

THE ROYAL LOFTS

A Brief History

by Michael Shepherd



It was in 1886 that the first racing pigeons appeared on the Royal Estate at Sandringham when King Leopold of Belgium made a gift of racing pigeons to the Prince of Wales (later King Edward VII). The first references to the Royal Lofts appeared in *The Racing Pigeon* dated April 20th, 1898.

As a matter of interest publication day was then a Wednesday, and the cover price was One Penny. English maple peas were advertised in the same issue at 15 shillings (75 pence) for 200 lbs.

The Royal Lofts were originally established at the residence of C H Jackson, then head gamekeeper on the Estate. Prior to the setting up of the Royal Lofts the original gift birds were housed in aviaries. It wasn't long before there were two lofts at the Sandringham Estate. A racing loft was established by the Duke of York (later King George V) and another was established for his father the Prince of Wales. At around this time J Walter Jones was

The Royal Lofts at Wolferton, this Petron loft was erected in 1992 when it was decided that the Royal Lofts would return to Sandringham Estate. Right: Carlo Napolitano examines one of the racing team



appointed loft manager. Mr Jones was already a successful fancier in Sheffield prior to his appointment. Upon his arrival at Sandringham he introduced some of his own birds into the colony, these were Jurions.

It would appear that Walter Jones was very friendly with Mons Jurion for he had many of his top pigeons and regularly advertised them in the columns of *The Racing Pigeon*, including descendants of Jurion's 'Premier Revenu'. This pigeon was to leave its mark in the Royal Lofts for many years.

In those early days there weren't the local clubs that exist today. The lofts at Sandringham competed with the London Flying Club, the Midland Flying Club and the Central Counties FC. Apart from racing, some of those early pigeons were used to carry messages to Sandringham from Marlborough House in London.

The then Duke of York was a devoted Naval man and he was quick to recognise the great potential of top class racing pigeons to the Navy in the event of warfare. The Duke was instrumental in the setting up of the first Royal Naval Loft situated in the Royal Clarence Victualling Yard, Gosport. (An article and illustrations appeared in *The Racing Pigeon*, June 29th, 1898).

Soon after the outbreak of World War I it was realised that trawlers and drifters engaged in mine sweeping operations had no means of communication with the mainland. Volunteers were sought from those who had lofts near the coast and were prepared to lend their pigeons to the Admiralty for this vital work. Inmates of the Royal Lofts were quickly placed at the disposal of the Admiralty. The Royal pigeons proved valuable in this theatre of war and were mentioned in dispatches.

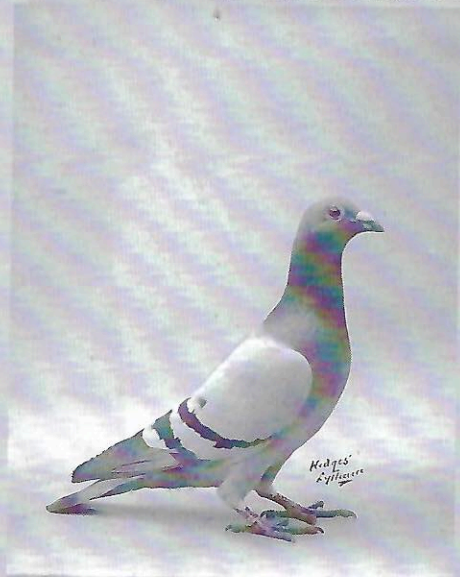
In those early years the sport of pigeon racing struggled for recognition in this country, and very few people realised that the Royal interest even existed. However, this was all to change when, in 1899, the Prince of Wales won the National Flying Club race from Lerwick and the Duke of York was 3rd & 5th, and permission was obtained to reveal the Royal connection with the sport.

That publicity gave the sport a great lift and many more began to take an interest with many new fanciers swelling the ranks. That race from Lerwick was the last ever flown by the National Flying Club on the North route as members voted for the more popular South route. Even





The lofts and aviaries at Sandringham (circa 1937). Left: Blue hen, winner of 1st Banff 1930 for King George V. Right: Winner of 1st Open NFC Lerwick in 1899 for the Prince of Wales

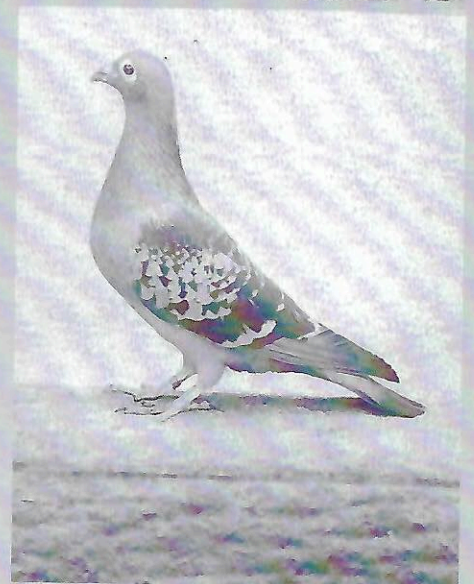


in those early days of pigeon racing fanciers in East Anglia recognised the difficulties posed by the Wash, noting that pigeons would fly round it rather than cross it when flying from the North. This obviously cost them a lot of time on race days thus they preferred to race from such points as Chichester, Isle of Wight and across the Channel.

