

THREE

O. I. "OSSIE" WOOD

ON FEBRUARY 9TH, 1942, OSWALD I. ("OSSIE") WOOD DIED AFTER A short illness. It was then the end of the reign of one of Yorkshire's most successful fanciers. His clearance sale in March, 1942, resulted in a complete sell-out, although many were offered at very high prices.

In races over 200 miles between 1922 and 1942 his birds flying to Ilkley won 299 1st, 2nd and 3rd prizes and 902 1st pool prizes, although his loft was the most westerly in all the three clubs he flew in, and Ilkley is situated in the Pennines, with mountains south, north and west.

HIS BIRDS

He was a Gurnay specialist and, as his friend Gurnay himself said, had "the best and purest Gurnays in England". Gurnay gave him many birds, and he bought 19 more at the Gurnay sale in 1936, including Le Fonce Angouleme. The other and older strain in his loft was his Olicana strain. This strain was established in 1896, and held its own at all distances, including Marseilles to Ilkley, 804 miles. Olicana, bred by the owner in 1919; flown 1919, 100 miles; 1920, Folkestone; 1921, Arras, winning £79; 1922, Paris, winning Bradford F.C. three 1sts in succession — namely, Folkestone, Amiens and Paris; also won 18th Amiens G.Y.A. (2,312 birds), 1st Paris (1,115 birds), etc. This bird won over £200 in 1922 alone, and is half-brother to Derrick, bred by owner and winner of 2nd Marseilles, 804 miles.

The Gurnay strain was introduced in 1920. Gurnays were sent direct to him from M. Gurnay, and all his birds came direct from Verviers. M. Gurnay also bred six birds for him in 1921, all Vierzons blood, which O. I. Wood considered one of the finest racing pigeons ever bred, as not only did this bird race, but has bred generations of highly successful racers. Young Hawk, bred by him in 1923, was a Gurnay closely inbred to Vierzons on both sides. He competed in races over 230 miles, and from 1924 to 1928 won 19 1st, 2nd and 3rd prizes and 95 1st pool prizes. Young Hawk was pooled to £1 in 19 races, and won 1st £1 pool in 17 of these races, 2nd in one, and

arrived home first in the remaining race. At the age of 19 he had never had an infertile egg.

Young Hawk ended his days in the loft of Jack Barrett, Rawdon, near Leeds. He went to him after O. I. Wood's death and he was put in a loft to himself with a mate. He bred one cock in the spring of 1942. However, the effort was too much for his 19 years and he dropped down dead after the youngster was weaned.

His other main Gurnay stock bird was Le Fonce Angouleme, 11328269.27, bred and raced by M. Gurnay, Verviers (No. 7, 1936 sale list), and undoubtedly the best bird in the Gurnay loft both for performance and pedigree. He was winner 1st prize Angouleme with a lead of half an hour. Pedigree alone makes this bird a champion, being bred from a son of Le FAVORI when paired to daughter of Petit Ecaille Vierzons, two of the best pigeons ever owned by M. Gurnay. Le Fonce Angouleme was an ace of aces, and was described as unique as a racer and incomparable as a breeder. No fewer than 44 descendants were included in the 1937 sale.

HIS SUCCESSES

The consistency of O. I. Wood's performances was remarkable. From 1922 to 1932, with an average entry of about five birds per race and racing in strongest competition, the loft won 79 1st prizes, 78 2nd prizes, 67 3rd prizes, and 54 4th prizes, also 706 1st pool prizes and 584 other pool prizes, at all distances, including Marseilles to Ilkley (804 miles) and Barcelona to Ilkley (900 miles).

He only competed in the longer races and did not race young birds. When sending five birds to a long race his first selection was pooled to £1, second to 50p, third to 25p, fourth to 15p and fifth to 5p.

In 1929 he won the championship trophy in the North-West Yorkshire F.C. (7-bird limit). This was for the fifth time in six years.

In 1930, competing in races over 230 miles: Eight 1st prizes, six 2nd prizes, seven 3rd prizes, 98 1st pool prizes and 51 other pool prizes. In North-West Yorkshire F.C., with a 7-bird limit, won the championship trophy for the sixth time, and 1st 50p knock-out. In the Yorkshire Mid-week F.C. all sections: 1st Amiens, 1st Orleans, 1st Continental Ave. In his third club, Wharfedale F.C.: 1st for Continental points trophy; and in North West Yorkshire Federation: 1st and cup Amiens section and 2nd Orleans (721 birds).

This list could be continued indefinitely to show his successes throughout the years and to show that he maintained the quality and

consistency. Here are his results for 1939, his last year of racing. He did not compete in the last race in Wharfedale and District F.C. from Orpington on 26 August 1939, as this was the day appointed for the evacuation of children from London. This probably cost him two trophies, as he was a long way ahead for both the Combined Ave. and also the Combined points trophy in the Wharfedale and District F.C.

In spite of this, he won in 1939: 1st Folkestone (234 miles); three 1sts all different races: 1st Littlehampton (222 miles); 1st 2nd and 3rd Amiens (330 miles); 1st and 2nd Pont l'Éveque (333 miles); 2nd and 5th Tours (466 miles); 1st and 3rd Poitiers (517 miles); and these trophies: North-West Yorkshire F.C. 1st Continental trophy, 42 points (runner-up 20 points); 1st Club Championship, 71 points (runner-up 52 points); also three 1sts, three 2nds and three thirds in £1 scheme; two 1sts and two 3rds in 2-bird Continental scheme; one 1st, one 2nd and four 3rds in £5 open cross-Channel scheme; Wharfedale and District F.C., 1st Inland Ave., 1st Continental Ave., 1st all O.B. Ave., 1st Continental points trophy; Aire and Wharfe Combine, 1st Ave. for all Continental races. Every bird raced in 1939 was bred by himself and every bird was either pure Gurnay or Gurnay cross.

He wrote to The Racing Pigeon correspondent "Nor'West" in 1936 pointing out that: "No. 1, on his 1936 race sheet, a mealy cock, is a 1927 pigeon. It may interest you to know this cock has raced Widowhood for the past seven years, and has flown from Amiens (three times), Caen, Le Mans (twice), Poitiers, also Guernsey and Marennes with Manchester F.C., 1934 (timed in both races), Rennes M.F.C., 1935 (timed in on day), and then Marennes with Yorkshire Championship Club, timed in 9.27 a.m. next day, taking 14th position, none home on the day". This example goes a long way to kill the argument that widowers do not last long on Widowhood, and cannot fly 500 miles, his mealy cock having crossed the Channel eleven times, and been timed in twice from Marennes with M.F.C.

One of his most noticeable characteristics was his emphasis on long distance birds. He never recorded performances under 230 miles, and his wins of 600 and 700 miles were remarkable.

HIS METHODS

He was a great friend of W. S. Pearson, another successful Ilkley flier, and like him and Gurnay used the Widowhood system. He was,

however, amazingly secretive about the details of his methods. It is claimed by the opponents of Widowhood that all his longest races were flown Natural, but he himself said "nowt". His secret was probably that he and, of course, his loft manager, W. "Rufus" Hirst, knew how to handle Widowhood pigeons and how to use them properly. He had at one time four lofts with different teams in each, so that although he only sent five or six birds he could pick those that were just right.

