

Good Breeding

British Livestock Portraits, 1780–1900

“WE’RE REALLY KEEN ON THE PIGS,” says Iona Joseph, my hostess and guide, so I feel a need to reassess my initial reaction to these animals, which wasn’t kind. The pig portraits are the favorites, she says, because they depict such a range of interesting shapes and colors, some of them rivaling canvases of pure abstract design. But while it’s true that the pigs are many-hued—licorice black, coffee bean brown, boiled ham pink, lard white—and their shapes captivatingly odd (the oddest to my eye being the one that’s perfectly round, hence the title of its picture, *The Spherical Pig*), I can’t help wishing they showed more evidence of sentience, like those in comparable pictures of prize sheep and cows. Either the pigs were just too fat to emote anything but stupefaction or the artists were unable to capture it.

To be fair, one pig does have a glimmer of personality. Iona says she has nicknamed her Mae West, and I do detect a resemblance. Positioned sideways smack in the middle of the composition, she has one sultry eye turned toward me, and her mouth is fixed in a kind of come-hither smile. But she also resembles a giant swollen tick, or else a mammoth jellybean—a hairy one, with legs—and her snout is sunk like a bottle stopper into her dished face of flesh.

During Christmas week 2004, I was invited by Iona and her husband, Stephen, to their townhouse in London’s fashionable Kensington neighborhood.¹ Previously, I had known them only by reputation. The owners of Iona Antiques, exhibitors on the international antiques show circuit, they became the market makers for these idiosyncratic works of art when they began to collect them about thirty-five years ago. In the decades that followed, they put together what is considered to be the finest private collection of British livestock paintings in the world, and their book, *Farm Animal Portraits*, written with journalist Elspeth Moncrieff, was published by the prestigious Antique Collectors’ Club in 1996.

Readers may be familiar with similar portraits of livestock that have been reproduced on contemporary placemats and mugs. After the Josephs rediscovered the

genre, so did kitchen kitsch entrepreneurs (who, nonetheless, offer no images that can be called less than “cute”—no swollen ticks in their barnyards). Originals are not easily come by in any case. The oils are seldom seen at art fairs, auctions, or dealers’ shops. Never mind their absence from the walls of major museums, whose curators have traditionally devalued them. Many, perhaps most, ended up in rubbish heaps and bonfires when pictures of fattened farm animals went out of fashion after Queen Victoria’s reign, their destroyers unmindful of perpetrating a double loss, one for art scholarship, the other for the histories of husbandry and of food.

Livestock painters were usually not sophisticated, to be sure. Often self-taught itinerants who may have failed at previous careers, they traveled from farm to farm looking for business. Iona says that when she and Stephen first began to show their collection publicly, in 1983, the question they were most frequently asked was: “Did you paint them yourselves?” Limners of subtlety were not the right candidates for documenting farmers’ breeding successes anyway. More valuable than a fully developed aesthetic sense was literalness. Former sign painters often did the job best, lettering into many of these designs the name of the animal’s breeder, date of birth, parentage, dimensions, and the types of foods it was raised on.

Robert Bakewell (1725–1795) of Dishley Grange, Leicestershire, was the acknowledged pioneer breeder of the first improved livestock. His revolutionary experiments with longhorn cattle, some of the world’s earliest examples of genetic engineering, resulted in beasts that produced more meat on less feed in a shorter time than any other breeds then known. And this was accomplished in an era when cattle were mainly used for milk or plowing, being butchered for their stringy meat only when they were too old for either harness or dairy.

