

## Pigeon Racing in the 21st Century

It's hard to believe now, but once upon a time it was difficult to find a pub in Britain without a loyal community of pigeon fanciers.

Known as 'the horses of the working man', fanciers would meet at the bar to trade gossip, advice, and sometimes even the birds themselves. Most streets in the UK in fact had pigeon lofts in back gardens or on allotments. Everyone used to know someone that kept pigeons.

Far from being only a working-class pastime, pigeon racing has royal pedigree. In 1886, HRH Edward, Prince of Wales – later King Edward VII, the Queen's great grandfather – built royal pigeon lofts on the Sandringham Estate. Thus began a significant cultural change from what was previously perceived as for the 'poor man' to a social past-time for all. The Queen still keeps pigeons to this day.

From being one of the most popular sports in Britain in the Victorian and Edwardian eras – especially by miners and railwaymen, who took days off to compete – its popularity has been steadily declining ever since.

The first blow came with the rail strikes and cuts of the 1960s, when the number of railway workers and lines declined sharply. The railway network was a quick and easy means of transport for releasing pigeons. Then came the pit closures in the 1970s, triggering a similar fall in the numbers of men who could afford the time and money required to take part.

Now, though, it has been hit especially hard, not by Brexit red tape, but by the high number of pub closures and – believe it or not – the rise in peregrine falcons.

Pigeon racing is a social event and the closing of many local pubs and clubs has had a devastating impact. Younger people are no longer taking up the sport like they did in the past: there are simply too many electronic device distractions, and as the age group of fanciers ages, sadly there are simply not the numbers of younger members to replace them.

The biggest problem the 20,000 members of Royal Pigeon Racing Association faces, however, is the increase in raptors that decimate our birds.

At present, fanciers are fighting a constant daily battle. Peregrine falcons in particular are being encouraged to nest and breed in unnatural environments, which are causing havoc with the local ecology and with pigeon fanciers who lose their prized birds every time they are released for training or racing. It can be totally devastating, and is an unrecognised consequence of peregrine breeding programmes, which have been introduced to please tourists at scenic locations.

Unless the raptor problem is addressed then a sport that has been enjoyed by millions of people in the UK and around the world, a sport of Kings and Queens, will be lost forever.

It is interesting to contrast this with the incredible growth of the sport in China. Beijing has 100,000 pigeon fanciers alone. Seen as the young wealthy man's sport, it attracts major investment and is growing exponentially. Such is the demand for elite pigeons in the Far East a pigeon named Armando recently sold for a staggering \$1.4 million US dollars.

Opportunities for businessmen particular in China to invest in the global market of purchasing pigeons mainly from Europe are seeing a profitable financial return on their capital for their feathered assets and the prices that their offspring are valued at.

The media attention on these purchases is helpful, and if harnessed correctly could reignite a passion for pigeon racing here in the UK. But it will require more sensitivity to the impact of certain trends that have been ongoing in Britain for decades.

With the help of the Racing Pigeon APPG chaired by Craig Williams MP, significant progress has been made in raising the awareness at Westminster to promote a greater understanding and appreciation of the social, sporting, and cultural benefits of pigeon racing.

The introduction of several schools keeping pigeons, such as the Kingsmead School Pigeon Project and Peel Park School in Lancashire, using pigeons in their everyday school curriculum, has been praised for assisting with an alternative educational approach, catering for the needs of all students who can use their birds as an educational tool.

Pigeon fancying in the UK is still a much loved pastime for many. The social element involved in keeping pigeons continues to be a vital part of day to day life for many families and friends. Believe me, there is no greater feeling than seeing a pigeon return home to its loft after flying hundreds of miles. It gives a feeling of excitement second to none.

As such, with government and local support, our beloved sport can survive, and thrive, once more. Who knows, maybe one day it will see a similar renaissance as it has abroad.

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