

BRAKEL

and BRAKEL BANTAMS

By: Jan Schaareman. Photos by Rene van de Kerkhof.

The Brakel is a light breed, although quite large. With their barred markings they are very attractive birds—eye-catching both in the yard and the show pen. They can be kept in pens, but they prefer to free-range, which is the way they have been kept around Belgian farmhouses since ancient times.

History

Brakel-style chickens have been kept by Belgian farmers for centuries. These birds often had to be self-sufficient and they were often abandoned. By natural selection only the strongest birds survived. Records from as far back as 1416, describe a local chicken variety near the village of Brakel. They were believed to have been brought to Belgium during the Middle Ages by the Crusaders and are probably related to the Fayoumi fowl, which still exists in Egypt to this day.

In 1850, the Brakels were a quite diverse lot and not particularly uniform. They were just black and grey birds with a mixture of all sorts of markings. During this time, other Brakel-type chicken breeds were being developed along regional lines, such as:

The Zottegem fowl—a Brakel look-a-like with black coloured head feathering.

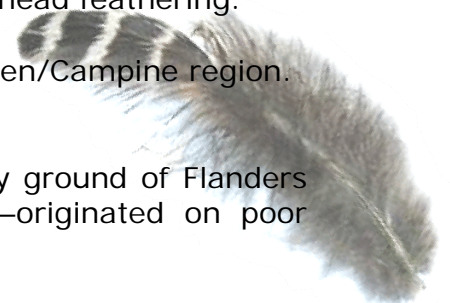
The NederBrakel fowl—a heavy meat-type Brakel.

The Campine fowl—a lighter Brakel, mainly kept in the Kempen/Campine region.

The Chaam fowl—also from Kempen, with orange-red eyes.

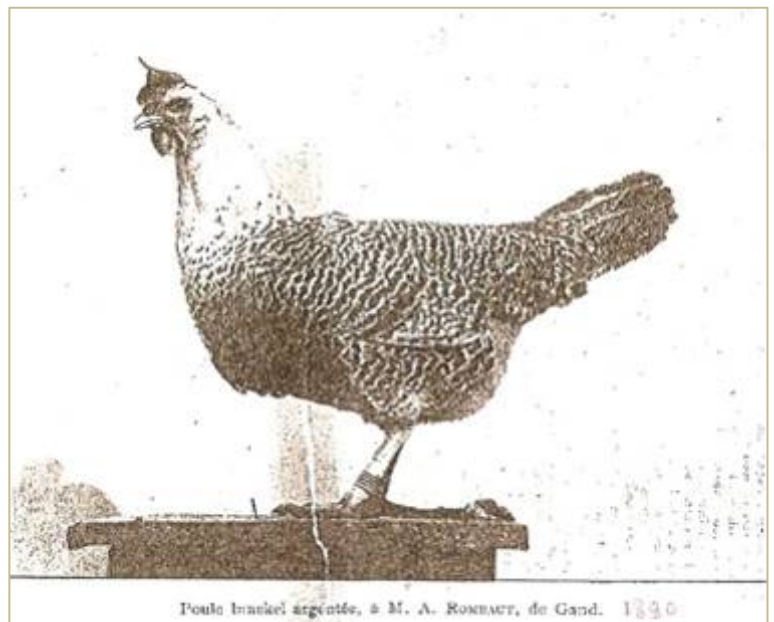
The Kortrijk fowl—a short-legged Brakel with five toes.

The Brakel meat-type chickens originated on the heavy clay ground of Flanders while the Campine—a lighter and longer legged chicken—originated on poor



sandy soils with limited natural food. From all these sub-varieties only two flourished—the Brakel and the Campine. Later, in Belgium, these two varieties eventually became just one breed.

More recently, the Zottegem fowl and Chaam fowl have been saved from extinction by a few dedicated fanciers from only a handful of original birds.



