

# THE ROD ADAMS STORY

## An Interview with Mike Shepherd

### Pigeon photographs and eyes by Peter Bennett

No doubt long term readers of the *Racing Pigeon Pictorial* will remember the wonderful series by the subject of this article, Rod Adams. That series was titled 'Pigeon Psychology'. Rod is of course a very successful pigeon fancier winning many top positions in the mighty Up North Combine, including 1st Open from Bourges in 1998.

Rod was born in South Shields, Tyne and Wear, in 1938, and although there was no family involvement with pigeons Rod became involved with them when he was about ten years old. Eventually club racing followed, stock was obtained from the local bird market and rejects from local lofts. Rod said that he managed to clock the odd one in with those birds, but started to take off when



Rod Adams (left) and Dave Borrow holding two outstanding Channel hens

#### UNC POSITIONS SINCE

	1972	
<i>Race point</i>	<i>Pos</i>	<i>Birds</i>
Lillers (1)	45th	16,710
Beauvais (1)	77th	11,387
Lillers (2)	74th	6,680
	<b>1973</b>	
Lillers (1)	65th	20,280
Lillers (2)	42nd	11,937
Ashford YB Nat	62nd	16,101
	<b>1974</b>	
Lillers (1)	143rd	21,262
Beauvais (1)	92nd	15,632
	103rd	
Beauvais (2)	118th	14,445
Ashford YB Nat	98th	20,562
	<b>1975</b>	
Lillers (1)	41st	15,336
	43rd	
Orleans	2nd Open NEFC	
Bourges	137th	7,809
	147th	
	161st	
	<b>1976</b>	
Lillers	23rd	19,183
	50th	
	95th	
Beauvais (1)	49th	14,674
	159th Open	25,355
Beauvais (2)	74th	10,844
	118th	
	122nd	
	129th	

the better local fanciers gave him genuine birds from their good pigeons, but the watershed was getting two eggs and later on birds from the late great Tommy Burke.

Those pigeons were the original Vandies, very fast inland but would go the distance with the right treatment. Tommy Burke taught Rod all he knows about competing in sprint races, that, of course, said Rod, was when I was young and at an age to take it all in. Tommy's performances were out of this world, Rod said that the man was way ahead of his time, if you didn't beat Tommy, you didn't win.

As time progressed Rod became interested in distance racing and the men he looked up to were Tom Kilner, Ayton Marshall, Billy Napper, Billy Gibbons, Tinkler & Pigford, Piercy Brothers. He said his first decent Channel pigeons came from Dr Ralph Iley and later on off Sonny Galloway and Herbie Elliott, but the real breakthrough came with birds from Mr & Mrs

Hindhaugh, son and Donaldson of Washington. In those early days Rod admitted that the mistakes were many, he said that he had no idea how important training was, especially at the right time. In those early days the feeding was rough and ready and the birds described as a 'right motley crew'. Rod told me that it was a hard lesson learned when, against all advice given, he sent a yearling bred off a bird market pigeon to a 570 mile race and scored with her the next morning. Channel racing, he thought, was a doddle. Rod told me that he went nine years after that before he even got a pigeon back, never mind in race time. Rod said that the most important lesson he learned as a novice was that if you want to beat the top man in your club you need pigeons as good as his or better, and you need a management system as good as his or better. It is as simple as that.

His first lofts were totally unsuitable and these were replaced



Above: The eye of 'Little Miss Bourges'

Left: Chequer pied hen 'Little Miss Bourges', 1st Up North Combine Bourges 1998, bred and raced by Rod Adams

in time by a 'proper' loft built in the fashion of that time, 16ft long, two compartments and a trapping place with large chicken wire windows in the front. It was made entirely of second-hand timber and had a sloping felted roof and was painted, according to availability,



Rod looking pleased with the trophy

Shipyard red, British Rail green or Gas Board yellow. Nobody actually purchased paint! As time went on Rod's ex-partner who is a joiner by trade built two lofts on similar lines but without any trapping places and joined by a good sitting

cabin which stood the test of time for thirty years and which all his good performances were flown to.

