

The Emperor

By Hal Conn

THE EMPEROR

Hal Conn

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PREFACE

In the century during which racing pigeons has developed as a sport all over the globe, many figures, female as well as male, have earned the right to be recognized for their contributions. Some were great masters at the breeding of winning birds; some were great for conditioning or training; still other helped with reporting or developing new participants, and the list goes on.

One man was so large a figure that he has surpassed the accomplishments of all others, before, during, or following his lifetime. The writer has deliberately decided to preserve the bulk of this work for a narration of the life and exploits of Renier Gurnay. Others are mentioned, only if they have something to do with The Emperor directly.

If other greats are slighted, they must be the subjects of future works.

Hal Conn, Crystal River, Fl. 2001

Part One: Belgium

Chapter One

The Early Years

Renier Gurnay (Ren'-yay Goor-nay') was born in Verviers (Vair-vee-ay'), Belgium in 1864. He was to earn the nickname, "The Emperor," but we are getting several years ahead of our story.

Belgium is a tiny country, slightly larger than the state of Vermont, with a population of approximately eight million people. Geographically, it is situated between its large neighbors, France and Germany. Thus, it was the fate of the Belgians that, twice in a generation, they were most unfortunately in the way when Germany chose to invade France.

The Belgians are also linked to Germany and France in a language sense. The northwestern portion of the country speaks a dialect of German and Dutch, the Flemish influence, whereas, in the southeastern portion, influenced by the Walloons, the predominant language is French. The language factor may be one of the reasons that the development of the racing pigeon split between the two regions, Antwerp in the north, and Liege in the south. Some pigeon historians see Brussels as divergent from Antwerp and Verviers apart from Liege, but for the purposes of this work, it will suffice to place them in two groups.

Antwerp, at that time, had a population of about one million,

whereas the Liege citizens numbered about 100,000, of whom about 40,000 resided in Verviers.

Modern politicians group the Belgians with the Netherlands and Luxemburg as the "Benelux" nations. Although small, they are significant in terms of raw materials and trade; in other words, transportation.

In the sports world, the United States has its baseball and basketball and Great Britain its cricket and soccer, but the sport of pigeon racing owes its beginnings to Belgium, where it is still the national passion. In fact, Belgium is still the major world leader in the sport, closely followed by The Netherlands.

Pigeons have been used as messengers since ancient times. We are told that conquering heroes; returning home from their victories, sent pigeons on in advance of their armies to advise the home folks to prepare a celebration.

In more modern times, the Rothschild family of bankers used pigeons in Paris, c. 1820, to build an empire using market reports and battle news which they acquired more quickly and mysteriously than their opposition.

It may be that reading of these exploits provided a portion of the impetus for the development by the Belgians of homing or "racing" pigeons. Those early fanciers were geniuses at blending existing breeds to produce the results they sought, but they were certainly not historians, so we are often reduced to conjecture.

It should be noted as a basic that the "homing instinct," exists naturally in most, if not all, wild, or even domesticated animals. We have all read exploits of dogs and cats which ave found former homes, sometimes over distances of several hundred miles. Add the swallows which return to the

Mission at San Juan de Capistrano on the same day each year, the trout which swim upstream from the ocean to spawn, and many other creatures.

Apparently, then, the Belgians blended several varieties of domesticated pigeons to produce a bird with a superior homing instinct, greater speed, strength, and endurance. It may be argued that modern fanciers all over the world, continue this process; except that outside species are seldom, if ever, used. Rather, one mates "best to best," or inbreeds," using specimens within the colony, or, "line breeds," relating all subjects to one specific ancestor. The goal, of course, is to enhance the aforementioned qualities. The reader is encouraged to study these techniques elsewhere.

Probably the "fathers," of the modern racing pigeon were Mons. Ulens, curator of a zoological garden in Antwerp, and his loft manager (assistant), Mons. Beernaerts. Pigeon breeds used were the Persian Messenger, (or Eastern Carrier) similar to the English Carrier, Dragon (Dragoon), the Smerle, which in turn is a blend of Owl, Camus, Cumulet, and Turbit.

