

The Lizard, the War and the LCA

Did the formation of a specialist society really rescue this classic breed in the nick of time, as tradition maintains? **JOHN MARTIN**'s research has shown that the truth isn't quite so simple

CANARIES

MANY writers and commentators, when reviewing the formation of the Lizard Canary Association (LCA), frequently repeat the statement that after the Second World War a census of the number of surviving pure-bred Lizards was conducted. This is said to



LCA president John Martin: John was several times a welcome visitor to the *Cage & Aviary Birds* archive at Cudham, Kent

have come up with the disturbing finding that probably only 30 breeding pairs survived in the country.

Indeed, the latest to repeat this almost mythological statement is Gerry Parker in his article in *Cage & Aviary Birds*, March 11, 2020, although to his credit he does state that the wording is cautious. [Mr Parker's reference was T.

Dodwell, The Lizard Canary and other rare breeds (1982)

— Ed.] It is usually inferred that this information was the catalyst for Robert Yates of Wolverhampton to invite Lizard breeders to contact him with a view to setting up an association for the protection of the Lizard breed.

This argument has always intrigued me since, in my own involvement with the Lizard fancy, which goes back some 45 years, I was fortunate to get to know

many of the leading Lizard men, some of whom had a memory of those early days. And it was the consistent view that many leading breeders of that time were never contacted about a referendum of the numbers of surviving Lizards. I know that John Scott, for many years a chairman, and later president, of the LCA told me that while he was away in the

Forces during the Second World War, his father kept a reasonably sized stud of Lizards going all through the War. And neither John nor his father were ever contacted about a census.

I am fortunate to have in my possession the original minute books of the meetings of the Association, stretching from May 13, 1945 up to the first AGM which was not until November 22, 1952, at the National Exhibition, Olympia; see Huw Evans's letter of

66 I could find only one reference to a census of the Lizard canary



Surviving and thriving: class-winning Lizards from the LCA Classic of 2015, a clear cap silver cock and non cap gold hen

March 25), and on to the AGM at Alexandra Palace, which was held in December 1974. Going through the notes on all these meetings, I am unable to find ANY evidence to support the existence of a census taking place or — just as importantly — the result of any such census.

Also, through the good offices of the editor of *Cage & Aviary Birds*, I was allowed access to the archives of that

paper, and spent many hours going through the back catalogues of the years that were relevant to my research. Throughout all those editions, I could find only one reference to a census of the Lizard canary, and that was in a letter to the editor dated May 25, 1945, from a Mr E. Elkington of Littleover, Derbyshire.

Continues on page 15

Continues from page 14

Mr Elkington describes his experiences of taking up the Lizard, his pleasure at sending stock to America and at being informed that their descendants had won prizes in and around the New York area in 1943 and 1944. He finishes his letter by saying: "Personally, I think it would be a very good idea to take a census of all Lizard breeders, so that changes of blood could be arranged between them." Plainly, then, a census had not already taken place according to the knowledge of the writer, and that view was never commented on in later editions of *Cage Birds*. Also, it was a census about breeders of the Lizard Canary and not the quantity of stock held by those breeders that was being suggested. The report on Lizards being in New York in the years quoted is also interesting.

So, clearly, confirmation of any census held either before, or in the early days of the formation of the LCA, did not come up in my research. The number of Lizards exhibited at the National Exhibition of 1945, when a total of 45 birds were staged, would also indicate a larger number being kept.

I also have *Cage Birds* annuals for some of the war years, and can give an example from 1941 — during the very darkest days of the war, with seed being obtained only with great difficulty — when the top breeder W.P. Barnes of Grantham, Lincs, regularly advertised stock for sale. And his advert was not alone.

However, having access to the archives already mentioned I did turn up

some interesting facts about the early years of the LCA. While Robert Yates is credited with the idea of forming a club to protect the Lizard Canary, his actions were preceded by a letter to the editor of *Cage Birds*, which appeared in the columns of the March 18, 1945 edition. This was from a Sapper J.T. McNay, who was probably on active service,

66 In 1941, the top breeder W.P. Barnes of Grantham regularly advertised Lizard stock for sale

maybe overseas (the Second World War was still coming to its conclusion). He bemoaned the current state of the Lizard fancy and predicted its eventual demise if a specialist society did not appear to safeguard the breed. This was the

catalyst that spurred Robert Yates into action, with his now famous letter to the editor dated March 23, 1945, which appeared in the following edition of the paper. In his letter, Mr Yates starts by acknowledging Sapper McNay's communication and agreeing with the sentiment forcibly expressed by the author.

Robert Yates then goes on to suggest that all interested parties convene at the Crystal Palace Show with a view to forming a Lizard Canary

Association of Great Britain. He also requests that those fanciers with experience of the breed contact him without delay and that if this offer met with general acceptance by Lizard breeders, then he would organise such a meeting at the Palace.

Clearly the idea then took on a more urgent aspect, because by the issue of May 4, 1945, we find Robert Yates again writing to *Cage Birds* advising that from correspondence, prospective members of the Association were resident in all four corners of the country and the difficulty of travelling across a war-torn country to a meeting in London would be considerable. He had therefore taken the initiative and decided to convene a meeting in Wolverhampton on Sunday May 13 to form the Lizard Canary Association. Attendance at that meeting was by invitation only from Robert Yates, and the Association's minute book lists the name of those fanciers who attended: Messrs Lewis,



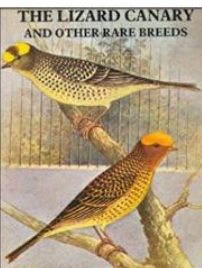
The late John Scott: his father maintained a stud of Lizards during World War Two

Oakley, Perry and Robert Yates. These were the first members of the Council which would run the affairs of the Association.

While the story of the census is in my opinion questionable, the key point was stated by John Scott in his article in *Cage & Aviary Birds* on August 10, 1978, about the Lizard canary and its relationship with its cousin, the London fancy: "It is wrong to think that the LCA saved the Lizard from extinction. That was done by fanciers who retained stock throughout the War."

● A special article about the LCA's historic silverware will appear in next week's *Cage & Aviary Birds*.

John Martin is the president of the Lizard Canary Association of Great Britain.



Key text: G.T. Dodwell's *The Lizard Canary*



Founding father: Robert Yates *Photo: LCA*



The LCA's Founders Trophy: read more about this historic silverware next week *Photo: LCA*