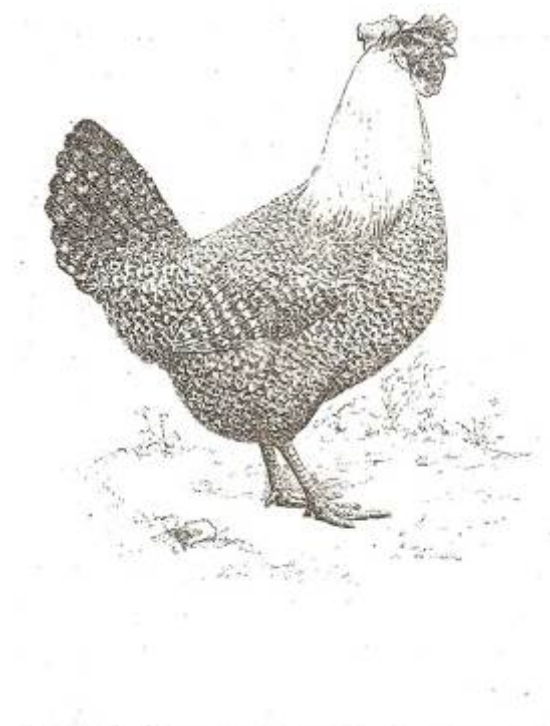
Above: Silver Brakel in 1890.

In *Het Vlaamsch Neerhof*, no 92 (1895)—a Belgian poultry magazine—Aug. van Speybrouk described the Brakel, comparing it with the smaller Campine. Written in Old Dutch/Belgian language, the article refers to an earlier article in the authoritative magazine *Chasse et Pêche*. The Campine was said to be a better layer, but the Brakel was a better broody. The chicks of the Brakel could be fattened quick and easily, providing a fine table meat when only four or five months old.

Below you see some of the pictures that illustrated the article in this old magazine.



COO BRAEKEL ARGENTÉ.
ZILVERLAKENSCHEN BRAKELSCHEN HAAN.



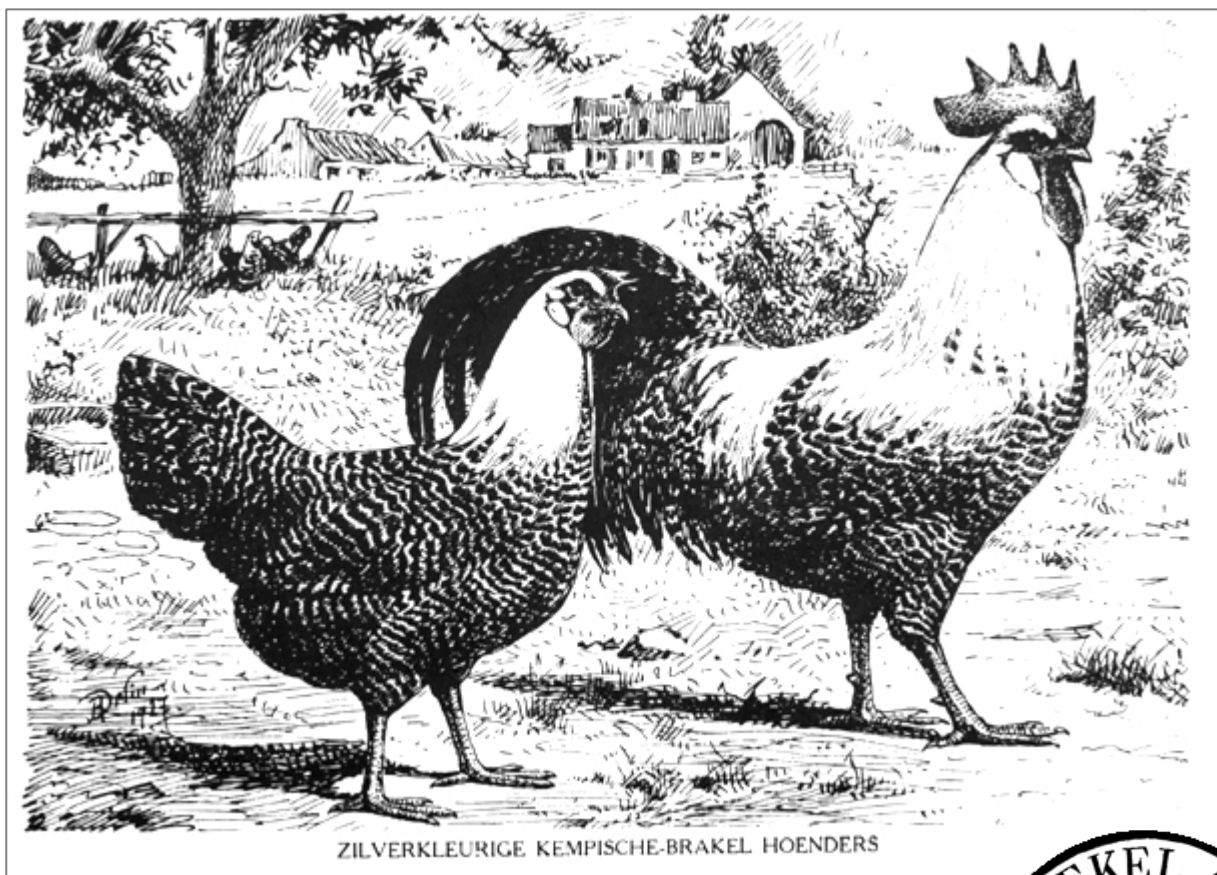
POULE BRAEKEL ARGENTÉE.
ZILVERLAKENSCHEN BRAKELSCHEN HEN.