His loft could be blacked out whenever he desired with roll blinds, etc., and he had a tower over his loft where he used to take up position on race days, with binoculars in hand, and where he could see for many miles, when visibility allowed of course. He fed seeds — but what seeds he never disclosed. He would mention some that most fanciers know and then add "and others". He was very careful with his hens and would not race them if he intended to breed from them.

His article in "Squills Year Book" showed the importance he attached to condition. He was, however, not only one of the most successful fliers in Yorkshire, but did great work in encouraging the best interests of the sport.

O. I. Wood was one of the instigators, along with Capt. E. E. Jackson, who, by a coincidence, died a few weeks after him, of the Lancashire v. Yorkshire County Championship races in 1925, when ten members from the N.W. Yorkshire F.C. and ten from the Lancashire Social Circle, with a two-bird limit (four birds in all), flew the (Yorkshire) Paris race and the (Lancashire) Nantes race, Lancashire winning the double event by 84 points to Yorkshire's 26 points. As the losers, Yorkshire's penalty was to provide a celebration dinner and a weekend at Scarborough for members of the L.S.C. In connection with the big annual shows of the Great Yorkshire Amalgamation, Mr. Wood invited the judges and a number of well-known fanciers as guests to dinner on the evening before each show, and many pigeon topics were thrashed out. He made an ideal host and those privileged to attend treasured pleasant memories of them.

The late H. W. Bell, of Leeds, a great friend and frequent visitor to O. I. Wood's lofts, also raced Gurnays and raced with success, but this did not happen until Mr. Hirst, O. I. Wood's loft manager, came to see him. The story is told that a conversation was held in strict privacy, even Mrs. Bell was not allowed to be present. Just before O. I. Wood's final sale, H. W. Bell visited the loft and selected a pair and on the morning of the sale another pair. These

bred many winners; winning several 1sts in Leeds F.C.

In spite of the secrecy with which O. I. Wood kept his lofts, he wrote many informative articles on the conditioning of pigeons. Here is what he said after the Great Air Race of 1934 in the days before jet planes when flying machines had propellers and were made of wood and canvas.

Most fanciers would take an interest in the England-Australia Air Race, but I wonder how many noticed the following paragraph in the 'Daily Mail' of 20 October 1934: 'The craving for speed has reached such a pitch that men have been assiduously polishing every inch of the surface of the giant racers, because it has been discovered that the application of a glazed finish like that of a mahogany table can add several miles an hour to the speed of a 'plane!'

This is condition pure and simple, and is the final touch. First of all, we must have the perfectly balanced frame, which is body and wing, then the engine power, which is the heart, muscle, etc., then the petrol and oil, which is the food, but all is useless without the pilot, who is the brain and eye, and on the top of this there must be the will to win, the perfect health to stand the strain, and probably just a little luck, but luck counts least of all. Compare this event with your pigeon intended for a long race and you will have an idea of the part you must play. All who studied this race should have learnt a lot, as when one reads of engine trouble, wrong petrol, lost in storms, dead-tired, etc., etc., one has an idea what to expect from our pigeons. But what do we expect from our pigeons? Some expect our birds to home in any weather; some expect our birds to race week after week; some expect our birds to race whether they are fit or not; but in the event of a smash most will blame anything except themselves.

How can we improve our pigeons? First of all, we must look to our race organisers. The method today seems to be to get our birds to the race point at the lowest possible cost per bird, but this is all wrong. The true cost of any race is what it costs to get our birds home again in race time, and this is how we should calculate — that is, base all costs on returns.

We fanciers can help in many ways, and should study this cost on returns problem, not only as regards the organisation but the cost to ourselves. If we send ten birds at £1 per bird, and only get two home, what is the cost per bird? We must see to it that only good, fit

pigeons are sent, and study our birds. One of the best methods I know is to enter your birds in your book in the order you expect them to arrive home, and if you are wrong in your selection, find out the reason, as you should know most about your own birds. The best way would be for clubs to adopt this system; and publish on race result the total sent by each competitor, and which selection has been timed in. If we saw at the top of the list "O. I. Wood (20), Sel. 19, Vel. 1021", we should know what to think, but if Sel. No. 1 had been timed in, we should also know what to think, even if the bird were not pooled.

How can we fanciers improve our pigeons? In the first place, we must have a suitable loft. This need not be an elaborate affair, in fact, the simpler the better, but it must be bone dry, and have good ventilation without draught, facing as near south as possible. Next, we come to the correct racing type, and the best way to find this is to visit successful lofts and notice the type which win the races you yourself are anxious to win. I used to go round with my old friend "Billy" (W.H.) Pearson, one of the best fanciers we ever had. We handled every good winner we could, but his trouble was that fanciers not only let him handle, but often sent him a pair as well, which meant too many pigeons to look after.

If you are starting, go to two or three fanciers who are winning today, and do not trouble about those who used to win years ago. Get two pairs from each and keep to a similar type. Keep one pair from each fancier pure, and cross the others out, but keep all for breeding only, until you have had time to test the result of your own breeding. So many new fanciers breed one pair, and then put the old ones on the road, and if the cross is good they find either one or both parents have been lost, which means they must start over again.

Build up on pedigree all the time, but when you buy, do not trouble about anything farther back than the grandparents. Again, after you have purchased your first lot, never purchase another bird, except with the idea of using your purchase for breeding only.

Never breed from a very old hen, nor expect a hen which has raced hard to produce good youngsters. I say this in spite of the fact that the sire of Olicana was bred from a ten-year-old hen which had flown Rennes eight years in succession, but this was an exception, and one swallow does not make a summer. Never keep a weakling, or try to cure an ailing pigeon, no matter what they are bred from. Never send a pigeon to race unless you feel quite sure it is in condition. Never expect a pigeon to breed hard and race hard at the same time.

Never expect a bird which is raced hard as a youngster and again as a yearling to keep this up in future years. We always hear of those 300 mile youngsters which perform well later in life, but these are like the sire of Olicana, exceptions. What about those youngsters which are sent and never return, and those which do return but are never heard of again? A good pigeon not over-raced as a youngster or yearling should race well up to seven or eight years of age. Never keep or purchase a latebred youngster off a pair which has been breeding all the season, but set great store on a latebred which is from a good pair which have not bred earlier in the season.

Never overbreed and never overfeed. If these two items alone are attended to, we shall have better pigeons. Good sound corn, common sense, patience and observation will all go to make quality. Rome was not built in a day, and although pigeons breed quickly, good pigeons are scarce.

I firmly believe that many good pigeons are bred, but most are ruined by their owners because of the fact that they are asked to do impossible tasks before they are mature. The man who puts quality before quantity will not only improve our racing pigeons, but will also derive untold pleasure for himself.

