

The Flying Tippler in N. Ireland

I have spent most of my life as a pigeon fancier. As a lad often or twelve I kept rollers while my Father kept the racing pigeon, which never appealed to me. I recall my schooldays when I should have been studying, I was gazing through the classroom window at the sky above. I used to watch the kits of tipplers and the large teams of racing pigeons which littered the environment in which I lived.

Many of my schoolmates had pigeons, some even kept them in tea chests or apple boxes. Pigeon sheds could be seen in every back alley. This area was known to all tippler men as the "Magnet" because of its attraction for the young tippler. I remember tippler clubs in those days rarely had young bird flies due to the number of y.b. losses.

There were so many established tippler clubs that 1950 saw the formation of the N.I.T.F. Northern Ireland Tippler Federation. Today the English pigeon, i.e. Boden, Bowden, Hughes, Davies, Fields, Potts etc., have found their way into some of our lofts, but this is not the first time. The 1940s presented us with Bellinghams through V. Arbuthnot, Brookileld pigeons from Sheffield by the late Rab Chapman. Other strains were:- Needham, Gooding, Westecott, Pope, Holland, Myrdith, Macclesfield and Lovett.

Tipplers were plentiful, so much so that stray hunting was almost a profession in many areas. I remember buying a kit from an old stray hunter for 30 shillings (£1.50). This was the fee for the birds, also the right to break them. I'd let them out after school then after tea I would climb on my bike and go and fetch them. It was always the same, I arrived at the home of R. Newell (the stray hunter), there I found him sitting on his yard wall wearing a peaked cap and a scarf tucked into his pullover. In his hand would be a cane. He was watching for last minute strays to pass over. There

must have been eighty to ninety birds sitting on his rooftop. They were all colours, shapes and sizes. A stray would appear and one crack from his cane would send fifty to sixty birds into the air circling around and around, picking any lone pigeons. It was obvious that the team offbirds were trained for one purpose. Sometimes there would be four or five birds in one catch and the stray hunter could instantly tell how many strangers had pitched with his team. Some corn was then thrown into the cage and all the birds ran down the slated roof like an avalanche, bringing all the strays with them into the shed nearby, where a special device for the strays operated by the tug of a string would soon go into action.

Club rung birds fetched a special price from merchants who called every Sunday. Birds rung N.I.T.F. were priceless to these men. Other birds were taken by the stray hunters to pet shops where they were traded for corn or cash. Rabbin Newell was only one of many who pursued this system.

One particular era comes to mind. The Saturday night sales in Gresham Street, Belfast, just beside the old pet shops, which still exist today. The Saturday night sales used to commence at 7.00 p.m. when pigeon men from everywhere gathered to buy or sell birds. All types of birds were produced from saddle bags of bikes, some were wrapped in old newspapers while other birds were kept in cardboard boxes and racing baskets. I remember buying a print tippler every week for four weeks for a shilling each time (5p). It was common for a young lad to buy birds, take them home to try to fly them, only to find them at the sales the following week again.

Although this went on for many years, it was illegal, and quite understandable, as the pet shops were unable to sell birds at the weekend. Everyone kept their money for the sales. Occasionally a complaint was filed and the police would appear. Many punters took to their heels and ran while others casually opened their boxes and released their birds knowing well that they would go straight home. Peter's Bar in the same street, was a rendezvous on Saturday nights for all the old hands of the sport.

Sadly time paid its toll on the tippler sport in N. Ireland. Some old hands • passed on through ill health, others died from old age. The recession hit us hard, lack of industry forced good fliers like Victor Pearce to emigrate. Redevelopment played its part too. Old houses were demolished and replaced in many areas with flats and maisonettes. Sheer disillusionment set in with many, at the loss of good club mates, and finally the political situation in N. Ireland hit all sports, ours was no exception.

Although the 1960s had seen good times flown, many over seventeen and eighteen hours and H. Shannon set an Irish record of 19hrs 10 mins. with three hens, it did not save the sport from deterioration. In an effort to improve the situation the Ulster Club and The Wheatfield Club amalgamated under the name Ulster Flying Tippler Club. My own club The South Belfast had fallen, so I joined the U.F.T.C. The deterioration of

The Frenchpark provided us with C. Garrett, Bill Rosbotham and his son Trevor, who just a boy then. In 1968 there was only one club. It went on for a few years but there was no real improvement. In the early 70's, I myself had been struck by thieves who took most of my birds. With this, and a few domestic problems, regrettably I was forced to desert the sport,

H. Shannon had moved to a new residence in Lisburn, where began a struggle not just to stay within the sport, but to keep the fine family of birds he had taken years to create. I remember visiting him when he first moved to his new home. He was forced for some time to keep his birds in his garage.

It was now almost the mid 70's. The words "a dying sport" echoed throughout pet shops and an almost empty club room where only a few turned up for meetings. There were now no competitions. The future for the sport looked rather dim, some even feared extinction, but that was not to be.

The few who had remained, namely A. Gregan (now committee), S. Warwick (now committee), J. Wilson and A. Bailey were determined not to let this happen. They held the door open for us all and I'm pleased to say their effort was not in vain. Within a short time men who had been absent had returned with others, W. Owens (now committee), J. Anderson (chairman), A. Rodgers (treasurer), W. Hill (ring sec).

In 1978 I returned to find the club now known as the Mountainview F.T.C. did seek and obtain affiliation to the N.T.U. This was a major step and very necessary. I don't think anything will survive without progress. One of my first duties on the club was to relieve R. Lilley's referee at noon in the O.B.C. that year, and at 11.30 p.m. that night I was one of the witnesses to a new Irish record, 19hrs. 30 mins. This was another boost for us.

Since then, every new year has brought new members and new clubs. Our old bird record is 20hrs. 2 mins. (T. Rosbotham), and our young bird record is 18hrs. 18 mins. H. Shannon).

In my experience throughout the years I have learned there is a great deal of satisfaction within the art of the **flying** tippler and the disappointments we encounter only make for greater triumphs.

I close this chapter with a little advice to all, particularly novices. Be patient and never allow yourself to be disillusioned. Within the heart of every tippler man lies the desire for success, but remember, success is not necessarily winning, but how you play the game.



Trevor Rosbotham of Mounlainview Club led, being presented with t:up
by N.T.U. Secretary, Brian Rose,
20 hours - 17.6.84 and 20hrs, 2 mins. - 23.6.85