

## Chapter Five

### Further Belgian Champions

Hopefully, the reader will remember the disclaimer in the introduction. The writer is concerned mainly with those Belgian flyers who had some effect on the life and career of Renier Gurnay. Of course, many famous Belgian champions will be omitted; it is inevitable.

There is a further point. The secondary purpose of the book is to trace the Gurnay pigeons from Belgium to Great Britain and then to the United States. Yes, there were a few direct exports to the US from Belgium, but the great bulk of the Gurnays to arrive in the US were by way of Great Britain.

At present, therefore, we are concerned with exports of birds from Belgium to Great Britain.

### Georges Gits

Gits is especially important to us, because he was the first large scale exporter of birds to Great Britain. Secondly, he was one of the first to recognize the genius of Renier Gurnay and to crown him with the title: "The Emperor." Gits lived in Antwerp, where he was born in 1839. He came to prominence in the pigeon world about 1865, when he formed a racing club which eventually claimed 2000 members. Gits served as secretary for 50 years.

From all we can learn, Gits was a line breeder; which system requires frequent introduction of new birds. These were large, small, long, short; all sorts of dimensions, but he blended them into one of the strongest families of his day. It may be claimed with some justification that he was the greatest pure genius at breeding who ever lived.

Meanwhile, the English were going through a transformation. From the early days when British sea captains used birds with some homing ability to report home, a genuine interest in racing and in the Belgian strains began to develop in the British Isles.

Somewhere along in this era, some enterprising Antwerp residents began selling and reselling birds to gullible Englishmen, who released them; upon which, the birds returned to Antwerp.

Commander Rayner of the British Military relates dryly that such trusting folks were called, "Twerps."

At any rate, the British fanciers soon discovered that Georges Gits was a master breeder and racer, and there was scarcely a British loft in this time period which did not have a few descendants of the Gits birds.

Like Gurnay and most other champions, Gits was a careful record keeper, and his birds excelled in bad weather and headwinds. It was said of him that the tougher the day and the slower the speeds, the more top places he won.

As previously indicated, Gits sold many birds to England during his lifetime, and when he died in 1923, the remaining birds were sold in the British Isles.

## Charles Wegge

Wegge's birds were of the Antwerp type, and he probably began with Vekemans. Evidently, Vekemans was the successor to Ulens at the zoological gardens in Antwerp.

Wegge's special friend was Jules Janssens, and since they both lived in Lierre, it is probable that they saw each other almost daily.

Wegge, like Gurnay, felt that a good big bird would beat a good little bird. However, Wegge was a very close inbreeder, and yet, maintained the size. This is a mystery which much research has failed to solve.

The Wegge birds have been used for many years as a cross with other Antwerp families, but only a few of his birds ever reached England, and they are such different type from the Liege/Verviers pigeons that such crosses require many generations to become fruitful.

Wegge suffered from diabetes and died in 1898.

## Paul Sion

The Sions were probably the first of the great father/son teams. Robert, the son, carried on the marvelous exploits of his father and continued a dynasty which had been carefully developed by the father.

Probably most fathers, reading of the Sions, are a touch envious. It seems to be true that most sons, like those of Alexandre Hansenne, do not choose to follow in their fathers' footsteps and, instead, spend their energies in other pursuits.

How different pigeon history might have been, for example, if Renier Gurnay had had a son like Robert Sion.

Of further interest (the point made previously), that although the Sions were nominally French, Tourcoing is directly on the Belgian border, so calling the Sions "French," is more accident than descriptive.

The Sions tended to recessive red and were typical of Antwerp pigeons: long cased, long necked, and long legged.

They were favored earlier than many other strains in the US, and were imported directly from Sion father and son, rather than first going to England.

The Sions still have many devotees in the US and still excel; particularly at the long distances, flown natural.

They were imported by Charles Heitzman, of Kentucky, in large numbers during the post World War II years.

The Sions were a blend of Vekemans, as well as other existing strains; were especially good on bad days, and were prized by many others as a cross.

Both Sions flew natural, as well as widowhood. Experienced fanciers will understand that flying both systems at once requires very extensive loft space, full twenty four hour days, and the patience of Job.

## M.G.Stassart

Anderlecht is a few miles west of Brussels. It was logical, therefore, for Stassart to develop a family by crossing Antwerp and Liege. His birds were largely Wegge and

Hansenne, although he later introduced Bricoux.