FOUR

FRED SHAW

THE METEORIC CAREER OF FRED SHAW WILL ALWAYS BE ONE OF THE seven wonders of the pigeon world. His incredible successes between 1921 and 1926 will live long in the annals of the sport. In those years he rose from being almost a nobody to the most successful fancier in Britain. When he had his clearance sale, he was the most highly thought of fancier in Britain. However, I think we would do well to remember one or two things while we consider these great successes of his.

Firstly, he was a showman and a businessman, and when I say showman I mean, of course, he knew how to display his pigeons to the best advantage, not only in the show pen but in advertisement columns. His advertisements in "The Racing Pigeon" during those years are masterpieces, and indeed they well deserve to be, for they were drawn up partly by him and partly by the incomparable "Nor West", Jack Bruce. It is important to remember also that he was a businessman engaged in the business of selling pigeons. It is well known that he flew Gurnays on the Widowhood System, but he called them "Shaw-Gurnays" on the "Shaw-Gurnay System", and indeed once objected to "his" system being called Widowhood. It is probably because he was selling pigeons that he laid such stress on the fact that his successes were not won on any system but on the quality of the pigeons alone, and for one year, 1923, he specifically denies that any pigeons were flown Widowhood. He realised that if, as some of his detractors said, his system was essential to make the Gurnays win, then obviously he would have to sell the system with the pigeons, and he would not or could not do that. The actual Widowhood system used by Fred Shaw was based on that used by his friend and teacher, Renier Gurnay, and further details will be found under that heading. He did make certain modifications to his system, which will be noted further on. The information given here is authentic and I emphasise this because at one time there was a book circulating with his name on it but not actually written by him.

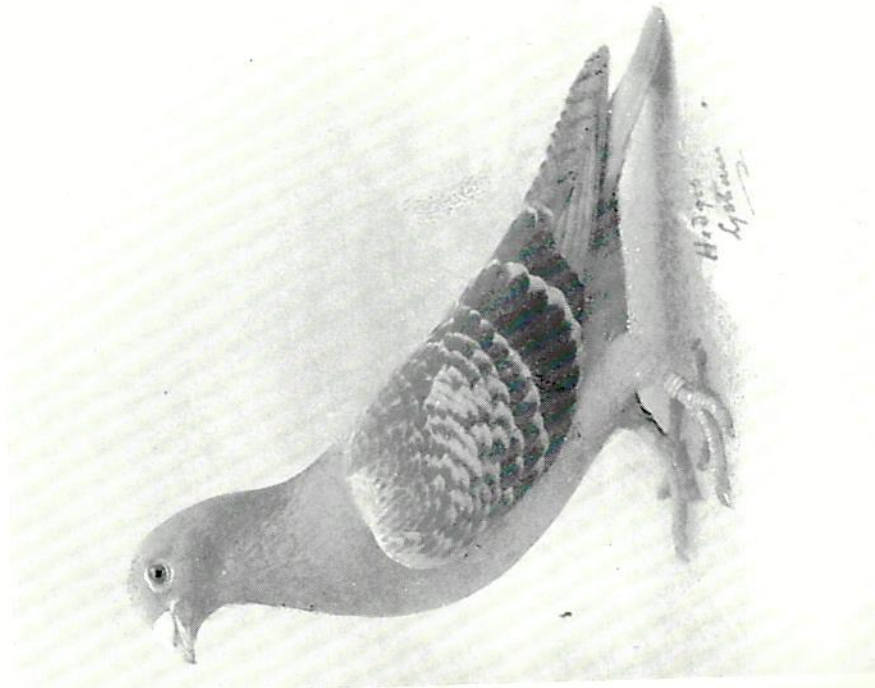
THE SIX YEARS' PERFORMANCES

Having said this, let us have a look now at the tremendous performances Fred Shaw put up and on which he built his name. He

started in 1920 with a team of imported Gurnays; in all, these birds won £60 (*Today perhaps £1,500 would be the equivalent.*—Ed) during the year, but there was no great sensation. In 1921, with 13 birds of the original team and 12 late-bred cocks, he showed the way the wind was blowing by winning over £310 and being the second highest prize-winner in the 250 strong Manchester Flying Club. His total winnings in that club alone were £198. In all, he won 10 firsts in 11 successive races with various clubs, including 1st, 2nd, 3rd and 4th with the Hyde Flying Club, also winning 1st Stockport Federation. This latter position was won at a velocity of 1032 y.p.m. with a north-east wind and against 1,380 competitors. He followed this by sending four of his yearlings to Marennes with the Great Northern, a distance of 529 miles. He got three back from this, winning a special prize in the Hyde Flying Club for first yearling hen. Throughout the whole of this season he did not send more than nine birds to any race.

He followed this in 1922 with an even more successful season. In the South East Section of the Manchester Flying Club he won 1st and 2nd Bath, 1st, 2nd, 3rd and 4th Bournemouth, 8th Guernsey, 1st Rennes and 6th Marennes, following this, with his young birds, with 3rd Worcester, 1st and 3rd Bath, 2nd, 3rd, 5th and 6th Bournemouth, and finishing up with the Young Bird Average Prize both for his section and for all sections of the Manchester Flying Club. The most outstanding of these wins was his 1st Rennes, in which he beat all the eight sections. This was a disastrous race with only a few home on the day, but his bird made a velocity of 942, winning by 14 minutes ahead of the nearest bird. That year he first became highest prize-winner in the Manchester Flying Club, Best Young Bird Average, and he won the 50 guinea Challenge Cup for the best average with an average velocity of 1039, beating his next competitor by 36 yards per minute and the second best by 106. The winner of the Rennes race, "Neaty", was awarded the National Homing Union Gold Medal for this performance and the same bird's performance at Marennes.

In 1923 he dropped from his top position and was again second highest prizewinner with £153, representing 54 separate and distinct Club, Pool and Nomination prizes. He won five firsts in five different races; this, of course, is in the Manchester Flying Club alone, and does not include his other clubs, such as Stockport and District H.S., Hyde H.S., Stockport Social Circle, Manchester



Science, blue chequer cock bred in 1919 the last son bred from Le Bossu, winner of £2,000 in four seasons.

Saturday F.C., Gee Cross H.S. and Mottram H.S. It was this year that he said he did not use the "Shaw-Gurnay" system at all.

It should not be thought, of course, that this slight drop in success, or that of the following year, 1924, when he was third highest prize-winner, was due to any lack of ability of his birds; he was always trying experiments and looking for new methods, and if some of these experiments caused him to lose a pound or two, he was not the man to worry, especially as he still maintained an unequalled record in pigeon racing. In 1924 his winnings in the Manchester Flying Club totalled £140, representing 70 Club, Pool and Nomination prizes, including three firsts. These birds also made the distance to Marennes, where 17 out of the 18 returned. In 1925 he was again highest prize-winner in the Manchester Flying Club, winning over £197, and also the Young Bird Average. In his final year before his clearance sale, 1926, he was sixth highest prize-winner with over £111.

