

*CONSISTENT SUCCESS AT THE DISTANCE
TO A BACK GARDEN LOFT.*

MR & MRS STEPHEN RHODES of AYLESHAM IN KENT

Ever since I became press officer for the fast expanding BICC, I have noticed that ,in the races when the going is hard and the distance long , amongst the names of fanciers who consistently clock pigeons near the top of the race result , is that of Mr & Mrs Rhodes of Aylesham in Kent.

During the 2014 old bird programme I asked Stephen Rhodes if he would like to have his loft of long distance diehards featured in an article and complete silence was the deafening reply !! After waiting several months and not hearing from Stephen I recently caught up with him at the Epsom Show and he finally agreed to the offer of a loft report. So here goes with the story of one of the most consistent long distance fanciers in the south east of England.



Mr & Mrs Rhodes 4th Open Marseille

THE BEGINNING.

Stephen started keeping pigeons in 1960 when he was seven years old. His first pigeons were two pairs of Barkers gifted by his grandfather Tom Westbury. This came about because old Tom couldn't keep the young Stephen out of his loft. History seems to be repeating itself at the present time as Stephen's granddaughter Madeleine, although only four, is showing a keen interest in the birds and has taken some of Stephen's pigeons to school and given a talk to her classmates.

In 1927 Grandad Tom Westbury made the long trek on foot from his native Yorkshire to Kent. He was accompanied on his journey south by quite a few other family members. Their aim was to find work in the Kent coalfield as there was no work in Yorkshire at that time but plenty of work in the Kent coal mines. Stephen's brother Paul who helps with the birds, still lives in the house on Kings Road that the family settled in all those years ago. Many good birds were raced by old Tom to the Kings Road address.

THE LOFT.

Stephen's first loft was built by his dad and was 4 ft long x 3ft deep x 4 ft high with a little trap on the front fitted with bob wires. Nest boxes took the form of orange boxes from the Co-op with two bricks wedged in a corner to make a nest area. The Rhodes family have been at their present address for the past 34 years and the loft now measures 54ft long x 8ft deep x 6ft 3 1/2 in height. This has a pitched roof of wood covered in strong mineral felt so the interior is bone dry. The racing loft has 4 sections each 8 ft wide and 8ft deep with twelve nest boxes in each section.

There is a 4ft wide section for stock birds with a 20 ft x 8 ft x 8ft aviary housing just 5 pairs of stock birds.

All sections are fitted with grids on the floor with a two and a half foot drop area beneath. All nest boxes and perches are cleaned daily with all areas disinfected weekly and scrubbed clean each month. Approximately 70/80 old birds are housed and all must race. The partners usually rear 50 youngsters and most years end up with 45 after training through to 100 miles. Only a very few young birds are raced and these with the NFC as Stephen wants the babies to grow on until they are two years old when they should be capable of competing in two long distance races with the BICC up to 600 miles.



Rhodes loft

THE SYSTEM.

The birds are raced on the roundabout system as this suits Stephen and brother Paul's shift work as both brothers work 12 hour shifts.

When the birds were raced on the natural system they were all mated at the same time ,usually at the end of March in order to keep a good wing for later in the old bird season. Now however, they are mated all together in late February and the birds seem to reach form at the time of the BICC International races in late June, July and August.

The old birds are trained out to Ashford 15 miles, Winchelsea 25 miles plus a few 100 milers with the Wingham club before being entered in a short Channel race with the EECC at around 200 miles. This early gentle preparation gets them in trim for the NFC Tarbes or the BICC Pau International at 548 mile. In the past they have also been sent straight from 200 miles to BICC Perpignan with no problems So the birds are certainly not "caned" in the run up to their long distance tests.

However, the birds do fly freely around home from babies and are up flying with gusto in all weathers. As a result there is certainly no need to force them to fly. In fact they exercise so well at home that many of the local fanciers try to get their race teams in the air at the same time so that they can be pulled along with the Rhodes team!! The birds are fit and healthy and well fed, with no rationing, so they exercise freely and enthusiastically around home.

Both cocks and hens, when on the roundabout system, are exercised once daily . Once the birds are fit, and the cobwebs blown away, they only get further training if they have been rested, awaiting basketting for one of the big races. These tosses are usually from around 30miles just to "keep their heads in gear" so to speak and can be from any direction, as Stephen says "I'm not worried just so long as those wings are flapping hard".

The idea is to get the work into the birds early on in the season and then its just a case of the finishing touches being applied with a minimum two weeks rest before basketting for the Internationals. During this two week build up period the birds are fed plenty of seeds such as hemp, linseed, canary seed, sunflower seeds and peanuts which are broken into pieces. These seeds are fed to the birds on the lawn in front of the loft with the aim of building up the racers fat reserves in preparation for the marathon flights.