Like Sion, Stassart was a wealthy man with large lofts and a loftman to do the routine care of the birds.

Sion and Stassart were warm personal friends, and some of Stassart's champions were a result of Sion crosses.

Like Sion, Stassart flew both natural and widowhood, but Stassart leaned toward natural hens. He felt that widowhood cocks got too cunning for the system, so their best years were 2,3,4, and 5.

The reader should note that none of our heroes really flew a bird very hard until it was two years old. In the words of Nestor Tremmery, another great of the time, "Never ask a boy to do a man's work."

The blood of the great Stassarts was also to be found in the Heitzman lofts in Kentucky. There is now a grandson, but your scribe knows nothing about him.

#### Jules Janssens

American readers should not confuse this fancier with a modern strain with a similar name spelling. They are not related.

Janssens lived in the same village (Lierre) as Wegge, and they were fast friends. The population of Lierre was about 2000, and it was said that when they had a pigeon race, there were more entries from the village than there were citizens in the community.

Janssens and Wegge freely exchanged birds, and Janssens gave birds to many others. He was called, "The Grand Old

Man of Belgian Pigeon Racing," and was president of "Federation Columbophile Belge" for over half a century.

Important in the Janssens cross were the Grooters brothers, as well.

Much of the Wegge/Janssens blood has trickled down into Stassart, Sion, Bricoux, and more modern strains.

#### Paul Verhoye

Verhoye lived in Courtrai, well west of Brussels, but firmly in the Antwerp sphere of influence. When he came to prominence midway in the Gurnay Era, Gurnay contacted him, and they exchanged some birds.

They became fast friends, although the few Verhoyes which actually became involved in the Gurnay breeding plans were soon absorbed. The cross, however, was very successful, and there is no doubt that both lofts benefitted.

We may be confident that the Verhoye birds were down from Vekemans, with probably some addition of Wegge or Janssens.

#### O. and E. Grooters

The Grooters brothers were very secretive of their birds and methods. No one was allowed into their lofts, and most information concerning them was pure speculation.

It was thought that they began with some birds from an English sea captain, which would account for the bold heads, since the English relied primarily on the Dragoon.

The Grooters were varied in size and shape but basically resembled the Liege pigeons more than the Antwerp. The same may be said of most of the Brussels birds.

The Grooters brothers specialized in races from 400 to 600 miles and won more than their share of races at those distances.

Eventually, the Grooters made their way to England and from there to the US, where they were regarded as a good long distance pigeon in the 1950's.

#### Lucien Bastin

Bastin lived in Verviers, so as far as we know, he did not acquire Gurnays directly. The reader will recall that Gurnay refused to sell any birds to anyone who might use them to compete against him. How often someone commissioned a third person to get such birds by subterfuge is unknown.

Bastin was a wealthy man, with large lofts and a loftman. However, he kept a small loft into which he put his potential champions, and he, alone, was responsible for their care.

His birds were of a lovely type, with the physique and the feather quality of the Gurnays. His colors ran more to chocolate than the bronzes and blues of Gurnay, and the blood eventually went to Putnam of England and to Curtis of the US. More of that later.

#### Dr. Arthur Bricoux

Jolimont (or Julimont) is north of Liege, and Dr. Bricoux really represents the "next generation," of the fanciers on our list.

He blended Antwerp and Liege, perhaps, to a greater extent than anyone of his time. He began with Grooters, but he added Wegge on several different occasions.

I saw the Bricoux in the '50's at the loft of a fancier who had imported them. They had great feather and were strong pigeons, but they looked as large to me as white kings.

I always felt that they were better suited to a climate like Belgium than sunbelt USA.

The German Signal Corps also valued the Bricoux birds. In World War Two, they confiscated Bricoux's entire loft and moved the birds to Munich, for the benefit of the German army. This fate was a threat for all Belgian flyers of note, and we are told that Gurnay helped a number of fellow competitors to avoid the conscription of their birds.

#### Georges and Victor Fabry

This is another father/son team, and they lived in Liege.

Georges Fabry was a chemist (today, we would say, "pharmacist,") and he was much in demand as a consultant on pigeon health.

The birds were down from Hansenne, but unlike Gurnay, the Fabrys did not hate white feathers, so there were soon pieds and splashes throughout the loft.

To see the Fabrys today, one has no doubt that they are related to the Gurnays, and they fly very well indeed.

#### The Interpreters

Americans get by very well in the world. We speak an

American form of English, and anyone who wishes to communicate with us can jolly well learn our brand of English.