At about the same time, it is believed that Ulens obtained some birds from English fishermen, who used them to send messages back to their homes. These birds were also used in the blending of the first racing pigeons. Such activities were occurring c. 1850, and it is interesting to note that a century later, in the 1950's, there were successful American flyers who identified their birds as being of the Ulens Strain.

Although they had a common origin, the Antwerp and Liege types soon bifurcated, with the Antwerp pigeons becoming more long casted, more long legged and long necked than those of Liege. The Liege birds tended to have stronger backs and wing butts, with more rounded heads. To this day,

liege type birds are seen to have better feather quality. The Antwerp birds tended to have heavier wattles and ceres, and seem to have had the better records at long distance races.

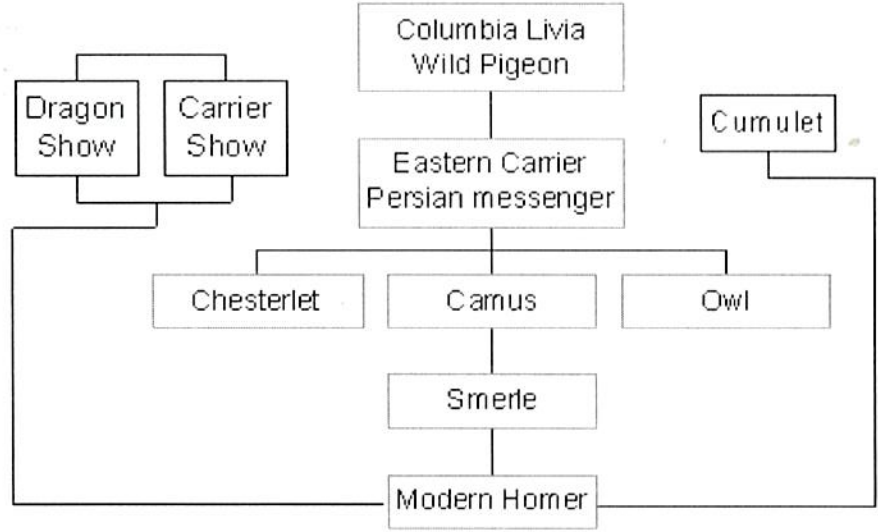
In the next one or two decades, Belgium exploded with new names of successful flyers. At the risk of overlooking many, it is felt that we should identify some major players who were connected to Gurnay in one way or another. Following Ulens in the Antwerp movement were: Gits, Delmotte, Grooters, Viegge, Stassart, and Janssens. Major Liege flyers were Hansenne, Bastin, Fabry, and Gurnay.

