is not borne out by dates, for *Nous* is to be found in the studbook as early as 1865, where he is described as "Lord Chichester's breed. June, 1864, purchd. At Brighton." He had no connection at all with any Russian dogs, if indeed they existed, for he had already been at Guisachan for some years.

I must confess that I had never put much faith in "the Russian myth"; but there is one very significant entry in the studbook in 1868 which causes me to waiver. A mysterious dog, "*Sancho*, April, 1868," appears at the bottom of the list for that year. No breeding is gotten – very unlike Sir Dudley's usual entries, which mention and repeat the details year after year. But it does occur to one that this dog might have been one of the Russians (*Sancho* seems a good circus name!). And might not Sir Dudley, having already a magnificent dog, *Nous* (i.e., wisdom), in his kennels have decided to try a dog of similar colour from the circus? *Sancho*, however, was clearly a failure; so much so that Sir Dudley never troubled even to make a note about his origin. He never appears again in the book; and he certainly never had any place at all in the future breeding of yellow retrievers. This suggestion, however, would account for the story, agreed by keepers years later, that a Russian dog did once appear at Guisachan. They talked of the arrival of *Nous* in 1868; but as he was already there, perhaps *Sancho* was the dog of which they spoke. So, clearly, Russian dogs can be dismissed from the problem for good and all.

Much of this talk about the Caucasus, however, was revived about 1911 by Colonel the Hon. William le Poer Trench, who owned a number of yellow dogs of Guisachan origin. He claimed that his strain went back to the original *Nous* breed. And that was quite possible, even probable. But his obsession on the subject of the Russian cross, induced him to journey to the Caucasus. There he was told that the dogs were with the sheep on the high ground at that season of the year. If he would pay the price, one would be found for him. He left his money; but no dog ever appeared!

The studbook gives us plain facts. Nevertheless, a few notes may be desirable to supplement the information given above, and to prove my case, after Sir Dudley

Marjoribanks purchase of Guisachan in 1854, he never had more than four retrievers in the kennels until 1866. In 1863, however, Tweed, "Ladykirk breed, 1862," was given to him by David Robertson, M.P., a relative, who had changed his name in 1834 from Marjoribanks and only reverted to the name when created a Baron in 1873, a week before he died. I shall have more to say about these dogs in due course.



In 1865 Nous appears in the book as having been bought in the previous year. A photograph of him, probably taken in 1872, with a Guisachan keeper, Simon Munro, who died the following year, appears in Hutchinson's Dog Encyclopedia, p. 742, and shows a very definite yellow dog. Tweed died in 1867, having never apparently been used for the stud and was replaced by Mr. Robertson with Belle, "1863, Ladykirk breed."

In June, 1868, Nous and Belle produced four yellow puppies, of which Sir Dudley kept two, Cowslip and Primrose. Of the others, he gave Crocus to his son, Edward Marjoribanks, and Ada to my father. The last named was the first of the Ilchester line, which will be dealt with separately later in the article.

Space will not allow long dissertations on the later development of the yellow retriever breed at Guisachan, but it is necessary to mention a new Tweed, given by Mr Robertson in 1872, for this dog was put to Cowslip in 1873, and produced Topsey. In 1874, Brass, out of my father's Ada, arrived, but went to an outkeeper. Jack and Jill, by Sampson, a red setter of Edward Marjoribank's, appear in 1875. In 1878, Sambo (H. Meux's) out of Topsey had Zoe, and finally Sweep, "bred by Ilchester." Crocus was given to Sir Dudley and produced three yellow puppies in 1881 out of Zoe. I have given these names since they will be referred to again when discussing the Ladykirk breed, and also to show that the cross of a black dog with a yellow bitch almost invariably produced yellow puppies. We also found these characteristics most strongly marked in the Ilchester breed. After about 1890, the bloodhound cross was introduced at Guisachan, largely for tracking

purposes, and there is a definite mention also, on a loose sheet, of a sandy coloured bloodhound having been used.

As a boy, brought up among my father's dogs, and when staying at Guisachan in later years, I never remember hearing much of the Russian story. But it does come back to me that water spaniels were mentioned as being connected with Sir Dudley's yellow retrievers.

As I have shown, the studbook mentions at least three importations of the Ladykirk breed. And they are most important to the theme, for Belle, the mother of the vital litter of yellow puppies, born in 1868, was one of them.