YOUNG BIRDS.

Young birds are not raced but do get a good education in the year of their birth. This education takes the form of a number of private tosses out to 30 miles followed by further tosses with the Wingham Club out to Bedhampton at 100 miles where the birds are really well looked after on their own transporter. There is no need for the darkness system in the Rhodes loft as the babies are not raced competitively.

FEEDING.

All birds are fed by hand in feeding trays. Stephen gauges the approximate amount of feed the birds will need and then adds this a little at a time until they slow down and he then knows that they have had enough. The feed is usually made up of Farm beans and peas and usually in the proportion of one part beans, one part peas, a handful of barley, a handful of wheat plus two handfuls of Garvo Marathon mixed together in a bowl with oil added. In the build up to the long races more Garvo Marathon mix is added along with peanuts and sunflower seeds plus the aforementioned seed mix. Also in these last few days Belgasol is added to the drinking water.

BLOODLINES.

The birds raced are a mixture of the best Barcelona International blood lines. The main thing is that the pigeons are full of up to date extreme long distance performance bloodlines. One of the partners' top stock cocks is a son of the "Joost" whose half brother was sold for 40,000 euros. An Emiel Denys hen containing all the Denys top Barcelona lines is also producing the goods with the Joost cock including being responsible for two second Open BICC Marseilles winners. Pigeons have also been obtained from the crack West Country loft of Crowley and Green and these introductions are closely related to the top racers "Meteor", "Untouchable" and "Seven up" which are all prizewinners with the BBC from Barcelona. In addition, the Rhodes stock loft also contains the bloodlines of "Roger Barcelona", "Red Barcelona", "The Japie cock" along with a number of hens obtained from Alwyn Hill closely related to the great long distance racer "Wings Down". Recent introductions are twelve pigeons from The House of Aarden containing all the very best of the Jan Aarden based long distance bloodlines. Stephen likes to line breed to the "Joost" cock their top stock bird, and has even paired him to his own daughter a winner of twice second Open BICC Marseille. The offspring of this pairing are doing really well.

The Rhodes's have a very strong friendship with Mr & Mrs Derek Adams from Canterbury who are very good sprint fanciers. Gift pigeons from the Adams loft have been extremely successful at National level for the Rhodes partnership including pigeons to win 8th 16th 31st plus many other positions with the NFC.

PERFORMANCES.

Amongst the partnerships' many top class performances are the following:-

*2 x 2nd Open BICC Marseille.
2nd Open BICC Perpignan.
4th Open BICC Barcelona.
3rd Open BICC Pau.
146th international*

With the NFC:-

12th Open Tarbes.

25th Open Pau

31st Open Pau

plus many other positions in both BICC and NFC.

Stephen regards the best performance as the 12th Open NFC Tarbes win, as the Rhodes pigeon was the furthest east in the country on that day.

As regards top individual performance pigeons Stephen has a soft spot for "The Aarden cock" which was a gift from his good friend Steven Fox. The Aarden cock scored in short distances races and in a total of fifteen BICC International races he finished at 10th, 11th, 15th, 16th & 37th Open Barcelona and 7th, 10th & 20th Open Perpignan - some pigeon that!! He also won a number of other positions including prizes from NFC Pau.

The Rhodes's were offered a very large sum of money for the Aarden cock by Mr Yusodo from a Japanese stud but refused to sell as the cock had failed to pass on his winning traits to any of his offspring though he raced like a "bat out of hell" himself.

MEDICATION.

Droppings samples and swabs are sent to Henk De Weerd at Colchester and the birds are only treated if a problem is detected. However, Stephen does have a very high regard for the product Parastop marketed by Belgica De Weerd.

Vitamins are given in the drinking water and the partners also use herb teas regularly along with with honey and garlic plus occasionally a product called Oxycell-b12.

THE FUTURE OF THE SPORT.

The following are some of Stephen's thoughts on how the sport can progress and encourage new members:-

"Help novices by providing good quality stock free of charge. Reduce club subs for under 16's and reduce birdage prices or let them send a few for free. All fanciers could help with stray birds by putting them in a crate/basket and feed and water for a week and let them go when recovered. I have looked after many like this and most return home. Forty pounds to get a bird returned is a killer for any schoolboy or girl.

Many thanks Stephen for giving us an insight into your methods and pigeons and here's wishing you good luck for the future and who knows, that elusive 1st Open National in a long distance race might well be close at hand.

Gareth Watkins