Left: A hen-feathered (Campine) cockerel, first prize winner in 1922.

In 1926 the National Belgian Poultry Union officially named the breed 'Kempische Brakel'. Then in 1962 they simplified the name to 'Brakel'. In 1927, the famous Belgian artist Rene Delin made a beautiful drawing of the Brakel that still stands today as a fine example of the breed.

Below: The standard drawing of the Brakel by Delin, 1927.



In Belgium, Germany and France the breed name is written as 'Brakel' but in the Netherlands it is spelt 'Braekel' after the Dutch Standard committee changed the spelling into the Old Dutch language. In Belgium all names with 'ae' are now spelled with only an 'a' and only the Belgian Braekel Club still maintains the old name on its club logo.



Head

Brakels typically should have a large head. Originally the comb was very coarse, usually folding twice on the females. These days however, the front of the hen's comb stands upright with the back falling over to one side. With the cock, the bottom edge of the blade should be at same height as the eyebrow. Thus the blade should not be too high, but well free of the neckline.



Often the combs of the hens show a darker pigment which indicates the hen has strong colour.

The earlobes should be white, although darker colouration often shows, especially in the bantams. A characteristic of the Brakel is the very dark, almost black eye colour.

Breeding for the correct marking

As can be seen in photos and various standard drawings, the markings of the Brakel have undergone major changes over the past 100 years. Originally it was just a blackish/grey chicken with dark eyes. The specific markings that distinguish them from other breeds is obtained by careful selection.

With Brakels, a barred (sometimes known as 'banded') marking is required,



where each feather has transverse straight bars, except on the sickles of the rooster.

This barring should be three times as wide as the ground colour.

Left: Note the outstanding barring on the tail and the back of this silver Brakel pullet.

The main difficulties are in breeding birds with proper breast marking with well defined edges, and a clear neck hackle in the females.



In the males, the tail marking needs attention.

Correct marking of the tail of a golden Brakel bantam male (left) and a silver Brakel male (below).



Breeding Brakels is a matter of compensating for the markings. The breast marking is predication to what the neck hackle and the tail will look like. Birds that show too much pigment, mostly have perfect breast marking, but the females will have too much black in the neck hackle. Males with black in the neck hackle should never be used in the breeding pen. Too much white in the breast shows a lack of pigment.

Separate cock and pullet breeding pens can improve the barring, but it is possible to breed standard barred males and females from the same breeding pen. Males that conform to the standard have more pigment than nicely barred females.

The first plumage of chicks gives an indication of the markings the bird will have later in life. When selecting the best birds, the cockerels are allowed to be darker than the pullets. It is also important to maintain enough pigment in the line. A clear, contrasting pattern is the aim in breeding, so sometimes compensation breeding is required, so it is important to keep some birds that are too dark. When the chickens get too light in the barring, the contrasting pattern is lost and it is not easy to get it back.