THE £1,000 CHALLENGE

It was in January 1924 that the famous £1,000 Challenge was made. This was his reply to the anonymous detractors of the Gurnay strain, and, as he well knew, first-class publicity for his birds. This is the actual wording of the challenge:—

"Against any loft within the Manchester Flying Club radius, in their season's programme of 7 races for Old Birds, Worcester to Marennes, 529 miles, 3 Prizes each race. £50, £30, £20, no bird home same day no prize. 1 bird takes the lot.

"In addition, the loft winning most money as above to have a Special Prize of £150, also the loft making the best average over all the 7 races to have a Special Prize of £150 (total time total distance system). In all races 10 birds to be nominated each race on marking day."

There were no takers, not surprisingly, since the shorter races at which he was most successful were best provided for. Nevertheless, it provoked a lively correspondence in "The Racing Pigeon", in which many well-known fanciers joined. The final letter came from Mr. Shaw and had this footnote by the Editor of "The Racing Pigeon":

"The reason your last letter was in the advertising columns was because we look upon all challenges simply as advertisements, and saw no reason to classify yours differently as you were the original challenger. As it is quite evident nothing is coming out of this challenge business, the correspondence is closed.—Ed., 'R.P.'"

MOST SUCCESSFUL IN SHORT RACES

Fred Shaw knew as well as anybody, and freely admitted, that Renier Gurnay only raced his pigeons with outstanding success in races up to Angouleme, that is about 450 miles, and he knew, too, that his Gurnays were at their best at distances under 450 miles. He believed that long distances and particularly the two-day races were very difficult for birds flown Widowhood; consequently he never accepted the challenges for the real long distance races. It is a wise man who knows his limitations.

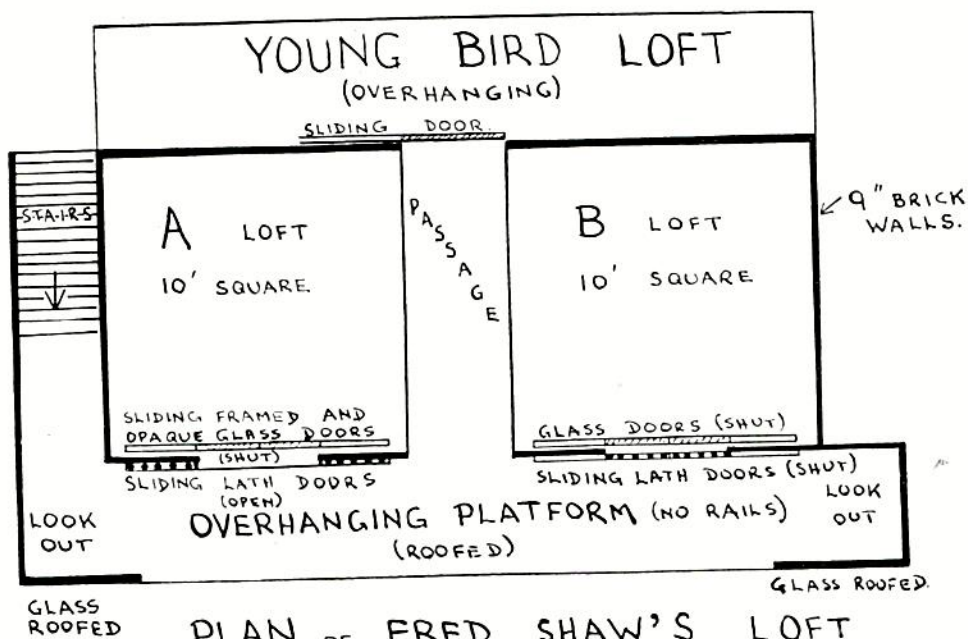
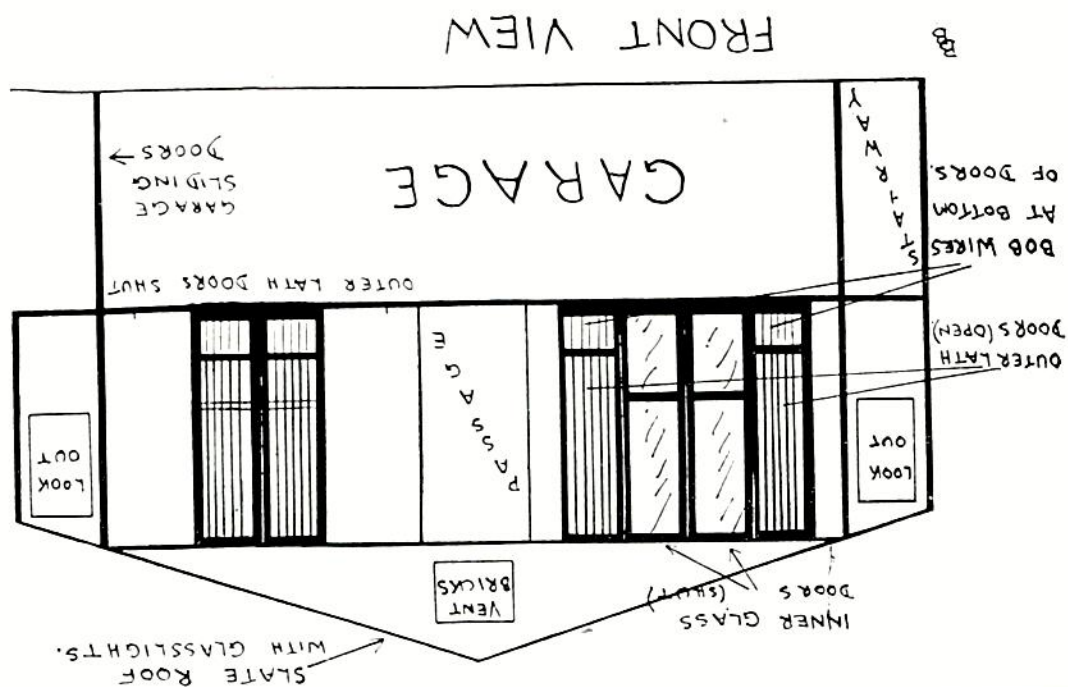
The Gurnays, however, were unbeatable in the short races. From Bath, for example, he was in 1921 1st and 3rd; 1922 1st and 2nd; 1923 1st; 1924 1st and 3rd; 1925 1st and 2nd; 1926 race point changed to Mangotsfield — nevertheless, 1st, 2nd and 3rd, with 2,011 competing. Similarly, from Bournemouth, 1921 1st and 2nd; 1922 1st, 2nd, 3rd and 4th; 1923 1st, 2nd and 3rd; 1924 1st and 2nd; 1925 1st, 2nd and 3rd; 1926, the first failure, only 6th. This record is probably unbeaten anywhere in Britain. His success at his peak was such that the members gave up the Stockport Social Circle as hopeless, and pooling in the South East Section of the Manchester Flying Club became less and less.

When he was challenged to fly in a local club, and to race as successfully as he did in the Manchester Flying Club, he showed them what he could do. In the first race he sent five birds and won 1st, 2nd, 3rd and 4th; in the second race he sent four birds and won 1st, 2nd and 3rd; and from Marennes he won 1st, 3rd and 6th. In the whole of these he only had one of his first team of 20 cocks, "Champion Apollo", and the rest were made up of his second team of 20 yearling cocks and hens.

