

Eric Craven of Sherburn-in-Elmet

Intelligent inbreeding

Eric Craven first started with pigeons when he was seven years old, during the early thirties. This interest was maintained, so that even during his National Service at the end of the war he was able to have a loft when serving in the Coldstream Guards. This was whilst he was guarding P.O.W.'s, not Buckingham Palace. The small mobile loft Eric used created quite a stir among the German prisoners, a surprisingly large number of whom were pigeon fanciers.

Once settled back into civvy street the first thing to do was to get a loft set up with a dual interest in both showing and racing, as some of his earliest memories of the sport were of his uncle, Geoff Hall of Ripley, showing birds. The only strain that Eric knew of at this time which could win in both showing and racing, were the Gurnays. Eric knew that George Greenshields regularly introduced them from Fred Shaw to improve his showbirds. So contact was made with several Gurnay specialists and a visit was made to the clearance sale of the late M. Watkinson of Northrop, who had imported birds direct from M. Gurnay. Here three birds were purchased. Two young birds bred out of this original stock won 2nd and 3rd in the first race in which Eric competed.

Another early purchase was a silver mealy hen, 49.3303, bred by M. W.

Bell of Hunslet, who had the best of the late O. I. Wood's Gurnays. Eric remembers spotting this pigeon in the hens' section, and his delight when told that he could buy it. This pigeon proved to be a bargain, as it bred many winners into the loft. Unfortunately just as Eric had got a good team together he had to move house, and most of the birds were disposed of. A few key stock birds were kept in a small loft in the centre of Leeds by Eric's brother-in-law, Peter Challenor. When it was possible to return to Sherburn-in-Elmet the loft and birds were collected and resettled. Not long after this one of the cocks won a hard race from Caen.

The silver mealy hen previously mentioned bred two mealy cocks which have been responsible for many of this family of Gurnays. One of these, 54.111, 'The Rock', won 1st and 4th as a young bird before being returned shot through the butt of the wing. The fact that he would not be raced proved to be a blessing in disguise, as this cock has since bred dozens of prizewinners, the most famous being 'Tearaway' and 'Bootsie', a nestpair with eleven 1sts, nine 2nds and five 3rds between them. 'Tearaway' topped the Fed. from Guernsey, 305 miles, in a N.W. wind by 32 minutes as a young bird. This performance earned 2nd Yorkshire combine, only being beaten by a bird flying 20 miles less. In the next race it again topped the Fed., this time

from Nottingham, 59 miles, after being found in the loft. This was a great pigeon which won seven 1sts, three 2nds and a 3rd through all distances, to Poitiers before Eric let his friend, Tom Nettiss of New Jersey, U.S.A., have it. The dam of this pair was 61.15, a blue called 'Julie', which was a grand-daughter of Wagham's 'Confidence' 2nd Pau N.F.C. 'Julie' won seven 1sts, four 2nds and two 3rds for Eric, as well as breeding several Fed. winners. This hen once went missing in a channel race from Le Mans, returning several days later with a note attached from Julich in Germany which is only a short distance from Verviers in Belgium, the ancestral home of the Gurnays.

The next introduction of Gurnay blood came via A. F. Brown of Tewkesbury in the form of three good birds, all of which bred well. A daughter of one of these paired to 'The Rock' bred a blue white-flight hen '4324', which proved to be an outstanding stock bird producing some excellent channel winners, including 'Favourite', 'Bonny Blue' and 'Honey', all of which were Fed. winners.

Major Heslop of Maidstone sold Eric a Bronze Pied hen, 50DD2291 'Cookey', which had won several times for him after he had bought it as a young bird from Bernard Miles. It was a real 'bull-dog' type Gurnay