Rod felt that the most important features of loft design can be argued over until you are blue in the face, but whatever the design the birds must be happy in their loft and it should be theirs and not the fancier's. Obviously it should have adequate ventilation and not overheat during the day nor cool too much at night as big temperature swings are not

conductive to creating and maintaining form. Every loft has a certain number of birds it can accommodate without jeopardising their health through overcrowding and this limit must be adhered to. It should be easy for the fancier to manage and custom built for him in terms of height etc. It should not require constant maintenance, be easy to clean or disinfect should the need arise, and built of modern materials requiring little in the way of attention. It should be bone dry at all times and admit the maximum amount of sunshine. Trapping arrangements are a matter of personal choice but should take into account that predators of all birds are always about and that nervous scared pigeons are no good to anyone. It should also be remembered that you the fancier, as well as passers by, are going to have to look at the loft every day, so it should be pleasing to the eye.

Rod's current loft was built for him in 1999 and is situated, as are the majority of lofts in the North East on an allotment site and is a total departure from his previous lofts, being of modern closed-in design. Rod said that he liked it very much, especially the corridor, a great asset in wet weather, but he said he wasn't sure how much the birds liked it. It comprises of two 20ft lofts at right angles to each other with a corn store cum cabin joining them. It is eight foot wide with a two foot corridor running the full length. There is an internal ceiling

UNC POSITIONS SINCE		
	1977	
Race point	Pos	Birds
Lillers (1)	27th	17,195
	168th	
	244th	
Beauvais (1)	24th	13,376
	82nd	
	86th	
Bourges	82nd	6,239
	246th	
Beauvai (2)	100th	13,116
	145th	
1978		
Melun (2)	133rd	6,942
Lillers (2)	27th	15,520
	158th	
Bourges	159th	4,229
1979		
Bourges	62nd	4,207
1980		
Lillers (1)	135th	19,128
Beauvais	71st	13,047
	101st	
Melun	111th	10,251
Lillers (2)	46th	17,651

consisting of weldmesh about six foot high to prevent the birds accessing the roof space. The materials used in the construction of the loft were mainly those that Rod could get for nothing or at second-hand prices, although he did say that on occasions he had to buy new stuff. It is built largely of three quarter inch plywood felted on the outside with a pitched half tiled roof, the other half being transparent corrugated PVC sheeting, the front being made of white shiplap type UPVC cladding. Internally, one loft is divided equally into three sections, each containing twelve nest boxes, these are built as a unit (out of melamine and hardboard) which can be lifted in and out if needs be, but not all the boxes are in use. Each compartment has double lathed doors which seal off the corridor when they are open and allow the birds to fly in and out through the three pairs of outer double doors.

The other loft is divided into two sections, one eight foot with sixteen nest boxes in it for the older Channel birds, not all of which are in use, and the other remaining section is used for young birds and contains more box perches than Rod said he

UNC POSITIONS SINCE		
<b>1981</b>		
<i>Race point</i>	<i>Pos</i>	<i>Birds</i>
Lillers (1)	19th	19,238
	141st	
	155th	
Beauvais	9th	17,305
	141st	
Bourges	120th	7,181
	158th	
Melun	55th	10,920
Lillers (2)	101st	15,652
	153rd	
<b>1982</b>		
Oudenaarde	8th 1st NECC	21,483
	17th Open	33,570
	44th	
	129th	
Beauvais	71st	17,360
	183rd	
Bourges	184th	5,392
<b>1983</b>		
No Channel racing		
<b>1984</b>		
Folkestone		
OB Nat	13th	23,725
Melun	151st	4,882
<b>1985</b>		
Oudenaarde	139th	11,603
Beauvais	13th	11,349
	122nd	
	140th	
Melun	2nd 1st NECC	7,026
	39th	
Runner-up NECC Channel Averages		

would ever fill. Ventilation is via the roof space and the tiles which are fixed to the roof laths with no underfelt. There is a two or three inch gap right around the loft under the eaves and further control of the ventilation is achieved by the judicious opening or closing of the five pairs of double doors and the two solid internal doors which can seal off or leave open the corn store. All light is via the transparent roof panels, the front being totally closed. The loft stands well clear of the ground. Trapping is via the open doors and there is no aviary.