Bakewell’s dramatic results were achieved not simply by doing better what others had already done before him, which was to cross females of one breed with males of



various other breeds. His bold idea was to interbreed his longhorns to intensify their desired characteristics. He bred from the same line, often from the same parentage, culling hard when necessary, and he did so in secret, since the church “frowned upon” (Iona’s phrase) these couplings as immoral. Bakewell was not engaged in science for its own sake; he wanted to solve a specific problem: how to feed the hungry poor of the new factory cities that were being built all around him in the British Midlands. To this same end, he experimented with Leicester sheep, breeding a New Leicester with a big, roly-poly sidecar of a body. In the Josephs’ book a color plate of *Three Fat New Leicester Sheep in a Landscape* shows front, back, and lateral views of the new breed in a kind of mug shot tableau. Until Bakewell’s time, sheep, like cattle, were not generally bred for meat; their value was in milk and wool. Mutton was a new source of fuel for people—very fatty mutton. John Lawrence,

Above: W.H. David, *Prize Sheep Being Fed Turnips* (1838). From *Elsbeth Moncrieff with Stephen and Iona Joseph, Farm Animal Portraits in Britain, 1780–1900* (Wappingers Falls, N.Y., and Suffolk, England: Antique Collectors’ Club, 1996), p.215.

OWNED BY THE MUSEUM OF LINCOLNSHIRE LIFE

author of *A General Treatise on Cattle, the Ox, the Sheep, and the Swine* (1805), wrote of a seventeen-pound joint of a prize New Leicester that produced between two and three quarts of drippings. The same reporter described the meat from that roast as not delicious. Bakewell wasn’t concerned. In 1809 his retort to a similar complaint was recorded: “Sir, I do not breed sheep for gentlemen but for the public.”²

His cattle’s carcasses were intended to be just as fatty. It was not uncommon to find as much as twelve inches of fat on the rib and nine inches on the rump, according to the Josephs’ researches. And their photographic illustration of a nineteenth-century painted plaster cast of a beef rib appears



Above: John Boulton, *The Durham Ox* (1802). From *Elspeth Moncrieff with Stephen and Iona Joseph, Farm Animal Portraits in Britain, 1780–1900* (Wappingers Falls, N.Y., and Suffolk, England: Antique Collectors' Club, 1996), p.64.

IN THE COLLECTION AT ALTHORP

to be almost entirely white fat, with only the faintest red lines of lean meat visible. To a twenty-first-century eye it qualifies as revolting. But the diners Bakewell had in mind needed the calories. “Fat was an important commodity,” the Josephs have written, “just as it is in third world countries where the hump of fat on the African cow is considered a delicacy.”³

Bakewell conducted his experiments in secret not only because of the church but because he wanted to avoid agricultural piracy. Once success was finally achieved, he began to welcome publicity. Soon enough, his practices became the breeding norms. Information was spread from breeder to breeder at meetings of the newly formed local agricultural societies. At those same gatherings, animals that had been brought for exhibition started being compared and judged. At stake in what shortly became formal contests was prestige as well as fattened bank accounts, since herd values were enhanced by prize-winning parents. But before real money could be made from letting sires or marketing dams and their offspring, their dimensions and other attributes needed to be advertised. Pictures of the newly crowned champions certainly helped. Against that backdrop of sci-

ence and sport, competition and commerce, the tradition of livestock portraits arose.

Exactly how accurate are these images? It’s a question eventually asked by everyone, says Iona. In the beginning artistic license was not exercised by the portraitists, she maintains. It would have been pointless for breeders to commission paintings that weren’t intended to be reasonably precise. Potential buyers, traveling great distances to do business with a breeder, couldn’t be disappointed too often. Statistics quoted in the Josephs’ book bear out their theory. In 1710, the average weight for beeves sold at London’s Smithfield Market was 370 pounds; in 1795, the year of Bakewell’s death, it was 800 pounds. The comparable figures for calves show them nearly tripling in weight during that period, from 50-pound averages to 148 pounds. For sheep the gain was just as remarkable: 28 pounds to 80 pounds. And

for lambs, 18 pounds to 50 pounds, which is the difference between the average weight of pug and that of a Dalmatian.⁴

Those who commissioned livestock portraits did, however, want their animals depicted in a way that emphasized the qualities they had taken pains to produce—long, straight backs, large hind quarters, as much fat as possible (particularly around the tail), spindly legs, after-thought-like heads, and (Iona’s description) “little ballerina feet.” To this end the first cattle painters adopted the iconography of horse portraiture, already well established by the mid-eighteenth century, which placed the beasts in profile in the foreground against a distant landscape, a perspective that created an impression of hugeness that could still be defended as “true.” The artists never would abandon that basic motif, but it did allow for distortions and exaggerations over time as motivations for breeding and for commissioning paintings changed.