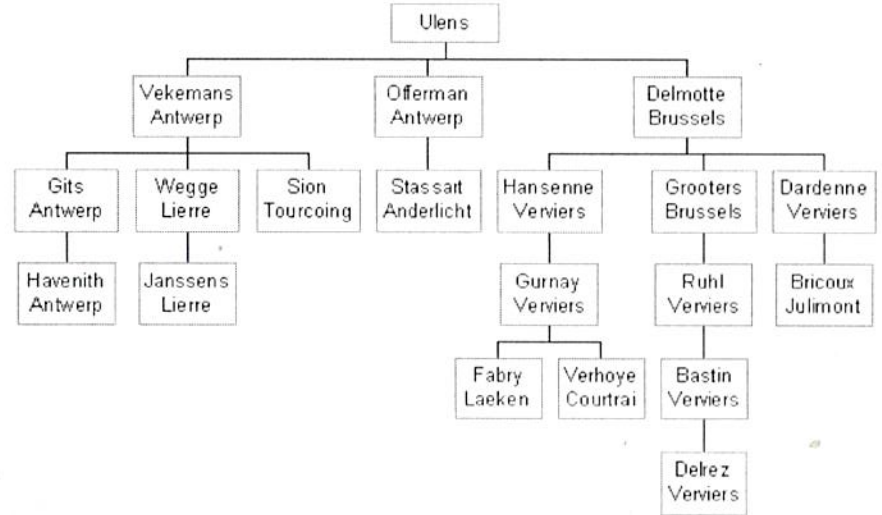
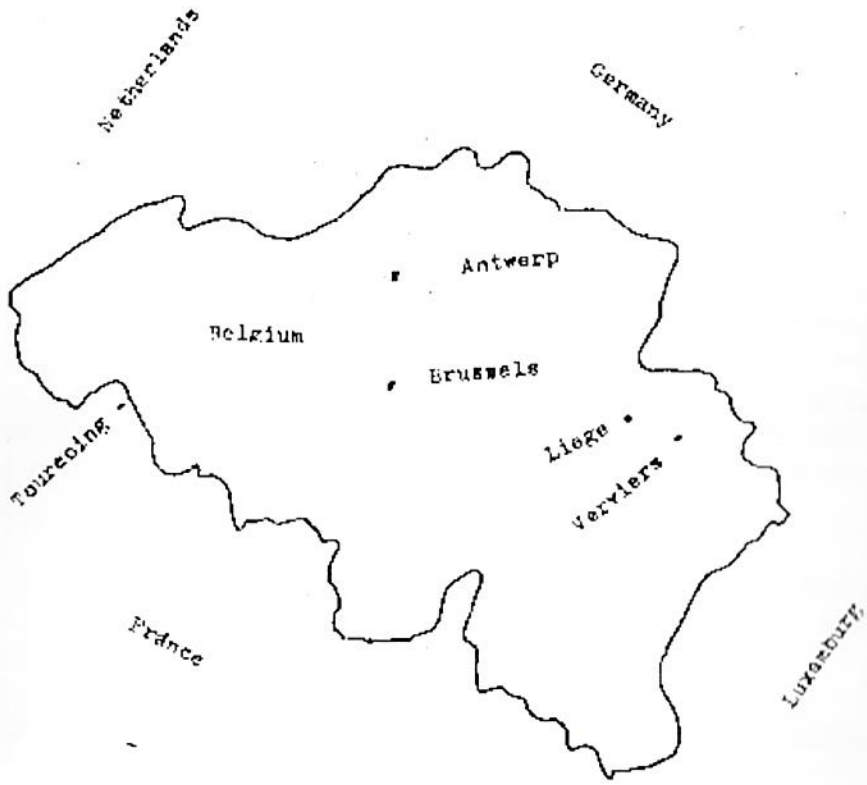
Finally, one should mention the great Paul Sion. Although technically, he was French, he lived in Tourcoing, on the Belgian border, and, as we know, pigeons do not care about man made geographical divisions. Sion's birds were of the Antwerp type; he flew with great distinction, and the strain which he founded was continued by his son, Robert. Descendants of those birds are still flown with success in the US.

One final introductory point. When the Belgians began to fly their birds competitively, they at first single tossed them and timed the individual flight.

We can well imagine that this process was too cumbersome, too time consuming, and lacked the thrill of competition.

Soon there were common releases of all competitors, but in the absence of clocks, the flyers ran with their birds to the clubhouse or central point, and the first one there was the winner.