There are problems with this philosophy if one gets away from the tourist centers in foreign lands and attempts to communicate with people in THEIR language.

This was the basic problem when pigeon people from other lands visited Belgium.

One interpreter/guide was Jules Maesenaere, of Zarren, who spoke both English and French.

Another was Northrop Barker, who moved from Yorkshire to Brussels and became one of its most successful pigeon flyers, as well as interpreter.

Again, the writer gets ahead of his story, but it was with great amusement that I read a purported conversation between Fred Shaw and Gurnay as related by Shaw. I am convinced that this conversation was a pure figment of Shaw's imagination, since he spoke no French, and Gurnay spoke no English.

## Part Two: Great Britain

### Chapter One

#### Exports from Belgium

That the citizens of Great Britain enthusiastically adopted the sport of flying pigeons would be an understatement.

The British took the Belgian methods, including the computation of speeds in yards per minute, which is the standard worldwide up to the present.

Next, the British got the Belgian birds and developed their own British strains.

Your scribe feels that the sort of successful racing pigeon depends in a very basic way on the climate in which they fly.

Therefore, while the Belgian and British climates would tend to be similar in terms of seasons and rainfall, if one looks at a map, it should be obvious that the climate in the British Isles must vary to a large extent than that of Belgium; buried on the continent as it is.

In Great Britain, the terrible winds, the fog, the constant rain, produce a daunting challenge to a bird which weighs a pound, or a bit more.

Thus, the English who claim the hardest flyers of all, certainly have a point.

ally, throw in the Pergrine Falcon, and one may wonder  
many of us in the US would like to fly in Great Britain?

have no early numbers relating to participants, but a  
ad picture emerges when we compare numbers of  
icipants in 1988. Belgium had 93,000 and in Great  
ain, there were 130,000. The US had 10,000.

o of the early importers into Great Britain of the Belgian  
s were J.W. Logan and J.O.Allen. In fact, they made a  
rber of buying trips together.

urally, they visited Northrop Barker. Not only was he a  
mpion flyer in the Brussels area, but the reader will recall  
: Barker was from Yorkshire, so that the normal language  
rier was absent.

ker, of course, was reluctant to part with his top  
mpions, and at one point, Logan demonstrated his British  
by commenting: "That's the trouble with you Belgians,  
I simply will not let us have your best birds at any price."

ker eventually relented and sold all of his birds to Logan  
about \$6000, with the proviso that Logan would let Barker  
re youngsters from them whenever he wished. This  
gan did, and Barker continued to be a top competitor.

tory comments that Barker was a top handler; more fuel  
the fancier who takes the handler side of the handler/bird  
ntroversy.

wner here clarifies three points which should be clear to  
in our understanding of similarities and differences in the  
ort in Belgium, Great Britain, and the United States.

Few Belgians have ever cared about pure strains. They  
id, rather, to mate best to best and give little consideration

to the origins of the breeders. Pedigrees have little or no  
value, and if a bird is bred with a champion on both sides of  
its lineage, it is "pure," for that "strain." In contrast, many  
fanciers in Great Britain and the US are followers of "strains."  
They must, of course, inbreed.

2. Pedigrees are of less value to the Belgians, whereas,  
pedigrees are very important to most British and American  
flyers. Your scribe does not know how pedigrees may or  
may not transfer in Belgium to dogs, cats, cattle, and the  
rest. In the US, people who follow these other animals attach  
great importance to pedigree.

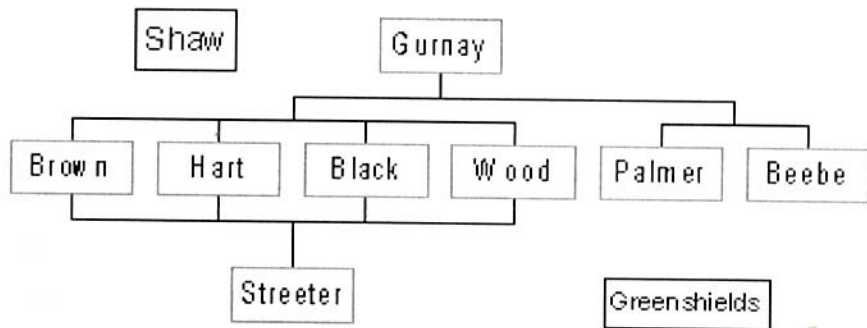
3. Most Belgians and British believe that a bird needs time to  
mature. Few fly youngsters more than 100 miles or yearlings  
past 200. In the US, 400 mile young bird races are common,  
and few worry about sending yearlings to 500 or 600. There  
is some evidence that the Belgians are beginning to come  
around to the US philosophy.