Breast marking of a silver cock (above) and a hen (right).

In the Netherlands, judges always look for a dark feather tip—in the past this black tip was preferred. However, Brakels with good, contrasting colour always have a small white edge at the feather tip; in feathers with more ground colour, the coloured edging will be even larger. This is also the case overly dark birds. Genetically this feather pattern is based on the e-allele Birchen (ER); this allele has influence on hackle, breast, wing and tail pattern, and also on eye colour.



Generally speaking the Brakel male is selected for correct breast barring. The saddle is silver/gold for the visible parts, but the saddle hackle feathers have some dark barring in the middle of the feather, laced with silver or gold. Preferably the black ends 2cm from the feather tip. Males with totally silver or golden saddle hackles are useless to breed with, as they lack pigment. The neck hackle looks clear silver or gold, but the down is black. The tail feathers have V-shaped barring; the side hangers have a sharply V-shaped pattern, the sickles with a more or less broken V-pattern. The main tail feathers should be as dark as possible. In the silver variety light specks are often visible. These are undesirable and should not be allowed to become excessive.



These days, females with a correctly barred tail are preferred. These hens generally have a clean neck and good barring in the breast feathers, however, nicely barred tails as seen in the silver hens are not commonly found in the golden hens.

Left: Note the lower quality tail barring in this gold bantam hen.

The eye colour should be very dark, however, in the rare colours,—white-barred gold (chamois) and white-barred silver (in Belgium: *witgebloemd*)—more tolerance is shown as the white barring also influences the eye colour.

Right: This white-barred gold bantam hen has the required dark eye colour, but it is difficult to obtain such a dark eye.



Colour varieties

The following colours are recognised in Belgium: the barred varieties Silver, Gold, Lemon, White-barred Gold, White-barred White, and the Self White, Black and Blue.

In most countries only the Gold and Silver are recognised; in the Netherlands also the white-barred gold at the large Brakels. Self coloured Brakels are hardly ever seen today and the barred varieties are by far the most popular, especially the silver variety.



The Gold Brakel is also exhibited regularly and often with almost perfect barring. However, sometimes they have white in the primaries—which is noticeable when the wing is opened—this being a sign of insufficient pigment. Also when a broken feather is pulled out, it will grow back with a white tip.

Left: Neck hackles of a Gold Brakel cockerel; the required colour is rich gold and as even as possible.

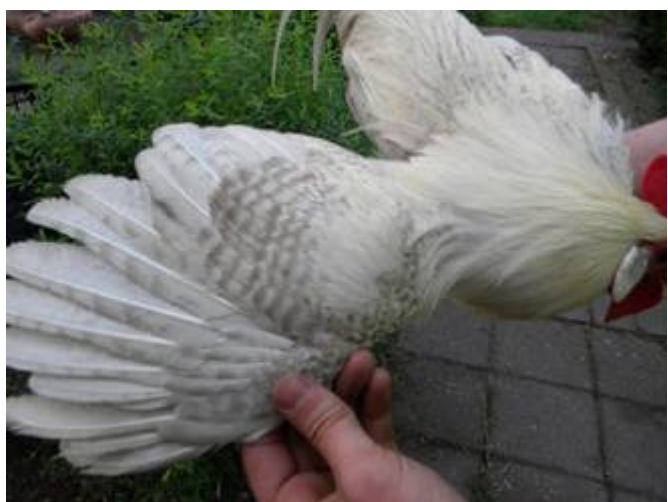
In the males, the gold colour should be as even as possible. If this is not correct, the neck hackle is a combination of reddish and yellowish gold colour. The birds with sufficient pigment will show the required plain golden hackle, as the dark pigment also influences the red/golden colour.

When a golden male is mated to a silver female, the F1 offspring are silver cockerels and golden pullets—being sex-linked chicks. These golden pullets often show much better colour than the ones from those of gold to gold matings. When mating these hens to golden males, often lemon birds result. Lemon is a diluted gold colour that comes from the silver ground colour, which in the Brakel is much whiter than in other breeds. In the lemon variety, the colour should also be as even as possible.

When the black barring is replaced by dominant white, we get the following colour varieties: white-barred silver, white-barred gold and white-barred lemon.