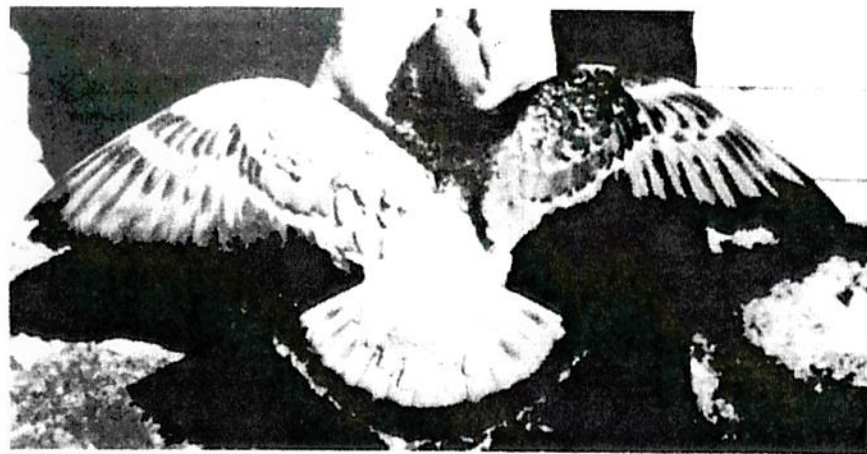




BLONDIE / Dean Young & Denis Lebrun

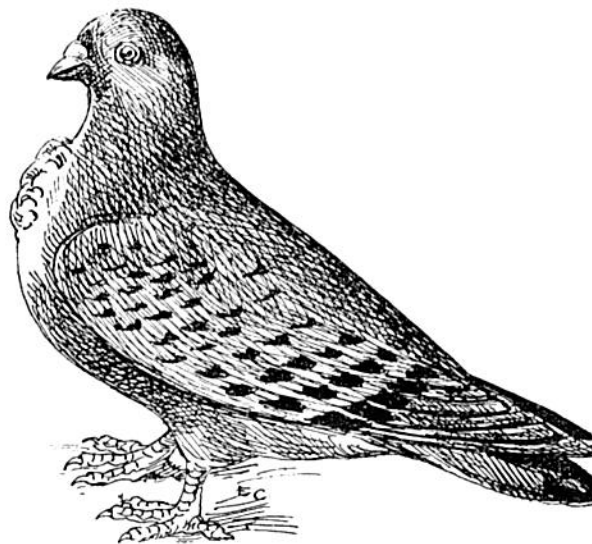


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MOSAIC MODENA

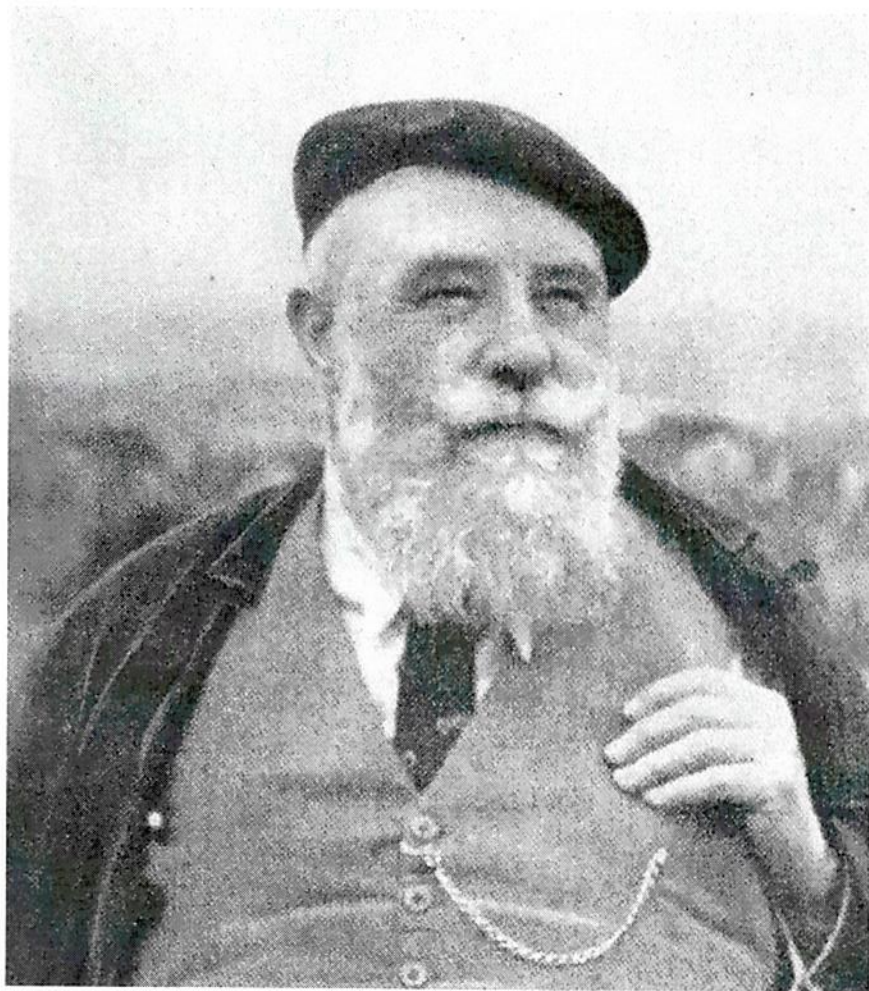
Mosaic Modena bred by Terry Fontenot, Lafayette, Louisiana. Photo from W.F. Hollander, Ames, Iowa



SMERLE



Dr. Anderson photographed with the late M. Jules Janssens, and some members of his family. Also in the picture are (second from right) the late Mr. O.I. Wood, of Gurnay fame, and Mr. Jack Barrett.