There is no explanation of the Ladykirk Breed in the studbook itself, but closely connected with it is a loose sheet of Guisachan writing paper, which Lady Pentland has also sent me, with jottings in Sir Dudley's own handwriting, dating from after 1884. This gives an invaluable clue, for it deals with crosses which he had used in his retriever kennel. The first entry runs:

“Cowslip, by Nous, out of Belle
Topsey, out of Cowslip, by Tweed Tweed water spaniels
Zoe, out of Topsey, by Sambo”

So Tweed and Belle were Tweed Water Spaniels! But what was that Tweed variety? There even seems great doubt as to what a water spaniel in 1868 looked like. No one seems able to tell me. The Natural History Museum has no record, but Dr. Parker, Keeper of Zoology, has most sent me a quotation from Ash, 1927, *Dogs, Their History and Development*.

“... the English water-spaniel, first depicted by Bewick, a collie-like dog, was probably a cross between the rough waterdog, or poodle, and the springer spaniel or setter.”

Between Bewick's time and that of Toplin, to judge from the illustration in Toplin's work, the water-spaniel had been so constantly crossed with the springer as to result in a dog of spaniel type, yet retaining the curly coat of the waterdog to some extent.

This certainly suggests a spaniel-like conformation; and some of the earlier yellow dogs had curly coats. The Kennel Club can tell me nothing. Neither can the Askews, owners of the Ladykirk, near Norham, on the Tweed, give me any information, although they have made a thorough search among their papers, photographs and pictures, Perhaps some reader could assist.

Having no further reliable information on this subject, I revert to the Ilchester breed. As I have shown, it began in 1868 with Ada, daughter of Nous and Belle and own-sister to Cowslip and to Edward Marjoribanks's Crocus. This strain my father proceeded to develop on lines quite different from those employed at Guisachan. From the first he bred from black dogs.

I am able to give two photographs, taken from pictures, of Ada, a charming-tempered bitch, but old and blind as I remember her. One of my earliest recollections was of my father coming into lunch at Melbury, suffering from many wasp stings. Ada had walked into a nest, luckily on the bank of a pond, and my father had thrown her into the water to get rid of her assailants!

Unfortunately no record was kept of how our crosses were arranged. Certainly at first, black wavy-coats were used, and later, black Labradors. Mr. Montague Guest's Sweep, a smooth-coat, sired more than one litter, and was probably the father of the best of our

second generation, Robin, a first class worker, with a beautiful nose and mouth, and a splendid water dog. The picture of him does not do him justice. The deerhound in the picture, which is by Van der Weyde, an early exponent of photography by electric light, also came from Guisachan, one of 12 puppies presented to my mother in 1876. After Robin, retriever names are only in my memory, in no set sequence, until I come to my own dogs. Even the efforts of my sister and others in later years to put the original breeding into pedigree form have been lost.



Robin, Yellow Retriever, and Wallace, Deerhound. By Van der Weyde, about 1880.

An out-cross bitch, probably about 1895, was given to my father, I think by Lady Breadalbane. They were small, reddish dogs, mostly good workers. But they were shy breeders, produced few puppies, and the strain died out. So did our own breed in the First World War, when the raising of puppies was said to be detrimental to the interests of the country. How little we then knew! We had crosses with outside strains of yellow Labradors, but never, I think, with Colonel Eustace Radclyffe's breed at the Hyde, Wareham. They were, I believe a separate breed altogether, said to have been initiated by the late Lord Lonsdale. We never used the bloodhound strain, but about 1900 we certainly had Guisachan crosses which showed that affinity.

To sum up, Nous, Sir Dudley Marjoribanks's dog, from "Lord Chichester's breed, Bought 1864," whatever that was, was the *first* of the yellow retrievers. No Russian strain ever had a place in the Guisachan pedigrees, though the Ladykirk breed, which was synonymous with Tweed water spaniels, had an all-important influence upon it. The cross of Nous, and Belle, a "Ladykirk" bitch in 1868, produced the first litter of yellow retriever puppies. From these started the separate Tweedmouth-Ilchester breeds of wavy-coated yellow retrievers, carrying on side by side, but with much different planning and many varied ramifications.

Finally, I should like to thank Lady Pentland, without whose loans this article could never have been written. Lady Susan and Mr. J. Askew, of Ladykirk, for their efforts to discover something about Tweed water spaniels, and Dr. Parker, Keeper of Zoology at South Kensington, for his help.