Although most of his fame came from his cocks, it was by no means these only that gained him his success. The hens "Spotter" and "Dancer" both won first Stockport Federation against over 3,500 birds.

HIS METHODS

Fred Shaw claimed, with some justification, that his birds could win under any system, although he raced the Widowhood system extensively. However, in 1923, he dropped this system altogether and raced them all Naturally. He gave his birds an open loft and allowed them to fly as they liked, then one toss at 40 miles and into the first race at 86 miles. This, of course, was for his old birds. During the



PLAN OF FRED SHAW'S LOFT
AT THE GRANGE.

day, when he was away from his loft, his birds received no attention at all, but in the evenings he spent some considerable time sitting by the lofts, just watching them and picking the birds to pool.

He used trapping seed, particularly in the early stages of the training, so that they would enter quickly. This, of course, was particularly applicable to his Naturally raced birds, for he rarely found difficulty with those which flew Widowed. As a rule, he did not allow the water trough to remain in the loft continuously, but only for an hour or so after feeding.

The normal mixture that he gave his birds was tares and maple peas. He usually gave them the tares first, so that they would eat them and not just have the peas. He sometimes varied this diet by giving them beans before the peas and remember these were the days when beans were not so frequently used as today. He followed this on the Wednesdays and Thursdays before racing with maize if he thought they had not eaten enough. The normal diet then was: after morning exercise — tares followed by peas; after evening exercise — tares or beans, followed by peas; and on Wednesdays and Thursdays before race days, maize was added.

During their training period and up to the time they were mated, he fed them a mixture of peas, tares and wheat. He did not believe in giving them beans until racing was at hand. The peas and wheat were frequently left in the loft the whole day, since he found that some of the hens were unable to get near the food at feeding times since they were driven away by the cocks.

For the hens, as soon as they laid they were given only peas, with rarely some tares and occasionally small seeds if they had been flying during the day. After the youngsters had hatched and were about a week old, he would restart the beans, mostly for the benefit of the cocks who would now normally be needing them. The youngsters were fed like the hens, on peas and tares, with a little wheat on occasions.

At the beginning of the season, the birds were paired up in the normal way and watched carefully for a day or two to make sure that there was no fighting in the loft. In the week or so before mating, the birds were given plenty of exercise and opportunities made for introducing the birds gradually to each other. It was, of course, even more important than with a natural loft that the cock should only see its destined mate, and of course it should not be allowed to approach too close to the hen and upset the laying timetable.

He attached importance (as do a very large number of Belgians

today) to getting the cock used to its nest box before the hen arrived, so that the cock would almost fly to its nest box rather than to the hen, although, of course, he did not carry this to the extremes to which it has been taken in some quarters.

On the actual day of mating the hens, recognising by now their cocks, were introduced into the cocks' nest boxes, and were shut in for several hours. When they were first allowed out, all other nest boxes were kept closed, but on the second occasion they might be allowed to mix with a few other couples, and on the third occasion it was possible to let all the birds run together.

When the hen was about to lay, then her exercise would be limited to once a day in the morning, and the cocks would be exercised separately. After she laid, as a rule, the hen only brought up one of the eggs, and the other egg, in the case of a valuable pair, was put out to foster parents if possible. When this youngster was about 10 or 11 days old, the cock was left in sole charge and the hen removed to a distant loft.

This, it will be noticed, is rather similar to the Semi-widowhood system (see Chapter 10) as quite frequently practised by many fanciers, and just as in the Semi-widowhood system a fancier will normally have to assist the cock to feed the youngster, usually when the cock is exercising morning and evening. This, of course, differs slightly from the method used by Gurnay, who used to separate the birds before the egg was hatched and to allow the cock to sit alone until he deserted the eggs.

During this period of the hatching of the egg, the cocks were put into serious training. For those without a great deal of experience, they had several short tosses of 15 miles, then several at 30 and one or two at 40. The hens were, as a rule, trained over some of the shorter distances of about 15 miles to keep them fit. It was arranged that the hen was always on the nest when the cock arrived. When the eggs hatched the training was halted for a while and regular exercise commenced. This, as a rule, was for the cocks only although sometimes the hens were exercised at midday when it was possible to exercise the cocks morning and evening.

After the hen had been removed, the cocks started training again with the 15 mile toss and during this period they did not see their hens at all. This continued for about a week until the youngster was ready to leave. It was then nearly the beginning of the racing season. The final part of this system before racing commenced was the re-introduction of the hens. The youngsters had by now been removed

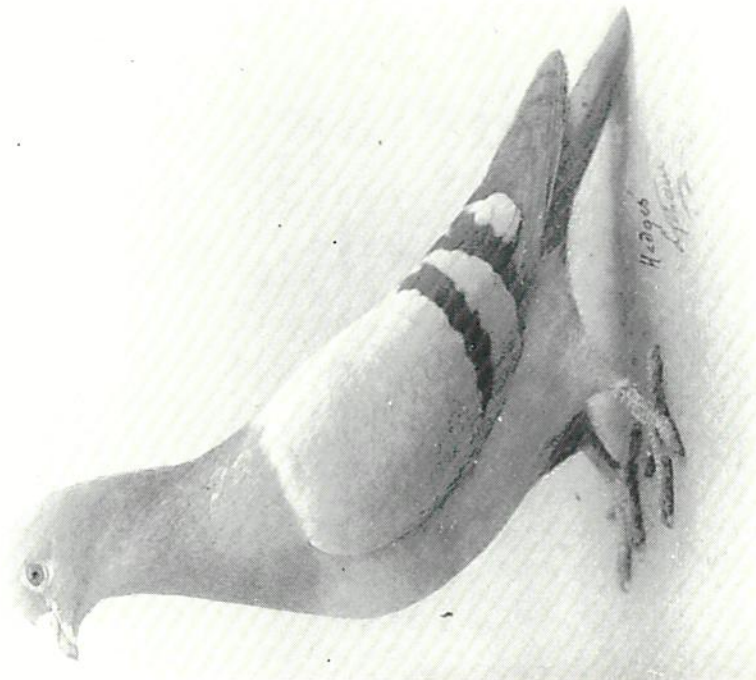
to the young bird loft and the cocks' nest boxes contained only the cock.

The hen was then placed back in the nest box, but great care was taken to see that there was no treading. The cock was then placed in its basket for a training toss. This procedure was repeated on all the tosses until the first race. On returning from each of these training tosses the hen was, of course, waiting for the cock, and they were allowed to remain together for a short while before being separated again. The hen was well fed before the cock returned and the cock had near at hand ready supplies of maples or small seeds, which he could pick up as soon as he felt inclined. All food was placed in pots inside the nest box.

During racing before the cock was basketed the hen was shown to the cock for a few minutes, but they were not allowed into the same nest box. Later on the hen, of course, was waiting in the nest box when the cock returned, and about half an hour after the cock returned the hen was removed to its loft as usual.