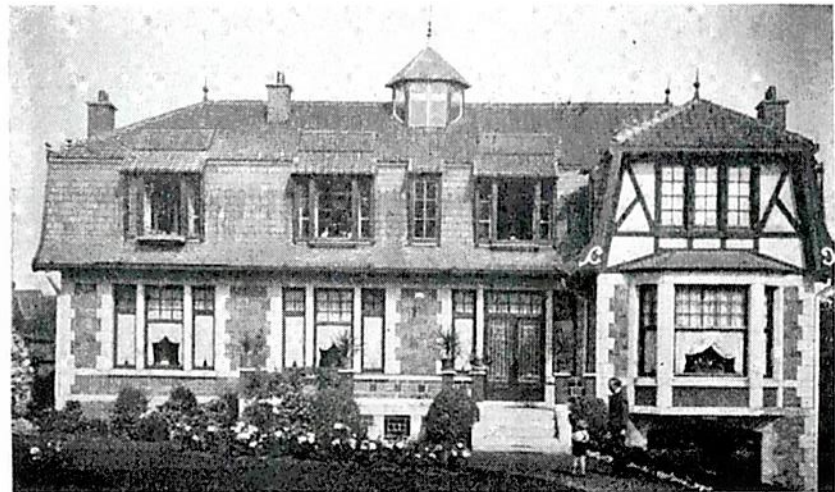
M.G. STASSART



M. PAUL SION



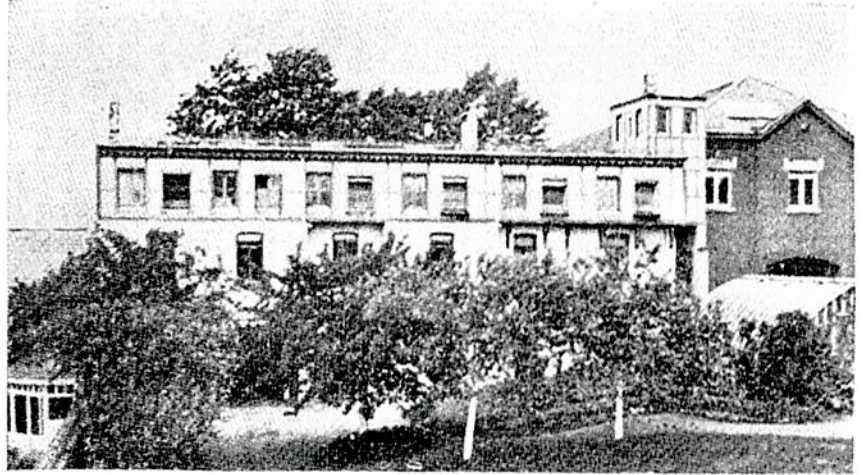
M. Georges Fabry
of Liège.



The Loft of M. Georges Fabry, occupying the complete top
portion of his house.



DR. ARTHUR BRICOUX



The Palatial Loft of the late M. Gurnay, of Verviers.



An informal photograph of the late Monsieur Renier Gurnay and Madame Gurnay.