One big change began in the nineteenth century, when some livestock started being bred as oddities to be toured in traveling shows rather than as marketable meat. These celebrity beasts were, to begin with, even larger than fattened herd animals. The Craven Heifer, bred by the Reverend W. Carr on the Duke of Devonshire’s estate in 1807, is said to have weighed 2,496 pounds and measured 11 feet 4 inches.⁵ The Lincolnshire Ox was reportedly even larger, at 2,880 pounds and over 13 feet long. By way of comparison, a 2005 vw Beetle weighs 2,743 pounds and measures 13 feet 5 inches.⁶ The animals probably were enormous by any standards, but commissioned artists would have been encouraged to make them look monstrous, since the owners then published prints from the paintings, expecting to use them as promotional and, later, to sell them as profitable souvenirs.

One of the most famous touring animals was the Durham Ox, a shorthorn that was bred in 1796 by Bakewell’s successor, Charles Colling. By 1802 the animal, which is said to have weighed nearly a ton in its prime, belonged to John Day, a showman who exhibited him around the countryside, transporting him in a specially designed wagon that was pulled by four horses, sometimes six, depending on the terrain. “Day’s wife and children would sit in the back with him,” says Iona, who sees it as evidence that the Durham Ox was extremely docile as well as cherished for his earning power: “He made a fortune for the family.”

Five different prints of the Durham Ox have been identified by the Josephs and so have three paintings. One of the originals was by John Boulton (1753–1812), the first British artist to specialize in cattle portraits and the one who painted Bakewell’s animals too (not to mention Bakewell himself). It is in the collection of Lord Spencer at Althorp, the late Lady Diana’s family home. “He’s got it hanging in

his private study,” attests Iona, who considers it the most important painting of its type. When it entered the Spencer collection is not known, but there is reason to believe it was acquired by the Third Earl of Spencer (1782–1845). Starting in the 1830s, the Victorians became deeply interested in agricultural reform, including the continued improvement of livestock. They also made a sport of breeding, and international royals often exchanged fattened animals as gifts.

Competitions at agricultural societies had by this time become major popular entertainments that were hardly any longer about meat for the minions. The object was to win prizes solely for glory, and artists who painted winners’ portraits regularly enhanced animals’ features to gratify owners’ egos. After these champions were crowned, they often were slaughtered, and their meat was sold at dear prices to a lucky few while the general public shared in the experience in a voyeuristic way. The prints they bought often detailed the butchering results—weights of various parts, their dimensions, and other qualities.

Artistic license was taken further with the pigs than with any other animals the livestock artists painted, according to the Josephs. Pigs really were in a category of their own for a couple of reasons, Iona says. First, up until the mid-nineteenth century, they were not taken seriously as commercial meat-producing animals. Their worth on farms was largely in their work as clean-up crews. In the Severn Valley, for example, “orchard pigs” would feed on windfalls and pulp from the cider presses. Coming late to the game, they were as a result rarely the subjects of the purely documentary portraiture of the late eighteenth century.

Secondly, when livestock breeders finally got around to improving pigs, they didn’t often try for genuine breed types; instead, they experimented with growing ever fatter and more distinctive-looking pigs. It is also true that portrait subjects were not the average suckling pig or bacon hog. The canvases we see today are pictures of the distorted ones, the most bizarre—the real contenders. To capture in paint their unique qualities, artistic license was almost required.