The stock birds are housed in a separate loft behind Rod's house for security reasons. Rod said when you race pigeons on vulnerable allotment sites they are not yours when you go home at nights. Anybody who really wants them can get them without too much trouble. As you approach your loft each morning you listen for the birds and when you hear them, well you are in business again, until nightfall at least. It is for those reasons that Rod places so much importance on his stock birds, much more than his racers. The racers can be replaced easily if need be. It is for this reason that the stock birds are kept in a well lit



The new loft of Rod Adams raced to for the first time in season 2000

**UNC POSITIONS SINCE**

	1986	
<i>Race point</i>	<i>Pos</i>	<i>Birds</i>
Bourges	92nd	3,595
	<b>1987</b>	
Beauvais	53rd	11,460
Melun	187th	6,790
Folkestone	240th	
	86th	20,081
	<b>1988</b>	
Lillers	170th	13,723
	<b>1989</b>	
Beauvais	32nd	11,061
Bourges	66th	3,709
	138th	
Clermont	25th	7,958
	<b>1990</b>	
Clermont	59th	10,533
	106th	
	176th	
Bourges	23rd	2,464
	74th	
	133rd	
	<b>1991</b>	
Clermont	95th	7,251
Bourges	12th	2,735
	36th	
	87th	
	95th	
	187th	
Provins	125th	6,590
	134th	

from other men's champions to be tried. The racing loft usually houses between 35 and 40 pairs and around 45 young birds are bred. All birds, both stock and racers are paired up at the same time, the first Saturday in March. Rod said that he had no interest in racing young birds, Darkness or otherwise, so he doesn't need to breed early, the entire loft being geared, eventually, to one end and to one race, Bourges. As for breeding methods, Rod said that he inbreeds to maintain the lines and out-crosses when he feels like it. His yardsticks are performance, shape and size and maintaining the blood which is doing the damage. Half brother and sister, grandsire and grand-daughter are his favourite matings but he said that he had paired father and daughter and followed this by pairing to her half-brother to produce purely stock pigeons that he required. Rod said that he was not an expert in genetics so when the pigeons reach two years of age they go to Bourges, any that don't return, well, they take their beaks with them and don't require him to feed them anymore! Big pigeons are not kept in this loft, Rod likes medium sized cocks, and hens small to medium with shallow bodies and not too much keel. He said that if they have any size at all they must be long cast. The birds must all be well balanced and buoyant in the hand with a nice head, short legs, be well feathered, cut away up the back with a nice tail root, a broad chest and a good

neck. Why not keep pigeons that are a pleasure to look at?

The racing system here is completely Natural, this has a lot to do with Rod's success with hens. He said that he would only change the system when someone starts beating the living daylight out of the best Bourges fliers in the Up North Combine on a regular basis using a different system. Yearlings are sent on a regular basis, I use the word 'sent' because Rod only has a clock set for National events, the club programme being used for training only. The older birds have their tosses chosen carefully, maybe only three or four before Bourges. Young birds go in at the 100 mile stage and are then sent down the road weekly until they get to around 200 miles, after which they are stopped. Rod never sends youngsters to the National or across the Channel, he feels this is a waste of time because the Darkness youngsters are totally dominant at this time.

The only time birds are held back is if Rod can't afford to lose them or their condition doesn't warrant them being sent. Training methods are simple, old birds get a few short tosses and one transporter toss prior to their first race. There are no doubt some that think that this preparation is excessive for old birds, but as Rod said, the pigeon hasn't been bred that can't be lost from 80 miles on a cold day early in the year, especially when it isn't fully fit. They don't get any

and alarmed environment. Fifteen or sixteen pairs of stock birds are housed in a 12ft x 8ft loft with an aviary on the front. The stock birds comprise of Rod's very best retired racers and birds bred especially for stock to maintain certain lines as well as a few well bred imports



Above: The eye of 'Miss Adams'  
 Left: 'Miss Adams', 1st Up North Combine Bourges 1999, raced by F & J Gray, from an egg presented by Rod Adams