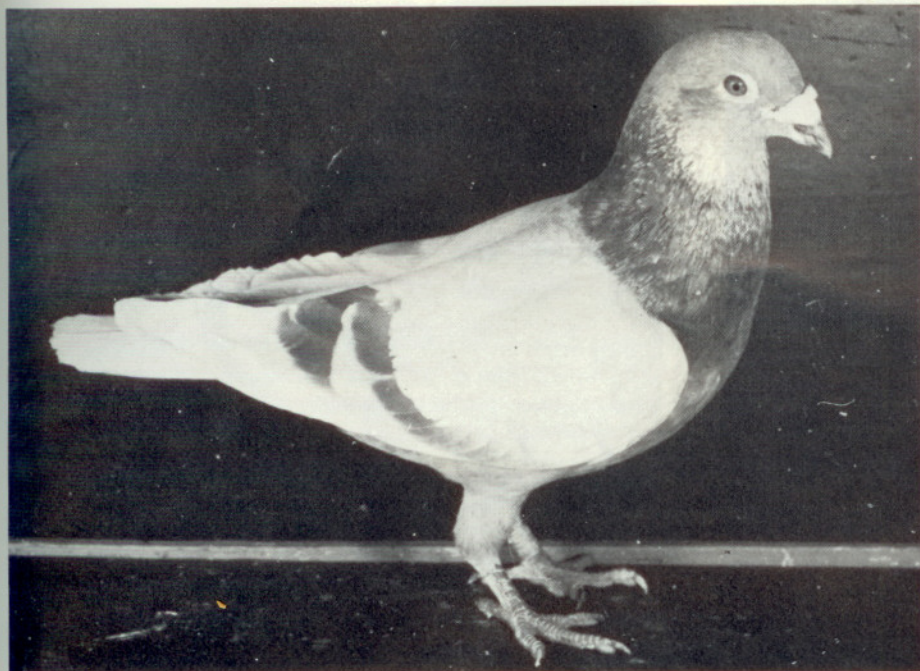


72.5156, won 1st Chichester with only 4 timed in club as well as 17th Rennes and 19th Nantes Y.C.C.



72.51554, a grandson of 'Black Splashed' which has won two 1sts, a 2nd and 3rd.

photographs by Anthony Bolton



'Tearaway', 62 GG 333, 1st Fed 2nd Combine from Guernsey (305 miles) as a youngster. Later winning seven 1sts, three 2nds and a 3rd.

and it bred four winners in the short period that he had it. In 1963 an exchange of stock birds took place with William Black of Renton, and this fancier's good cock 'Boomerang' left three winners out of four eggs laid in Eric's loft.

The next year Eric was able to borrow

the bird that he considered to have been the most influential in his present family of Gurnays. This bird was 'Mac', SU605424, loaned to Eric by Elwyn Jones of Mostyn. This cock was paired to Eric's best hens and it sired four winners in as many weeks, amongst which was a dark cock which later became the sire of Eric's

good bronze nestpair. The dam of this pair, 'Bronze Eclipse' and 'Bronze Twilight', was a bronze white-flight hen of the A. F. Brown bloodlines, a full sister to Watson Brothers 'White Throat' 63W2909, the Olympic gold medal winner which Tom and Charlie Watson of Fatfield had bred down from the Gurnays.

'Mac' was also the sire of 'Black Splashed' (see photo) and is grandsire of the blue cock 73.27123 which topped the Yorkshire Combine against 2,000 pigeons from Avranches, 353 miles, in a N.W. wind during 1975. That was after circling the loft for five minutes before trapping. Unfortunately this cock returned badly injured from its next race, Rennes, and died shortly after. This was quite a loss, as the pigeon was a real trier, having been first bird home in five consecutive races, and it certainly had qualities which made it a worthy candidate for stock.

Eric has always found his Gurnays very easy to race, and they get little training, usually just a 15 mile toss on the evening before basketing. However, all the birds do receive a good schooling as young birds with tosses in all directions and single ups when time permits. Once the young birds have been raced they receive the same treatment as the old birds.



'Bronze Twilight' 67.64482, a very good hen which has won 2nd Fed 8th Combine Poitiers, 1st Fed 2nd Combine Niort, 7th Fed Avranches and 6th 17th and 44th Nantes with Y.C.C. It is also a good breeder.



'Bronze Eclipse', 67.64497, nestmate of 'Twilight', this pigeon has won 18 positions in the first four including 1st Fed by $\frac{3}{4}$ hour from Falaise (341 miles).



'Black Splashed' 64.31203, as a young bird this cock won 2nd Fed 9th Yorks. Combine, arriving with the winner. It later won five 1sts, three 2nds and two 3rds before being kept for stock, a son of 'Bronze Mac' and 'Favourite'.