M. PAUL VERHOYE



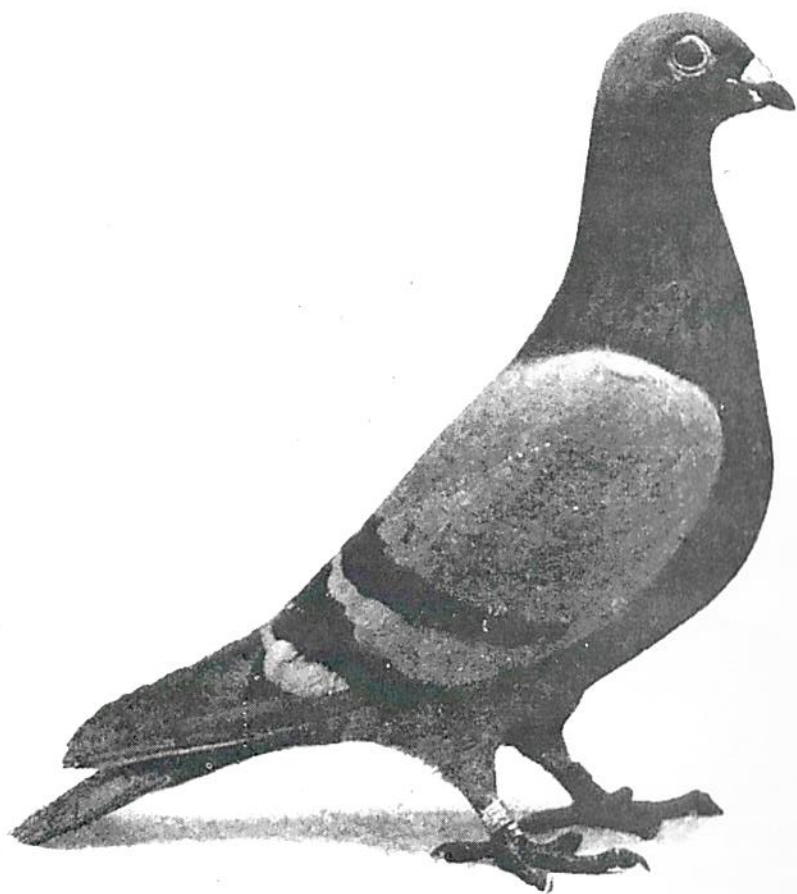
FRED SHAW



N. BARKER

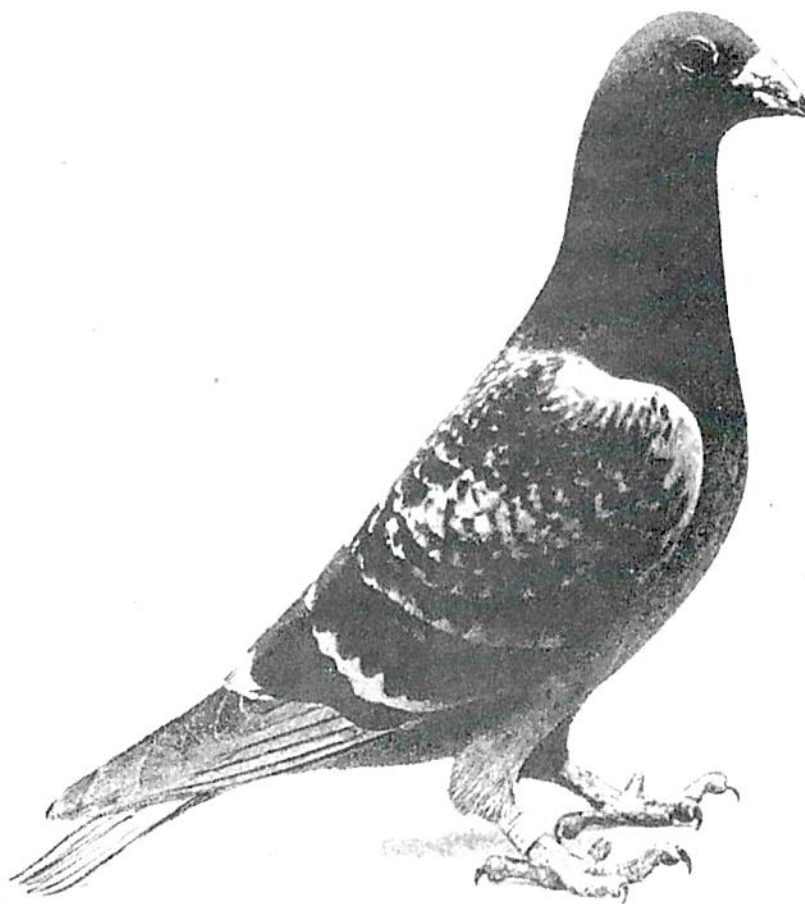


A. HANSENNE



"OLD BLUE HEN" ("Vielle Bleue")