I had the opportunity to study several pig pictures in the Josephs’ dining room as we lunched (stuffed quail, asparagus, and raspberries with clotted cream for dessert). It is a singular experience to eat with these animals in view. Not that any of them had steely gazes. The pig portrait titled *Lincolnshire Curly Coat* and signed by the unknown T. Coulas projected a sentience and immobility akin to a boulder’s. *Gloucester Old Spot*, circa 1841, by another unknown, G. Sebright, put me in mind of a hassock, a gargantuan one, suitable for Paul Bunyan. *A Prize Berkshire*, signed by a third unknown artist, W. Luker, resembled a shiny black torpedo teetering

on tiny white golf-tee feet. And yet the more I looked at these pictures, the more I understood why they represent the high end of the market and the most valuable pieces in the Josephs' collection. They are much more complex than the cattle and sheep portraits, perhaps precisely because they are so much less representational. And toward the end of the meal, I was surprised to find that I had warmed to them. Iona described her own progression of taste similarly: "At first, I thought they were really awfully weird, and then I thought they were rather nice."

A couple of the Josephs' pig portraits were painted by John Vine (1808–1867). He is a favorite of Iona, in part because his pigs show "character" and also because of the poignancy of his personal story. Born with rudimentary arms and legs, like those of Thalidomide victims, Vine himself may have been exhibited as a curiosity in childhood. Yet he overcame his handicap to travel the countryside with his wife and family, painting animals at agricultural shows.

In addition to paintings, a Vine sketchbook has survived in private hands. When the Josephs were writing their book, it provided a valuable source of information not only about Vine but about competitions in the mid-nineteenth century, especially the period between 1860 and 1864. Vine pasted into the book complimentary passes to shows he attended. He noted in script the names of prizewinners, breeders, his clients, and the like. He also made sketches for some ninety paintings in that one four-year period alone, giving us a rough idea of the large number of livestock portraits that must have been created by prolific artists during the Victorian period—and how many of those artworks must now be gone.

The fat-animal breeding phenomenon was imported to the United States, among other places, by means of overseas trade in pedigree livestock in the late nineteenth century. In February 1883 subscribers to the *Live Stock Monthly*, a then new publication out of Portland, Maine, opened their copies of the twenty-four-page newsprint quarto magazine to read an article titled "Some Remarks Regarding Small Yorkshire Swine." Two line drawings illustrated the text by T.R. Proctor of Utica, New York, owner of Bagg's Hotel Farm, from whose herd book the words and pictures were taken. They were clearly done in the British livestock portrait style. One shows a smiling boar, Lord John; the other, a conveniently dull-looking sow, Queen IV. Both of course are immensely fat, almost preternaturally so. And yet Small Yorkies did not need as much food as, say, Suffolks to get as fat as the full-grown ones in the pictures, Proctor proclaimed. The quantity of rye or corn required to keep a pig of other breeds in passable condition would keep three of these so fat they would "sleep in unconscious quiet from

one meal to the next," he boasted. And if obesity were to render the boar "incompetent for service," Proctor recommended a daily mile walk, a task to be given with confidence to a child, considering the breed's characteristic "quietness of disposition."

Reproduction difficulty was one among many problems that eventually caused a decline in the fatness fad at the start of the twentieth century. For years prior breeders had been facing a growing reaction against fat in the diet, even among the working classes. The Industrial Revolution had allowed them to prosper a little, and their palates had subsequently become more refined. If breeders of meat for market wanted butchers to buy from them, they needed to produce leaner carcasses.

Breeders of exhibition animals had been hearing protests too—from animal welfare activists. Exhibition pigs were giving them cause for special alarm. Some of these animals were so big they could hardly stand; others needed to be supported by props. Breathing trouble was common, and deaths occurred. The Josephs include in their book an 1873 engraving by E. Hacker that shows a trio of prizewinners whose snouts were placed on wooden "pillows" set in the bedding straw, to prevent them from being suffocated by their own flesh.