Feeding is based on mixture of the type in common use throughout the country. Year old beans and dog-tooth maize are preferred, with wheat and barley. Peas are only fed rarely, and a small amount of seed and oatmeal mixture after exercising and racing.

Until three years ago Eric was a 'scraper every day' man, even cleaning out on Christmas Day, but recently he has become converted to a system of partial deep litter. This is also more acceptable to the neighbours, as the loft is completely surrounded by flats and houses. The impetus for this change came following a holiday period when Eric's son looked after the birds. Apparently he 'couldn't find the scraper' and Eric was pleasantly surprised when they swept



74.11506, a grandson of 'Honey', this pigeon won 4 positions as a young bird and a yearling.

the deck in the race that weekend.

Breeding has always been of great interest, especially as most of the birds have at least one common ancestor. It therefore requires careful planning to prevent over close inbreedings. Eric has found it beneficial to pair birds of different coloured eyes, although he does not consider himself an eyesign enthusiast. He reckons the most important 'sign' is the 'early sign' on a Saturday afternoon.

Since 1959 Eric's Gurnays have won over 300 positions in the first three, including 100 firsts as well as many positions, Combined Averages and Channel Averages in the Barkston Ash Federation.

Eric has always tried to do his share on the administrative side of the sport, serving as club secretary, Fed. and Combine delegate, Federation Audition, and vice-president of both Fed. and Combine. One of the aspects of committee work which disappoints Eric is the formation of splinter groups. These often result in new organisations, and this one area will be served by a plethora of different federations, combines and amalgamations. In his own area, Central Yorkshire, he believes that some really first class racing could be had if one properly sectioned and professionally managed organisation could be set up. This would give longer race entries, larger prizes, more control over liberation, and all at less cost to the individual.

Eyesign Commentary

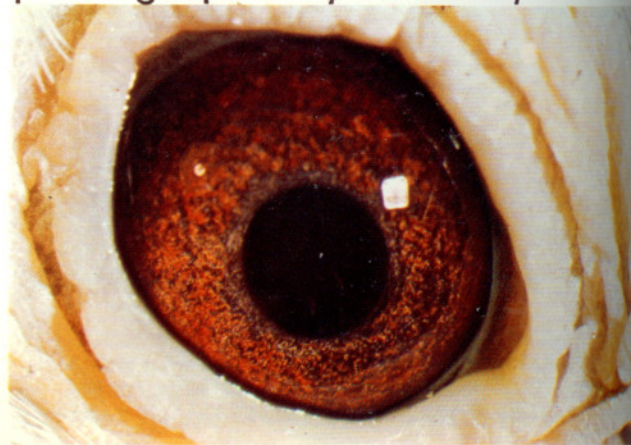
The birds of Eric Craven

64.31203. In this set of eyes we have a classic example of good family eyes, denoting a great deal of inbreeding. I am not aware of the strain or breed of these birds or any history about them, but I would suspect that the owner is a man who does not keep a great amount of birds, but keeps a select number.

The iris of 31203 shows that it is rather inbred, and carrying tremendous breeding characteristics, distance lines can be seen, and the great depth of colour is a treat to see.

The basic sign is a green, and the bird being inbred the sign tends to be rather fine, but is still strong. Distance lines can be seen and anyone could easily dismiss this sign as being weak but it is just the opposite. The overall picture is that of a Number 1 breeder with more than average racing ability. This is the type of eye which one could found a family around.

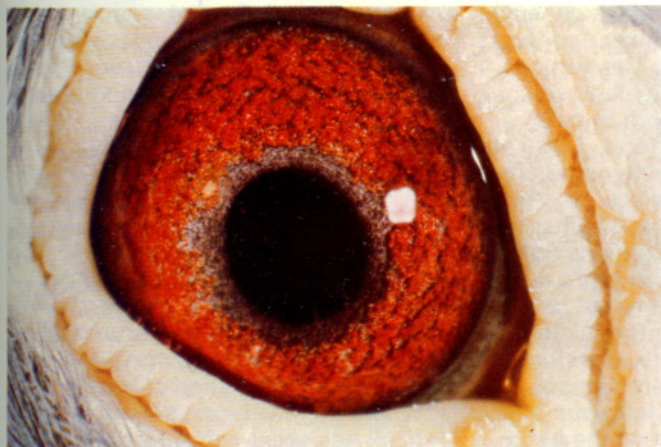
by Brian May
photographs by Anthony Bolton