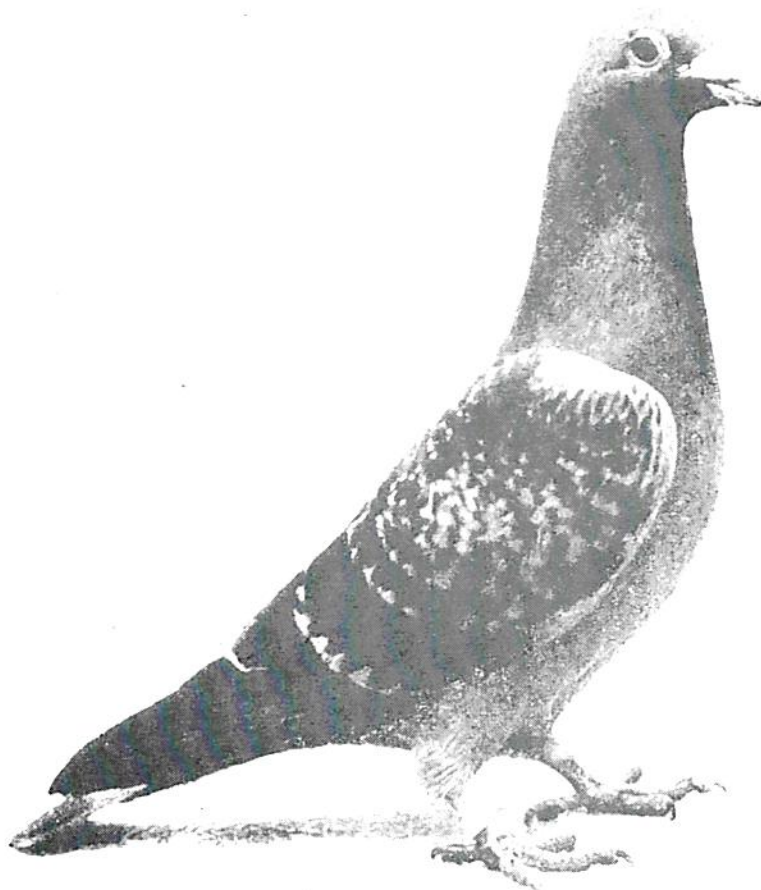
Foundation of loft. Her descendants won to one loft (M. Gurnay's) more than £100,000. Dam of the great "Bon Bleu", which sired "Bronze Favorite", 1st Grand National by half an hour, 1,643 competing, etc. etc. photograph taken when 15 years of age. Never beaten in the Expositions until she was 13 years of age. Presented to me by M. Gurnay, was buried in "The Grange" grounds on her death at 20 years of age.



"ANGOULEME"

Blue cheq. Cock.

Unique as a racer, breeder and exhibition bird. Won many prizes, including 1st in £40 pool in National. Nest-mate to "Petite Ecaille Vierzon", £1,600 in 16 races and brother to "The Masterpiece". "Angouleme" at "The Grange" Lofts, sired 1st prize winners at 9, 10, 11, 12 and 13 years of age- his grandson sired "Young Hawk". This bird represents my ideal in every detail for racing, breeding and exhibition.



"PETITE ECAILLE VIERZON"

"Little Cheq. Vierzon" Blue cheq. Cock.

Greatest pre-1914 war racer M. Gurnay ever had. 16 races-
16 prizes-£1,600, including 1st Vierzon – never out of big
money. Nest-mate to "Augouleme", unique as racer, breeder
and exposition. Also to "The Masterpiece". All three brothers
sired many 1st prize winners to "The Grange" lofts and all
over the world, including "Champion Apollo", "Champion
Repeater", "Seven Firsts", etc., etc. His granddaughter is
dam of "Bronze Favorite", 1st Grand National by half an
hour, 1,643 competing. Another granddaughter is dam of the
ace of aces, "Fonce Angouleme". 1st Angouleme by half an
hour; pool wins £2,100.