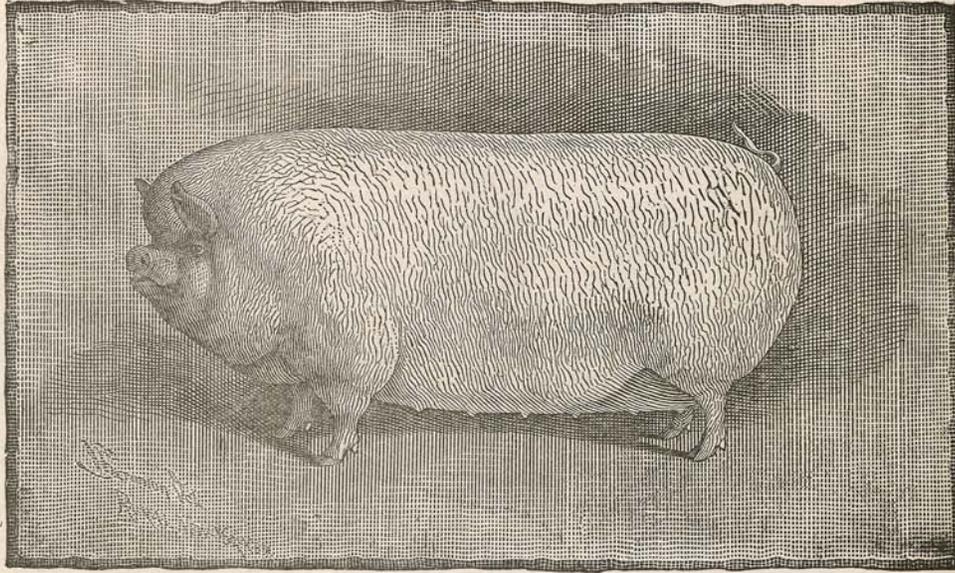
Bakewell had never envisioned any of this, but he did make a misstep of his own. He ignored the milk yield qualities of his longhorns. The deficiency became one of the reasons why shorthorns prevailed while longhorn herds dwindled. By the 1940s only two or three longhorn herds remained in Britain.

Longhorns today, along with other rare or endangered breeds, are making a comeback. There are currently about three hundred longhorn herds in the United Kingdom, and one of them is owned by friends of the Josephs, the Stanley family, whose farm is in Leicestershire, not far from where Bakewell conducted his pioneering experiments. Pat Stanley, in addition to her breeding work, had found time to write Bakewell's biography, and Iona made sure I had a copy before I left.⁷ She also gave me a pamphlet about the Stanleys' showing a longhorn that is her namesake. The Stanleys' "Iona" took First Cow at the Royal Agriculture Society of England in 2002 in a competition that judges good all-around breeding, not merely size.

Following my visit with the Josephs and Stephen's untimely death, Iona decided to withdraw from the antiques business and sell some of her livestock paintings at auction so that they could be collected anew. The group that was sold at Bonhams in London on March 21, 2006, brought strong prices, with a mid-nineteenth-century painting of a

THE SMALL YORKSHIRE SOW, QUEEN IV. 113.
Owned by T. R. PROCTOR, Bagg's Hotel Farm, UTICA, N. Y.

