

Brief History of the Soft Coated Wheaten Terrier

The Soft Coated Wheaten Terrier is the traditional Irish farm dog. For many years they were taken for granted as part of the landscape, being part of the day to day work of the Irish farmer. They were not taken up by wealthy dog enthusiasts but were seen as the poor people's dog. Under the penal law of the 18th century in Ireland tenant farmers were prohibited from owning a dog worth more than \$5. This makes it likely that the anonymous terriers, later to be known as the Soft Coated Wheaten Terrier, were the dogs kept by the poor Catholic tenants. The English landholders had the more expensive Wolfhounds. The Soft Coated Wheatens were bred to earn their keep and were an all-purpose dog. They were bred to hunt, heard, catch vermin, stand guard, to be a companion, and to poach.

Initially the four breeds of Irish terriers were lumped together under the name of Irish Terrier, although there had been four distinct breeds of terriers in Ireland for 200 years. It was not until 1937 that the breed was recognised by the Irish Kennel Club and named the Soft Coated Wheaten Terrier. Claims have been made that it is the oldest of the Irish terrier breeds with Soft Wheatens coats sometimes showing up in litters of pups in the other breeds of terriers from Ireland.

There is a story that they were numerous in the 18th century in Kerry. It was at that time that a large black dog, possibly a spaniel, swam ashore and mated with a Soft Coated Wheaten Terrier, the result of this cross being the Kerry Blue Terrier.

Because the Soft Coated Wheaten was a very common dog in Ireland its humble beginnings were probably from a very mixed ancestry with Wheatens being allowed to mate freely with whatever other dogs were around. In contrast the breeding of the Kerry Blue Terrier and Irish Terrier were deliberately controlled at an early date so that they were recognised as separated breeds earlier than the Soft Coated Wheaten. By the '30s however Soft Coated Wheaten enthusiasts in Ireland, namely Dr G J Pierce and Mr P Blake, were more selective in their breeding, developing a breed with distinctive traits. More recently Maureen Holmes has worked diligently to further develop the breed.

Since the Soft Coated Wheaten was a working terrier, used in such difficult jobs as hunting otters and badgers, it excelled when it first appeared in field trials, taking prizes more often than the other terrier breeds. Having its origins as a household member it tends to have a gentle temperament whilst being loyal and intelligent. Its alert carriage, free movement and properly managed and presented coat has made the breed popular in the show ring. Selective breeding in America and Europe have developed a popular and glamorous terrier.

Reference The Native Dogs of Ireland (1984), Dublin: The Irish Kennel Club.

Dr Monica O'Kelly

Larnook Soft Coated Wheaten Terriers



Above - Newkilber Perfidia (imp Eire)

Right - Ch Larnook Cracker Jack

What Everyone (including judges) Should Know About the Soft Coated Wheaten Terrier Coat

The Soft Coated Wheaten Terrier gets its name from its profuse wheaten coloured coat. Historically this name was used to distinguish it from its two Irish relatives the blue-grey Kerry Blue Terrier and the wirey, red coated Irish Terrier. It needs to be remembered however that since the Soft Coated Wheaten terrier was bred as a working terrier that conformation of the dog is of paramount importance. Any dog should be capable of performing the function for which it was bred. Whilst this terrier gets its name from the coat, the coat should be regarded as the icing on the cake. A Soft Coated Wheaten with an attractive coat should be severely penalised if it is not physically sound.

There are however a number of features of the Soft Coated Wheaten coat that need to be kept in mind.

The coat of the Soft Coated Wheaten terrier is a continuous growing coat. Given that, it does not shed and if well kept does not smell. Due to these factors it has been found that people who are allergic to other breeds of dogs are not allergic to the Soft Coated Wheaten. In the United States the Wheaten is referred to as the asthma sufferer's dog.

Texture and volume of the coat varies. The coat of the traditional Irish Soft Coated Wheaten is soft, silky and wavy with a lustrous shine. This made it an easy coat to care for. With the development of the breed in England, Europe and the United States the coat has shown changes with a thicker coat being more evident. Whilst many of the dogs in these countries might have a voluminous flowing coat the texture is not as silky and as lustrous as the Irish style of coat. In Australia with the blend of Irish, American and European lines the texture of the coat can vary considerably between Wheatens in the one litter. It is not uncommon to see Wheatens with predominately American bloodlines with the lustrous silky Irish style coat. The various styles of flowing coats in Wheatens are neither good nor bad, just different. A thick wooly coat is however of concern.

Colour also varies from one Soft Coated Wheaten to another. Shades vary from pale to rich honey, and to reddish wheaten. There may be black tipping around the mouth and ears. A white coat is not acceptable

It is important to be aware that the coat of a Soft Coated Wheaten is slow to

mature in both texture and colour. Surprisingly Wheatens are very dark, being almost black, at birth. As the hair grows the colour changes along the shaft of hair to the recognisable wheaten. It is usual to see baby Wheaten pups with black tipping. As the coat matures the shades of wheaten can vary. It is common for a Soft Coated Wheaten to be very pale, almost white, in colour at about 12 months of age. As they mature the wheaten colour develops. Texture also changes with age. Pups can be fluffy and wooly. In some Wheatens the thick fluffy coat persists until about three years of age by which time the coat changes to a flowing, wavy coat. The changes in coat colour and texture in the juvenile Wheaten can first be seen at the back of the neck and then spread over the rest of the body. An immature Soft Coated Wheaten, by that I mean a Wheaten under about 3 years, should not be penalised in the ring if the coat is not wheaten coloured and if it is not flowing.

By far the most controversial topic when it comes to the Soft Coated Wheaten Terrier is trimming. In "The Native Dogs of Ireland" published by the Irish Kennel Club trimming is recommended as follows:-

The ear fringes are removed and the hair is cut close to the skull and cheeks. The fall or top-knot which is the long hair from the forehead over the eyes, is maintained at full length, down to and in many cases over, the nose. The whiskers, beard, and leg feathering are left as profuse as possible. The hair is cut close at the neck and chest and graded into the shoulders. The long body coat is neatly topped to follow the outline of the dog. The tail should be cut close and neatly tapered.

With this approach to trimming the Soft Coated Wheaten looks like a terrier. It was a style of trimming that was functional in a working terrier. For some time a similar approach to trimming was not followed by those showing in Great Britain, where the Wheaten was not initially shown in the Terrier group. The result was that the trimming of a Soft Coated Wheaten in Great Britain meant that they did not look like terriers but more like a Bearded Collie. I was pleased to see on a recent trip to Great Britain that, now that the Soft Coated Wheaten there is included in the Terrier group, they are being trimmed as terriers and more in keeping with the guidelines recommended by the Irish Kennel Club. The approach to trimming recommended by the Irish Kennel Club is also more practical in maintaining the coat of a pet Wheaten and lends itself to making the Soft Coated Wheaten terrier glamorous for showing, in what after all is a beauty contest.

Dr Monica O'Kelly