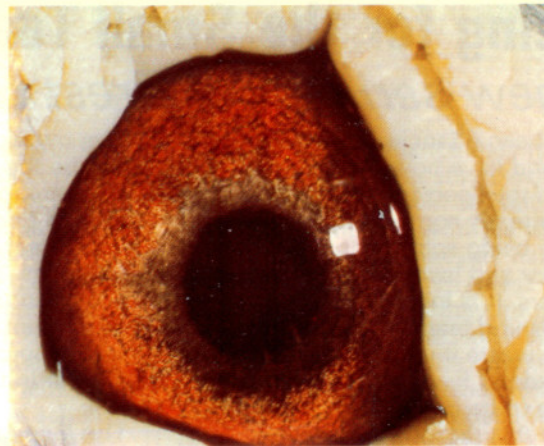


67.64482. Here we have another composite yellow family eye of great quality. The iris is again very strong in colour built up in layers, a very strong eye with distance lines in abundance, breeding potential is also very strong. The basic sign is composite yellow, very strong, very brittle, that of an excellent racer. The overall picture presented is that of a hard determined race bird, with more than a share of breeding potential.

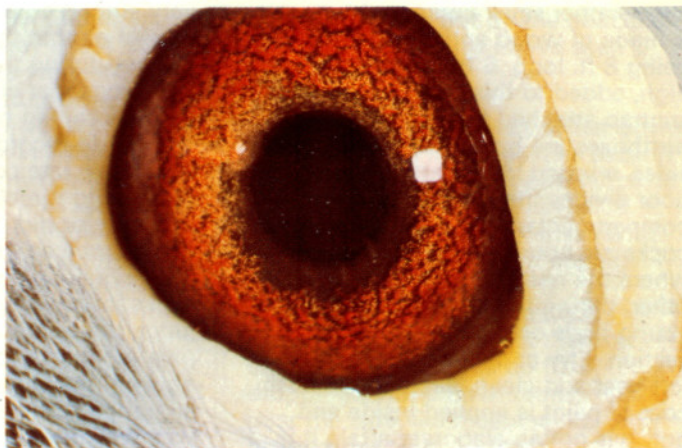
71.41943. Again another remarkable eye, of great presence and character, a very strong family eye, composite yellow in colour. The iris colour is again very strong showing great strength and character, the colour going right to the basic sign, breeding characteristics are exceptionally strong. The basic sign is that of composite yellow of great width and quality, distance lines are easily seen and the composition is also strong, again the sphincter muscle can be seen. Overall picture is again one of exceptional quality of great strength, an eye to depend on in either racing or breeding.



72.51554. Here we have an eye that is not only different in colour but one which is going right back to the base of this family, carrying characteristics of previous generations. The iris build up is very much the same, layer upon layer over a basic pearl base, the colour is still very strong indeed with racing and breeding potential easily seen. The basic sign is that of recessive violet of great strength, with good serrations, distance lines very evident. The overall picture presented is that of a good racing eye with breeding potential.



67.64497. Here we have another bird from the same loft and same family. The iris colour is very good, complete density all over, built up like a masterpiece in oils, layer upon layer. Breeding characteristics can be seen easily. The sign itself is a composite yellow of great width with good composition and serrations, the most important muscle the sphincter pupillae muscle is easily seen. The overall picture is that of an inbred racing eye with excellent distance qualities and breeding potential. A good family eye with great presence.



74.11506. In this slide we see an eye of not quite the quality of the previous ones, but one which is still good type. The iris colour is not so strong and brilliant, but the inbreeding that has gone into this bird's make up will come out in its performances. This bird has systematically been bred to do the job. The basic sign is composite yellow, good distance line can be seen, but not as clear as in the preceding slides, and in this eye I would assume that this bird could be rather difficult at times. Overall picture, a racing eye that can do well racing. A select family, nurtured by a systematic man.