### UNC POSITIONS SINCE

1992		
Race point	Pos	Birds
Lillers	140th	18,948
	147th	
Bourges	9th	3,415
	10th	
	15th	
	72nd	
	139th	
1993		
Lillers	127th	21,115
Abbeville	38th	15,469
	39th	
	52nd	
Bourges	130th	
	9th	3,681
	10th	
	41st	
	81st	
	116th	
Won Lanarkshire Social Circle Cup, Abbeville/Bourges		
1994		
Lillers	189th	19,867
Beauvais	113th	11,500
Bourges	128th	2,753
1995		
Lillers	27th	21,347
	29th	
1996		
Lillers	68th	20,458
Bourges	35th	2,439
Lillers (2)	79th	16,248
1997		
Bourges	30th	2,980
	94th	
	171st	
	176th	
Chenoise	242nd	6,490
1998		
Lillers	128th	20,592
Bourges	1st 1st NECC	2,369
	39th	
	79th	
	259th	
1st NEHU Open, Best Two-Bird Performance (Vodafone Trophy)		3,348
1999		
Bourges	96th	2,601

more tosses until a week before the Channel race they are destined for when they get three 30 mile training flights, usually on the Friday, Saturday and Sunday prior to basketing. While at home the birds get their liberty three times a day and fly freely for one hour at each session, the flag will be used if they don't exercise to Rod's liking. Young bird racing holds no fascination for Rod, and so the birds are trained so that he doesn't lose them, but there is no ambition to win young bird races. Training for the young birds begins just a few miles south of Rod's loft on the other side of the River Wear, they then progress in stages to



Above: 'Rod's Hat-Trick', 1st Up North Combine Bourges 2000, raced by Mr & Mrs Davison, bred by Rod Adams

Left: The eye of 'Rod's Hat-Trick'

Peterlee, about 15 miles away. After tosses from Peterlee the birds are switched from the A19 route to the A1 route, this is done to avoid all the wires they would have to cross if they were continued on the A19 route. Once the route is changed they proceed in stages up to 40 miles after which they get a transporter toss at 50 miles, so that they get some experience of a mass liberation not too far from home. They are then jumped into the third young bird race which is about 110 miles. Rod said he preferred to miss those early young bird events where the

losses can be quite high. With this method he reckons his losses are few and after that race from 110 miles, they do not get another training toss, just an hour round the loft twice a day.

On the subject of 'form' Rod said that observation was the key to detecting it. Apart from the physical signs indicating good health such as white wattles, bright eyes, close, shiny feathering and buoyant supple muscles, behavioural changes are the things to look for. Hyperactivity in normally lazy birds, aggression in

previously quiet pigeons and anything out of the ordinary. Knowledge of a family of pigeons and how a bird's parents behaved when they won is invaluable in detecting form. Rod said that years ago he had a pigeon that wasn't racing at all, then one day he saw him drop onto the upturned bath, lift his wings above his head like a seagull does when it is folding them after landing, then half-turn first one way then the other, all the time blowing his crop out as if he was cooing but, not doing so. It was a most peculiar performance but one that I had seen before though at another man's loft, and it had been that pigeon's father doing that little dance and he had won well at National level that day. Having seen that Rod said that he pooled his pigeon right up, a bird that had been performing badly, and sent him to a 400 mile race where he did well, winning 9th Open. As Rod said, form is an elusive thing, the trick is recognising it when it appears and not wasting your time trying too hard to produce it.

As in most discussions between pigeon fanciers the subject got around to feeding and Rod's opening remark sums up what a

'canny fancier' he is. "The most important thing about feeding is not what you are feeding but what you are feeding it to. Bad pigeons don't get any better whatever you feed them on." Rod said that he bought a lot of his corn in bulk to last the season, wheat, barley, peas, beans and linseed direct from the farm, maize, pellets and conditioning seed from the local corn merchant, but the mainstay of his feed is one of the cheapest and in his opinion, best mixtures about, Bucktons High Protein Economy Mixture. The beans are fed mainly when youngsters are being reared and in winter when it is mixed fifty/fifty and a mixture is made up of equal parts maize, wheat, linseed, barley, conditioning seed and pellets which is fed sparingly in the mornings and as much as they want on return from a race. The main daily feed is the High Protein mixture. This is of course for old birds, the young birds get fed quite differently. The old birds have food in front of them all the time and as the long races approach the percentage of maize is increased until by the time of the Bourges race, which is the longest event, they are probably receiving fifty per cent or even more. Young birds are weaned on a single grain,

usually peas, until they are up off the floor and using the perches when they are fed Bucktons Young Bird Mixture as their main feed until they are well down the road, at this time Rod mixes it half and half with the High Protein Mixture. The youngsters are fed twice a day, the morning feed being very light and not much of it, either barley on its own or mixed with a little young bird mixture. No tit-bits are given but on their return from a race they get as much as they can eat. Incidentally, Rod said he has never fed peanuts in his life. Feed supplements and other products, like most fanciers Rod does his best to ensure that the birds lack nothing. He gives water soluble multivitamins. These are given once per week just in case they are not getting what is required from their diet. Rod said that it might just be a fine way of turning money into pigeon muck, but as he said, "What the hell, it makes me feel better!" Different minerals, pickstones, honey, electrolytes etc, are used.