Moving on. As Duke of York, King

George VI had always shown a keen interest in the pigeons and was a regular visitor to J Walter Jones. When he ascended to the throne the Royal Lofts were thriving, having enjoyed some successful racing seasons. The Coronation really appeared to upset the progress of the Royal Lofts. However Walter Jones was remembered in the Coronation Honours List in which he was made a member of The Royal Victorian Order. Not long after this J Walter Jones died.

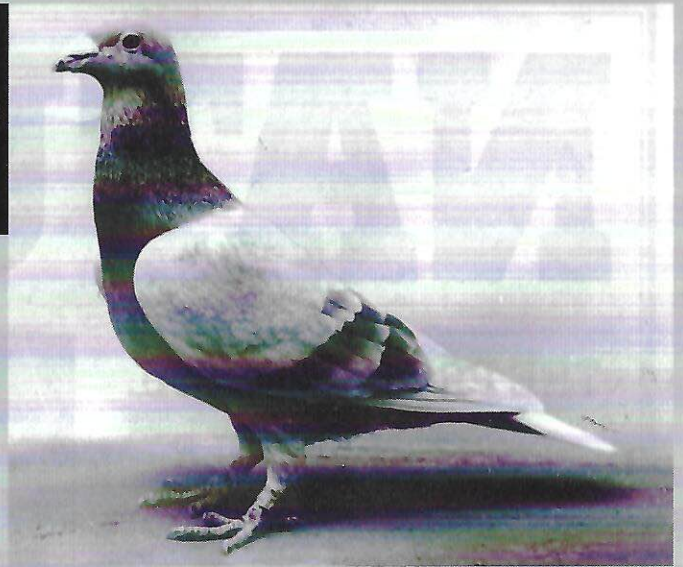
Ernest Steele, who had been involved in the Carrier Pigeon Service in World War I, became a gardener at Sandringham and was subsequently appointed Manager at the Royal Lofts. Under his management they continued to thrive. Achievements included winning the NRCC race from Banff in 1941 and the East Midland Section of the NRCC from Lerwick in 1947.



During the Second World War pigeons from the Royal Lofts were seconded to the Royal Air Force. During that period of hostilities the Royal pigeons were used regularly and one of King George VI pigeons was awarded the Dickin Medal. The pigeon was known as 'Royal Blue' and ringed NURP40GV1S453. This was the first pigeon during the war to bring a message from a force landed aircrew on the Continent. On

October 10th, 1940, this young bird was released from Holland, approximately 120 miles from base, at 07.20 hours and arrived at Sandringham at 11.30 hours the same day with information regarding the situation of the crew. This pigeon was bred and trained at the Royal Lofts, Sandringham and was seconded to the RAF Station, Bircham Newton.

Mealy cock, winner of 5th Open NRCC Lerwick 1947 for King George VI. Below: Walter Jones, loft manager at Sandringham in the early years



The King's interest in pigeons and pigeon racing continued throughout his reign during which time he presented five trophies to be competed for. These trophies are known as the 'Kings Cups'.

Ernest Steele retired in 1962 and Len Rush became Loft Manager. The birds were transferred from Sandringham to new lofts at Len's home in Kings Lynn. He was responsible for introducing new stock from some leading fanciers. During his term as Royal Loft Manager it was mainly North Road racing that the lofts took part in.

The Royal interest in pigeon racing continued when Queen Elizabeth II came to the throne and each winter during Her Majesty's stay at Sandringham the Queen visited the lofts to discuss with the Loft Manager the latest breeding and racing techniques. When Len Rush retired, Alan Pearce, another local fancier became Manager of the Royal Lofts. Again the lofts were relocated. This time to Weasenham St Peter where new lofts were erected to accommodate the Royal pigeons. The existing breeding stock was supplemented by the introduction of Janssen and Verheye lines. Prior to becoming Royal Loft Manager, Alan Pearce, had achieved success in his own right. Success soon started to come for the Royal Lofts in 1990 a four year old hen GB86ER00068, now known as 'Sandringham Lightning' won 1st Section, 5th Open NFC Pau for Her Majesty the Queen.

Sadly, Alan Pearce died of a heart attack in the autumn of 1991 and his life-long friend and fellow fancier, Carlo Napolitano, took over as Manager of the Royal Lofts. New Petron lofts were constructed at Wolferton, and the pigeons were brought back to the Sandringham Estate. Carlo has considerable experience as a fancier and a good racing record, and I am sure that the Royal Lofts will go from strength to strength.

I recently had the pleasure of visiting Carlo and he is busy trying to maintain and improve things. Since setting up the new lofts in 1992 he

has been quietly building another team of birds. This year's batch of young birds certainly look a promising lot, and to keep abreast of the times Carlo is trying these on the Darkness system.

The Queen has added to the trophies being competed for nationally presenting cups to the local Fakenham Club, the Welsh

Homing Union and two Challenge Cups to the RPRA. In recognition of Her Majesty's interest in the sport The Queen is Patron of a number of racing organisations: The National Flying Club, The North Road Championship Club, The Scottish National Flying Club, The Irish Grand National Flying Club. Her Majesty is also patron of the Royal Pigeon Racing Association.