There was nothing special about his loft, but he was a great believer in the value of light for pigeons, and indeed his loft in later years, at Bramhall, was a converted greenhouse whitewashed on the inside. For similar reasons he decreed the use of darkened lofts for Widowhood pigeons, saying that they were unnecessary. His old loft at The Grange, Hyde was a solid, brick-built affair with large doors the full height of the loft, open on race days, and with the nest boxes at the other end of each section.

A loft he used in his later years (not the one he raced to in his period of greatest successes) was of steel and asbestos, about 20ft. by 6ft. This had ventilators, a dowel front and glass roof lights to let in the sunlight he believed so important. In one compartment there were box perches and a triangular platform in the centre of the floor on which the hoppers were kept which also served as a table. The young bird section had the usual fittings except that the floor was raised to allow the accommodation of trays of feeding stuffs underneath. The racing section contained separate nest boxes about 18in. x 23in. These were the same pattern as he used in his old loft at The Grange, and were closed in the front by bolting wires which would only allow the bird to enter. A door was fitted so that when open it became a perch. It is similar in appearance to that used by W. S. Pearson. There was only a narrow dropping board with a single bolt wire on the entrance. The whole thing was quite simple, as were his earlier lofts, and designed to give a maximum of light and air.



Bon Bleu, this grand pigeon competed in nine races and won nine prizes. Fred Shaw purchased this grand racer from Renier Gurnay for a sum in excess of £100 in 1921.

I remember being told by Vic Watts that veteran of the South West who flew so successfully from Lervick winning the race in 1969 and many times placed. He gives Shaw the credit: if that's the word, for introducing mid-week tosses to this country. Before then it was exercise round the loft for everybody but in those years Shaw sent his loftman down to Stafford every day with a basket of Widowers. I do not think the story is not quite correct because the old RP Insurance labels were sold right through both OB and YB seasons, but he would be right about training them every day without exercise at home.

FIVE

RENIER GURNAY

THE HISTORY OF "RENE" GURNAY IS WELL-KNOWN IN PART TO MOST fanciers; his extraordinary success over the years until his death in 1939 has earned common acceptance of the title that Georges Gils gave him, "Emperor". He began his racing some time in the 1880's, and was still winning in the 1930's, more than 50 years of success. His wins in one season alone were £9,400 and in seven consecutive seasons were £45,000 this latter was won with a team of only 25 pigeons. To turn this into present day prices would give a round figure of about a million pounds! He is forgotten in modern Belgium (as are all the old great masters) but few today could better these performances. Another of his famous exploits in National racing was the occasion when he won £4,000 in eight days with six pigeons, or the equally famous Angouleme National, where he entered four pigeons and gained 1st, 12th and 38th, with 1,643 competing. Another of these wins which will go down in history was the Vierzon National Race where he entered two pigeons and won 1st and 2nd. He possessed at one time at least three pigeons, "Little Blue Cock", "Bariolé", and "Bronze Favourite", which had won the Belgian Grand National over half an hour in front of their nearest rivals.

His loft at Verviers in Belgium excelled not only in the production of racing pigeons but also in show birds. At one Grand Exposition de Liège he won 1st, 2nd and 3rd and Championship, against 816 competitors, and 1st and 2nd against 312 competitors. At the Brussels International Show he entered three birds, and gained 1st, 2nd and 4th. His national success at racing was, of course, coupled with an almost complete dominance in his local district; in his club in Verviers, where the competition was extremely keen, for more than 21 years in succession he had the greatest number of prizes, greatest cash winnings, and the greatest number of 1st, 2nd and 3rd prizes. It is a record perhaps without equal in the history of pigeon racing. His collection of trophies was tremendous and, of course, included the most "luxurious trophy in the world", which was a painting some 13ft. x 9ft. of ten of his pigeons. This hung for many years inside his drawing room.

His strain is based on the famous Hansenne blood and it was from Hansenne that he got nearly all of his famous winners. It was said that the Gurnay strain was "the Hansenne strain brought up to date,

raised and cared for by a master". The two names "Hansenne" and "Gurnay" are indeed inseparable, and many expert fanciers in Belgium go so far as to say that Rene Gurnay even surpassed that great fancier, Alexandre Hansenne.

The Hansenne strain owed its high sporting value to a mixture of three famous bloods — Dedoyard, Guelissen and Bonjeau. The mixture of these three strains founded the Hansenne family, and the three bloods explain the colours of the present-day Gurnays — bronze, blue and white. The blending of these three colours has given other colours which only the laws of heredity can explain. The fact remains that the majority of Gurnays today are bronze, blue, blue chequered, or pied. Hansenne also possessed a blue with white feathers, which produced the Ben Joli, which later became the property of M. Dourmier, of Antwerp. Amongst the Gurnay descendants even today we find blues with the white feathers.

Gurnay was a runner* for Hansenne in the 1880's, and became his great friend, so much so that Hansenne allowed his young friend (M. Gurnay was then under 20) to take away from his loft any bird he wanted. Gurnay soon met with success and Hansenne was so pleased that he gave Gurnay a favourite blue hen on the same Sunday it had won a first prize. This was later paired to a bronze cock, a great racer, also a present from Hansenne, but considered too old for further work on the road. This pair gave excellent results, and so many winners that Gurnay decided to keep to the Hansenne blood and concentrate on this wonderful strain, thus he determined to get hold of the very best.

Hansenne possessed a bird known as "Cœur sur le Dos", an unbeatable racer, a white "Merle" (Blackbird), a name often given to an outstanding pigeon in Belgium. This bird was also a great breeder whose youngsters were much cherished by Hansenne. Gurnay knew all about this bird and was determined to get hold of some from "Cœur sur le Dos" and on the eve of Hansenne's sale Gurnay selected and purchased two youngsters.

Mons. Hanssur, a rich fancier of Verviers, was a big buyer at Hansenne's sale, and paid very high prices for several of the best birds. Gurnay was aware of this, and later re-bought the whole of these birds because, first of all, he did not want a number of birds in

*In the days before pigeon clocks, the rubber ring, the wording of the stamp or sometimes the bird itself had to be shown at the clubhouse so a good runner was much sought after.

Verviers of the same origin as his own. To show the care and thoroughness of Gurnay, it is interesting to know that out of the birds purchased from Mons. Hanssur, all of which were true Hansenne, Gurnay retained only ten pigeons. From these ten pigeons, the yearling blue hen and her mate, the bronze cock, together with the two from "Cœur sur le Dos", all guaranteed absolutely Hansenne, the Gurnay strain had been built up, and, what is more, had been kept up to date for over 50 years.