The white-barred silver (in Belgium: *wit-gebloemd*) has white barring on a white ground colour—although some pattern is still visible, especially from a distance. White-barred gold (chamois) shows a clear pattern, but in this variety the breast marking is only moderate. To retain the required dark eyes, they are often crossed back to gold, preferably ones with overly dark barred birds. White-barred lemon also lacks the proper barring. This variety was recognised in Belgium five years ago, but there are still only a handful of breeders.

Top to Bottom: Black-barred gold, white-barred gold, black-barred silver and white-barred silver. This white-barred silver bantam male shows too much grey in barring and tail.





Left and below: The white-barred varieties generally lack breast pattern which should be more defined and higher up the neck.



In Belgium there is also the Zottegem.

This breed once had horse-shoe markings, but today they have the same pattern as the Brakel—although the black bands are wider, resulting in a darker overall appearance. The main difference is seen in the hens—the Zottegem hens have black in the upper part of their neck hackle thus the addition to the name Zottegem 'black-head'. The Zottegem male does not have black in the hackle, so it can be difficult to tell the difference between them and Brakel males. The main difference is the colour of the little feathers that cover the ear—in Brakels they are silver or gold, but in Zottegem they are always dark.

Brakel bantams

Brakel bantams are active and engaging birds. They are flighty and hardly ever go broody. Compared to their body weight they lay a fairly large egg and are very prolific.



Links: Bantam pullets with nicely lopped combs; note the dark pigment of the comb on the pullet in the front.

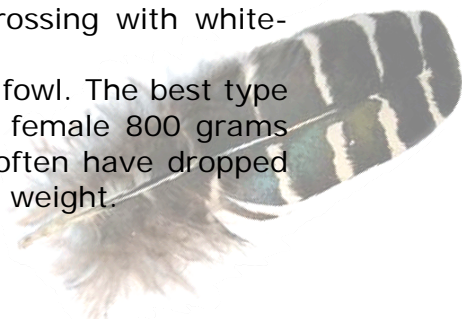
History

Brakel bantams were first entered in a poultry show in Holland in 1933 but these were Sebright crosses. Later in Germany, large Brakel were crossed with German bantams, which took several years before the typical barring was fixed.

In Belgium, Brakel bantams are recognised in the same colour varieties as the large

fowl, except for the white-barred lemon. The most common varieties are silver and gold. Lemon, white-barred gold and white-barred silver bantams have been shown and these white barred varieties were created by crossing with white-barred large fowl.

Brakel bantams should be a miniature version of large Brakel fowl. The best type is shown when the male weighs at least 1000 grams and a female 800 grams which are heavier weights than standard. The smaller birds often have dropped wings. The mentioned weight is a bit higher than the standard weight.





As with the large fowl, the bantam hens should have a lopped comb but unfortunately they often lack this characteristic.

Left: The comb of this white-barred gold pullet is already starting to fall over to the side.

Below: This is an old Gold Brakel bantam hen, showing black in the neck hackle because of her age.



Left: Head study of a Gold Brakel bantam male. Note the dark eye colour.

Below: White-barred Gold Brakel bantam male.



Raising chicks

Brakels and Brakel bantams are quite easy to raise. Compared to other breeds, they feather early and are fast maturing. They are hardy and resistant to disease which are traits inherited from their self-sufficient ancestors.

Chicks—Left: a large white-barred gold Brakel, centre: a gold Brakel bantam, in the rear a white-barred gold Brakel bantam and on the right, a silver Brakel bantam.



Brakels lay an average of 150–180 well-shaped eggs of 60–65 grams. Compared to other breeds in their weight class, the bantams lay a good sized egg of between 40–45 grams. At egg laying contests Brakels often win high awards.



The larger Brakels prefer to free range and when they have ample space, these birds will bring much pleasure. Given time, they become friendly and trusting toward their keeper. They can also be kept in a large run, but if strangers are present, they can be quite nervous. They are very alert—very seldom do hawks ever catch a Brakel.

More information can be obtained from the "Speciaalclub voor het Brakelhoen", website <http://www.Brakelhoen.be/>