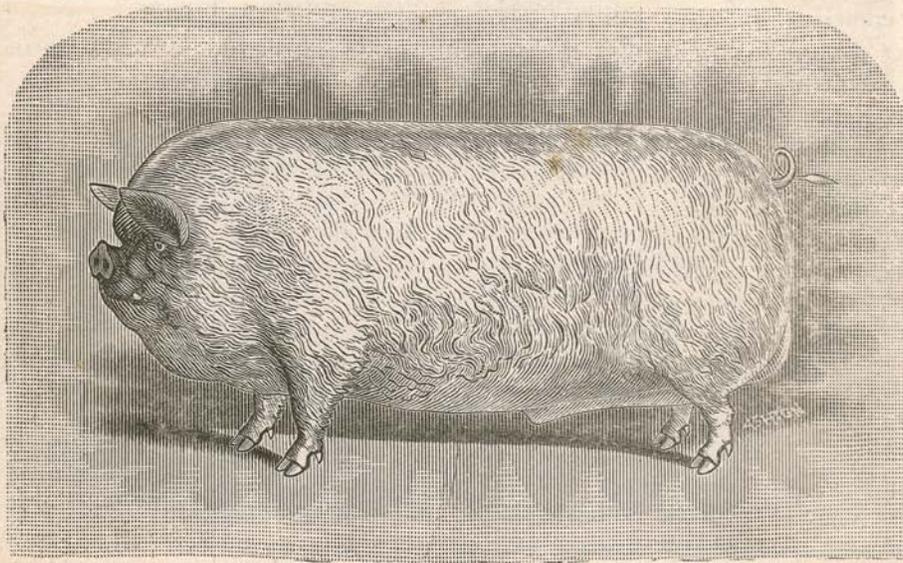
This animal won the GOLD MEDAL as member of Small Yorkshire Prize Herd at the New York State Fair and Cattle Show, at Utica, September, 1882; and also won First Prizes at Western New York Fair, 1879 and 1881, and at Onondaga County Fair, 1880 and 1881; second Prizes at New York State Fair, 1879, 1880, 1881 and 1882, and at Lewis County Fair, 1880.



PEDIGREE: {
FARROWED 6th September, 1878.
SIRE, King John III, he by King John (imported).
DAM, Queen, by Duke of Yorkshire (imported).
2d Dam, Flora 85 (imported).

THE SMALL YORKSHIRE BOAR, LORD JOHN. 89.
Owned by T. R. PROCTOR, Bagg's Hotel Farm, UTICA, N. Y.

This animal won the GOLD MEDAL as Head of Small Yorkshire Prize Herd at the New York State Fair and Cattle Show, at Utica, September, 1882; and also won First Prizes at New York State Fair, 1880, 1881 and 1882; and at Onondaga Co. Fair, 1881 and 1882; second Prize at Western New York State Fair, 1881.



PEDIGREE: {
FARROWED 24th September, 1870.
SIRE, Crown Prince, by Duke of Ellensmere.
DAM, Princess IV, by Duke of Yorkshire (imported).
2d Dam, Princess II, by King John (imported).
3d Dam, Deedemonia (imported).

prize heifer by J. Windle bringing £19,200.00, a slightly later one of a prize middle white sow in a landscape by E. S. England fetching £15,600.00, and John Vine's group portrait of six prize Berkshire pigs from the 1860s topping that at £16,800.00. (That is, \$33,721.00, \$27,398.00, and \$29,506.00, respectively.) Iona's note in the auction catalog warmly acknowledged her many clients and friends, all of whom learned to love "the absurdity of these wonderful paintings" as much as she and Stephen had. ●

Above, top: *The small Yorkshire sow, Queen ix.* From *Live Stock Monthly (Portland, ME)*, volume 1, number 2 (February 1883), p. 31.
Above, bottom: *Small Yorkshire boar, Lord John.* From *Live Stock Monthly (Portland, ME)*, volume 1, number 2 (February 1883), p. 30.

NOTES

1. Stephen Joseph died during the preparation of this article. He was sixty-five and undergoing treatment for cancer.
2. Quoted in *Farm Animal Portraits* by Elspeth Moncrieff, with Stephen and Iona Joseph (Suffolk, UK: Antique Collectors' Club, 1996), 210–211.
3. *Ibid.*, 169–170.
4. *Ibid.*, 171–173.

5. *Ibid.*, 28. See also *The International Encyclopedia of Dogs*, Stanley Dangerfield and Elsworth Howell, eds. (New York: Howell Book House, 1971).

6. See www.vw.com/newbeetle/features_ext.html.

7. Pat Stanley, *Robert Bakewell and the Longhorn Breed of Cattle* (Ipswich, UK: Farming Press Books, 1995).