Disease prevention and treatment, Rod said that this area is a right 'minefield'. "I was in the trade, so to speak, all my working life, being in a Medical School, and at times I



Rod Adams old loft



Local fanciers at old loft

struggle to make sense of things so I can sympathise with the average fancier without a degree in Pharmacology." Like everyone else Rod vaccinates against PMV, treats for coccidiosis, canker and worms before the season starts. They are treated again after breeding is finished and then left alone unless there is a problem when that problem is tackled specifically. Rod took early retirement almost four years ago after working for 42 years in the Department of Physiological Sciences at the University of Newcastle Upon Tyne. We discussed various theories and as Rod said they are just theories and not proven systems, but we all have them. He said he thought hens raced better at the distance in the area he lives in and the races he competes in, but this is not necessarily true of other areas. As for young birds he has no pet theories beyond believing that they have to be well schooled when young as he believes there is a window of learning then which does not seem to exist later on. As for eyesign Rod said that he had a large collection of slides which he has built up over the years in an effort to understand, or otherwise, that this theory may possess. He said what he had come to the conclusion that it is nothing more than an inbred characteristic of a strain, it does not help the fancier

at all in attempting to judge birds outside of that strain as to what they may or may not do or may or may not breed. Rod said, "It has been my contention for some years now that it is more than possible to breed for eyesign alone and produce it in birds that couldn't find their way home if they were at the bottom of your street let alone win races or breed winners. The sport abounds with theories and men willing to propagate them but the bottom line is, and always has been, you need quality birds first and foremost and to hell with the theories. The man may brag about his skills but the bird is the major factor and in many cases has made the man and not the other way round."

Rod said that he respected anyone who knows what he wants to do and sets out and does it, no matter what the distance and he said he respected even more the people who are doing this under financial, work or personal handicaps. Amongst the really big names it would be a foolish man who didn't rate Jim Biss as the greatest modern exponent of really long distance racing the UK has ever seen. A man who has taken on the Continentals in their Nationals and done this country proud. Jim Donaldson sitting right up in the far north of Scotland and quietly

doing his own thing, and doing it brilliantly for years, is another fancier that Rod admires. Nearer home Rod admires the dedicated sprint men such as the Woodroffe Bros, John Soderlund and Martin & Tony Ali, they are, he said, as good as anyone he knows.

On the subject of success or otherwise, Rod said that he felt that some fanciers weren't successful because they didn't particularly want to be. They just love keeping pigeons and choose not to join the rat race that is often the lot of more competitive fanciers. Other unsuccessful fanciers are so because they lack the basic management and husbandry skills to succeed in the modern game. He said there are many reasons why some fanciers don't win but when you think about it there are really only three types of fancier. Bad fanciers with bad pigeons, good fanciers with bad pigeons and good fanciers with good pigeons and the individual fancier must ask himself which category he is in.

For the record, Rod competes in the Raglan West Park Club which competes in the South Shields Federation. The Federation is in Section 4 in the Nationals run by the Up North Combine. Rod told me that he also competed on a casual basis in the North East Greater Distance Club and trains with a Wednesday club. The Raglan West Park Club has around 40 members and is very competitive. There are seven UNC winners currently in the club with nine Up North Combine wins between them. There is no doubt that strong competition within a club brings out the best in fanciers.

We discussed introductions and Rod said that any new blood would have to be from 500/600 day pigeons and preferably from within the Up North Combine area regardless of their alleged pedigree. However, it should be borne in mind that Rod has bred the last three UNC winners from Bourges, he is not exactly short of long distance winning genes in his stock loft.

Well, what you have read is the result of a brief interview with Rod Adams, fancier extraordinary. There is no doubt that Rod's experiences, methods, performances and stories would fill a book, who knows, perhaps one day that might happen. To give readers some idea of his ability I have included some of his Combine results.