On very rare occasions Gurnay would introduce a new cross, but any new birds were few and far between and selection very severe. Should he have the slightest doubt about any new pigeon introduced or about any youngster from the cross, not only the youngster but also any others, and the parent itself would be killed. Even when the new cross stood up to the severe test that it had to face it was only allowed to blend with a limited number and was soon absorbed by the strong Gurnay strain. As an example, the Verhoye blood was introduced from Courtrai when this fancier was at the height of his fame. He had just won 1st, 2nd and 3rd prizes from Angoulême, the 3rd pigeon being 20 minutes in advance of the 4th bird in the race. This Verhoye blood was a success, but is only to be found in a very few pedigrees in the Gurnay loft. The "Verhoye Raye" was one of these. Entered for Angoulême race on a hard day, he arrived first, winning the race by 20 minutes and 19,000 francs. This was in 1930, and it was not many years later that Gurnay retired. The 1936 Gurnay sale was summed up by one great Belgian writer as follows: "This will be the end of the last pure Belgian strain".

Almost all of Gurnay's great wins were won by flying the birds on the forced separation or Widowhood system, although his hens were also most successful. Here in Gurnay's own words, are the methods he used.

To fly birds well in a state of Widowhood, attention must be given every second. If a fancier believes that it is merely sufficient to separate the cocks from the hens to obtain results, he will quickly be given proof to the contrary.

The fancier must busy himself all the year round with his pigeons, have them well in hand, stop all fielding and have at his disposal very spacious buildings. For as Widowhood gives marvellous results with an experienced fancier — it induces the well-managed pigeon to very great speed — so it will only give pitiful results to the fancier who has

not at his disposal sufficient time nor sufficiently profound knowledge.

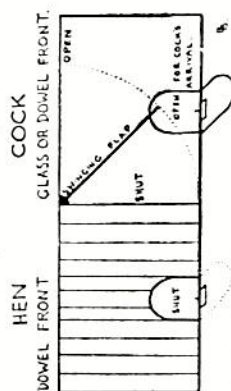
THE LOFTS

First of all one must have a loft for the cocks, a loft for the youngsters and a loft for the hens, sufficiently distant from that of the cocks so that the hens cannot either be seen or heard. In addition, one requires a loft for the breeding pairs.

The loft for the cocks, that is to say the racing loft, must not contain any perches and possess just as many nest boxes as there are cocks. These boxes must have a board that will turn down and serve as a perch for the cocks. The front of the box must be closed with laths and there must be an entrance such that the cock returning from a race can enter immediately and cannot get out again.

My loft is composed of boxes measuring about 15in. deep, 20in. wide and 18in. high. The boxes are all of the same dimensions and are placed one on top of the other. They can be removed easily in proportion to the losses in racing, for it is essential that there shall be only one box for each cock.

(Editor's Note. — Gurnay used in his time many patterns of nest boxes, but one of the simplest ones is that of which the front view is shown here. The hens were kept on one side, the cocks on the other, and in their section the hens bred their youngsters. When they were finished, the Widowhood training began. The hens were then moved to a hut, and as soon as they were released, they would fly straight back to their nest boxes and wait there until their cocks returned from a race. The lath partition that separated them could be let down so that the cocks and hens could not reach each other. After the race they were taken back to the hut, where they could not be seen or heard. All the birds were normally fed in their nest boxes and could fly straight to them through an open door. This pattern of a nest box has the advantage of being dual-purpose in that it can also be used for Natural racing.)



TRAINING FOR THE COCKS

I pair up about three weeks before the races, allow the birds to sit for a week and then take away the hen. The cock continues to sit alone for several days, and then abandons the eggs which are then taken away. This is the moment when the education of the pigeon commences, or its re-education, if the bird has already been flown in this fashion.

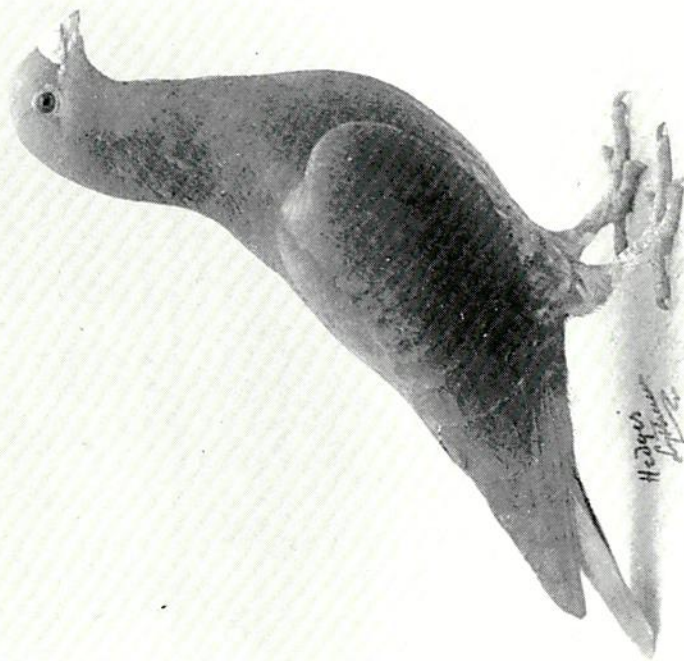
Morning and evening they have to fly, commencing with half an hour and increasing until at the end of a few days, the birds fly without interruption for an hour. Whatever the weather the cocks must fly each day, morning and evening, for an hour. As soon as the flight is finished the loft is shut up. Then the period of training commences. At the beginning the cock travels without seeing his hen, either on the return or on the departure, but on his return he is greeted by his owner who gives him some carefully chosen food.

In the few training tosses preceding the races, before the basketing, the hen is left with the cock for a few seconds but great care is taken to avoid any close contact. The cock must on his return find his hen shut up in his box and he must do the same after each race. The pigeon accustomed to finding on his return the companion of his desires, will be full of fire on the return journey. I leave the pair one hour or two together and then take the hen away again until the next race.

I tried many years ago to fly separated hens but did not obtain the same results as with cocks and I abandoned this method temporarily.

Many fanciers have tried Widowhood but very few are those who have continued with it. The first attempts are very difficult. At the beginning the pigeons are seen to take to the roof. They seem to be morose. They are not really in form until after the time when they know that at each return from a journey they will discover their hens. The fancier who will persevere will see in the long run that the pigeons are in a good state of health, the results are magnificent by this system.

Certain pigeons will not take to Widowhood easily. They lose appetite; they will not eat such-and-such a grain. It is necessary to give them tit-bits to make them decide to eat. Millet, hemp, rape, even a paste of hard-boiled eggs mixed with breadcrumbs. If, in spite of these chosen foods, one or several subjects persist in not eating and pine, Widowhood must be stopped for a certain time and the bird put in the loft among the breeding pairs.



Bronze Excellence, this pigeon was described by many Belgians as unbeatable, he won £1,000 in four races for Renier Gurnay prior to purchase by Fred Shaw.

For lofts practising Widowhood the period of breeding commences as soon as the races are ended. At this time the hens are replaced in the loft where they are allowed to rear a couple of youngsters. Contrary to what one might suppose in Widowhood the pigeon moults with difficulty. The fancier then has little time to make them moult. It is a critical moment and if they do not have a good moult the following season is greatly endangered.

