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Fifes and much more

Canaries are just part of the story for top Kent fancier **MIKE HOLMES**, discovers James Pringle

PROFILE

GO ALONG to Canterbury for a look at Mike Holmes's Fife canaries, and that's not all you would see. You would walk through a conservatory containing every imaginable variety of fuchsia to reach a garden lined with partridges and quail in cages. Then you would pass an enclosure of thrush and blackbird mutations, before at last entering a birdroom lined on four sides with cages of Fifes.

Mike has been a wildlife enthusiast since childhood – thanks not to his parents but to Hitler. Wartime evacuation to rural Kent to stay with his grandmother in Broad Oak kindled his interest.

"I used to catch wild birds," says Mike. "I kept a green woodpecker for several years and had jackdaws and all sorts of things, as well as bantams and rabbits."

It was in 1954 that he got the bug for canaries, starting with three pairs of Borders. He recalls: "Fred Powell was a leading light of the Canterbury & District CBS. He was a Border man, and I'd go to his house every Tuesday night to see his

birds. One year at the Sittingbourne show, I had the best novice and Fred had the best champion Borders."

A proud exhibit in Mike's home is the Kent Federation Cup. The Federation formerly embraced 17 clubs across the county. It organised all the show dates and exhibited at the Kent County Show. Fred and Mike won the trophy a number of times between them. As the final winner before the Federation disbanded a couple of years ago, Mike has kept the trophy.

"I enjoy showing," says Mike. "You meet so many of the old faces." Regular

Within five years, Mike was a champion with Fifes and had started to make his name as a judge.

"You get people questioning decisions," he says, "because Fifes alter terrifically from hour to hour. But it's really only people who haven't done any judging who criticise us!"

Nowadays, Mike judges not only in the UK but in Belgium, the Netherlands and Germany. "They look after you so much better abroad," he comments. "Germany's out of this world. The Continental shows are better staged – they provide all the cages and they

judge the birds first and decorate the cages afterwards.

"I've judged the German National twice and the English National once with Terry Kelly from Huddersfield and

John Oram from Northants. And I'm judging at the German Border and Fife Show this year with Chris Smith, the secretary of the Fife Federation."

Most of Mike's working life was in agricultural machinery. "I'd set up cleaning machines in grain stores, which would take out all the weed seeds, in the days before we got so many pesticides. And I was able to

supply friends in birdkeeping with the seeds," he recalls.

The last 12 years of his career saw a change of direction, with Mike helping European rallycross champion Will Gollop to build cars to race. In retirement, he keeps busy looking after his unusual assortment of birds, captaining his bowls club and growing fuchsias (at the last count he had 130 different varieties). He is chairman of Kent & Sussex Fife Fancy Canary Club.

"In my part of the fancy, you don't really get big names dominating the specialist shows," says Mike. "At every major show there's a different winner, because Fifes alter so much."

He enjoyed success at last year's Maidstone & South Eastern Counties Avicultural Society Show, scooping the prizes for first, second and third best Fifes. He also took the prizes for best Fife at the South East Canary Club Show and the Dover District Show. However, he says 2009 had its problems. "It wasn't a good year for my Fifes. Mites got into the birdroom and I couldn't get rid of them."

Ever since his childhood in the countryside, Mike has continued his interest in British birds. His collection now features mutations of softbills such as blackbirds and thrushes – the latter including cinnamon, chocolate and blue.

"My advice for these birds is basically to leave them to get on with the job and feed them with livefood such as mealworms and maggots," he says. Mike exhibits thrushes and blackbirds, and his ambition is to breed redstarts and blackstarts.

As for the gamebirds, Mike's involvement dates back to meeting Robert Saunders 10 years ago. He explains: "Robert is the gamekeeper on the Crundale Estate, near Canterbury. He came to me for some Fifes and he got me interested in helping him with the gamebirds and keeping some myself, and he helped me incubate quail. Through the breeding season I go and get all the estate chicks out of the incubators and put them into heated sheds for a few weeks before they are released in the woods. We produce 13,000 pheasants and 5,000 red-legged or French partridges a year.



Expert eye: Mike inspects his Fifes

"At one time, I had 14 sorts of quail at home. At present I've got mountain, Californian, Gambell's, elegants, bobwhites, Mexican speckled and Tennessee reds. I don't keep any of the pheasants here, but I help Robert with the hatching and rearing."

While establishing himself with gamebirds, Mike has continued his successful track record with canaries. "I never stop learning," he points out. "When I came into the hobby, there was no eggfood, so I'd mix my own. Neither was there any mixed seed, so again I'd make my own – a quarter rapeseed and three-

quarters canary seed. Whether ready-mixed is better, I don't know, but it never seems to breed so much."

"My advice to canary beginners would be – watch your birds closely and don't pair them up too soon.

When you think they're ready, go on a fortnight's holiday first!"

Funnily enough, Mike and his wife Nancy haven't actually had a holiday for 40 years – but with a range of hobbies each, they have plenty of other things to keep them occupied.

Freelance journalist James Pringle is a former *Cage & Aviary Birds* sub-editor.

TOP TIP
All breeders should do some show stewarding. They will learn so much about judging – Mike Holmes

An odd start with Fifes

MIKE'S birdkeeping has suffered three setbacks from burglaries. Two of the thefts involved parakeets, but the other (in 1993) cleared out his stock of Borders.

"When the news got round, Les Woodward from Margate offered me three pairs of Fifes," Mike recalls.

"I accepted and I really took to them. I've stayed with Fifes ever since. Borders were not much bigger than Fifes in those days and Fifes had to be entered in the 'any other variety' class, because there weren't many about. Today, Borders are much bigger and Fifes much smaller."

Show training: practice makes perfect