In addition to the above notes translated from the words of Renier Gurnay himself, I am indebted to Frank Denton, who was a great friend both of Gurnay and of his loft manager for some more information on some of his methods for success and these last few notes are based largely on what he has told me. He calls the Gurnay system a "mathematical system", because nothing was done approximately, all exactly. The grain given to each bird was weighed. Each bird was weighed, so that their form could be judged. In the same way, to test for their condition, he used to take their pulse with the aid of his wrist watch.

The sort of pigeon he liked was a short, very thick-necked one, with short, very thick legs, and he liked them on the big side for he said that a good big one could beat a good little one. He tried also to get a similar uniformity in their colours. He called some "bastard colours" and was always trying for a good deep colour. If he had a bird with a feeble colour, he tried very hard to get rid of it. "St. Vincent le Griz" was a bird he spent all his racing career trying to get rid of but could not.

He believed in giving his birds a paste; the exact prescription was never revealed but one of the ingredients was butter. He gave this paste to youngsters and old birds in the evening, and he believed that this was largely instrumental in obtaining the big bone structure he sought. This paste was used twice in England by Frank Denton — once on Walter Torkington's pigeons in the Experimental Marennes Race, when his little blue pied hen won the section and the second time on "Verdict" when she won the Guernsey Race.

Soon after the race birds returned to the loft it was Gurnay's custom to make sure every bird had a bath and a drink of what he called his "Vin Rouge". This, instead of being red wine, was permanganate of potash kept in a concentrated form in a large bottle. A few drops, just enough to tint the water, were added to the drinking water and enough to turn the water quite red was added to

the bath. This, of course, disinfected the birds inside and out. He used colza seed occasionally — mostly a small pot full every Monday morning — and he never touched canary or hemp.

He did not believe in racing the yearlings on Widowhood because they were too erratic and he handled his two-year-olds very carefully. The youngsters were not allowed out no matter how old they were until they responded to the loft management. Quite often this was not until, as he said, their wattles were whitening. Then the young ones were lightly fed the night previously, were given no food in the morning, and allowed to find their own way out of the loft. No old birds were allowed out until the youngsters were all back in. For this reason he very rarely lost a youngster. He always said to people who commented on his methods, "Why let a youngster out before it has enough sense to know its loft?"

POSTSCRIPT

It is not very well known that Lt.-Col. A. H. Osman flew some pigeons on the Widowhood System in the early 1920's, and the following correspondence with Ben (not Fred!) Shaw, of Wilmslow, Cheshire, dated 1924, is of considerable interest in showing his methods. The apparent vehemence of his denial of the "Gurnay system" is largely a reaction to the continued abuse of the term in certain advertisements.

Wilmslow, Cheshire.

February 17th, 1924.

"Dear Sir, — I have five pigeons (cocks), flown 300 and 400 miles, 1923. I raced them on the Gurnay system. They reared the first nest and I then separated them and flew them odd, letting them see their hens before sending them to the races, and they found them in their nest boxes when they arrived from the races. I won three firsts with three cocks in my club, fifty members, and first federation, 3,000 birds each race. I only raced twelve cocks 80 miles first race, velocity 960, 125 miles, velocity 1000, 359 miles, velocity 950. The other six stopped 181 miles, only losing one bird. I want to know if you think those that have flown 300 and 400 miles will do better or not, if they don't rear any young ones this season. Pair them up and let them sit first round of eggs, not let them hatch out, and then separate them and fly them odd. Have you tried racing old birds without letting them rear before racing? I mean the birds that have flown 300 and 400 miles, — BEN SHAW."

19 Doughty Street.

February 22nd, 1924.

"Dear Mr. Shaw, — In answer to your interesting letter, let me at once say, during my many visits to Belgium, extending over 40 years, I never heard of what you describe as the 'Gurnay system'. Nor do I think any Belgians have ever heard of a system described as such.

"In Belgium for many years a system called the 'Widowhood' System is practised by a large number of fanciers in Liège and Verviers, and I believe that Mons. Gurnay trains and exercises his birds on this system. And the system you describe in your letter is the system of Widowhood adopted by Mons. Pirlot and many other noted Liège fanciers. The birds are mated at the commencement of the year, allowed to rear one young in the first nest and then separated in the manner you describe. At times I have trained my birds on these lines and won as many as 20 or 30 firsts in a year.

"In 1921, when the rail strike kept us racing from a moderate distance a number of weeks, I put a number of cocks on this system, and won during that season eleven firsts and a number of pools each week. But the system entails a great amount of work. It is essential to force the separated cocks to take exercise at home. They need to be flagged for at least three-quarters of an hour each day. Mons. Gurnay has a mast and a flag at his loft especially erected for this purpose."

"Widowhood fanciers usually breed and keep a large number of birds, and from these select a given number for special preparation on the Widowhood lines. One of the difficulties is to get the birds to eat sufficiently to maintain strength and flesh, and to stand the strain of racing. Really good tares are largely used in place of peas and beans. Rape seed and a little hemp is also freely used by some of those who follow these methods. The birds are not given a great amount of work on the road, fine weather always being selected for the training. They are, however, given a fair number of single up tosses about ten miles from the loft to get them to home straight and finish on a straight course. Great care is taken in trapping in order not to spoil a good bird.

"Usually the loft is so constructed that the birds can see the entrance to the nest boxes from the outside and they fly straight to their box when homing being caught in the nest box. To train on this system of Widowhood means that a man must constantly be with his birds during the racing and training season to do all that is necessary, and do it at the right time.

"In Belgium the followers of this system are usually heavy poolers. Supposing they send ten birds to a race, they do not follow our system of selecting different birds for different pools, but usually pool every bird in all pools, so that no matter which bird homes first, it is well up in all pools, and this often beats the smaller competitor who can only pool one bird in the heavy pools and is very often handicapped in making his selection.

"Providing a man adopts the system of Widowhood training and his loft is well situated, having regard to the general trend of the wind, birds trained on this system on fine days will usually score over those burdened by a lot of feeding or rearing young, or sitting. But the birds are always trained well. If the weather happens to be very bad and the birds compelled to spend a night out in a long race, they take so much out of themselves trying to get home the first day that they are subject to crack up and not come on as well as those having some reserve to help them.

"In answer to your inquiry, my answer is in the negative. I think it is necessary to let the birds hatch the first nest of eggs and use the first lot of soft food, otherwise they go stale and do not race as well as those allowed to do so. After the soft food of the first nest has been used, then you can take liberties because the birds are in training. If you allow them to remain together then because the sitting is irregular and may be broken the soft food is not found in such abundance as during the first round when they were sitting close and have not been put in training.

"I should, therefore, not advise you to pair them up and separate them without hatching the first nest. But you have had good results on the other method. Why change? I am not so sure that on the Widowhood system, after 400 miles, you will get very satisfactory results, unless very fine weather prevails.

"Let me advise you, if you have discovered a system that suits your birds, suits the position of your loft and enables you to win, not to make drastic changes so long as it pays. I do not like the drastic change you suggest of sitting the first nest and separating the sexes after for the reasons stated above, and advise you to stick to your old methods and continue to gain the fruits of doing so as long as possible, or until your birds begin to fail, then you will have seriously to consider the reason why.—A. H. OSMAN".