Of course, it is slippery to make too many generalities in  
pigeon flying, but it seems to be true that most US race  
courses are easier than those in Belgium and surely easier  
than those in Great Britain.

Prior to the advent of the telegraph, pigeons were much  
used for messenger service in the British Isles. The task  
called for a heavy, muscular bird weighing 20 ounces or  
more and capable of reasonably swift flights of around 50  
miles.

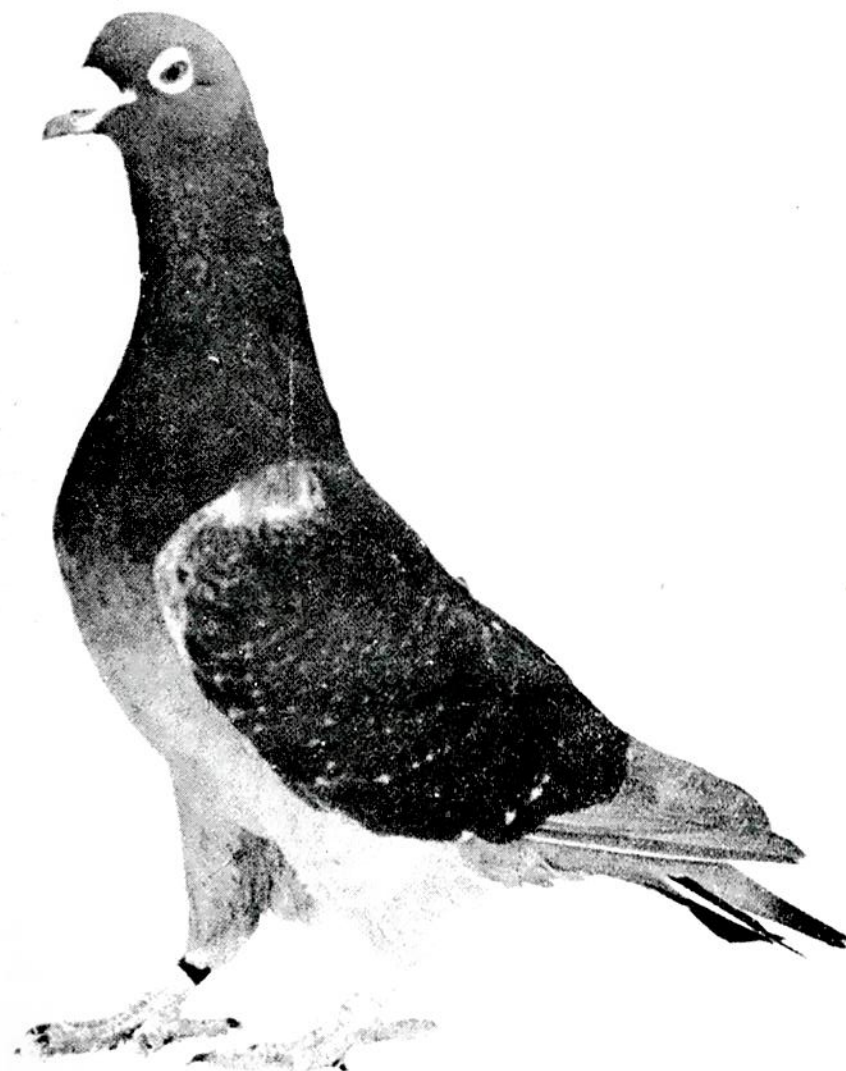
Such birds were totally unsuitable for flights of several  
hundred miles, so when racing became popular, these large  
birds were crossed with the Belgian birds, resulting in a bird  
which typically weighed 14 or 15 ounces and had the  
stamina and endurance to fly 14 or 15 hours continually.

Two final points: The typical Belgian loft was in an attic or above a stable or storage building and contained relatively more pigeons. The typical British loft was a small, free standing "garden" loft and housed fewer birds. Many Belgians could afford a "loftman," whereas such figures were rare in Great Britain.



Perkins Bros-R.G. Silson-Hilton & Son-Watson Bros-Snell-Mellor





Some more Reference Birds  
from the  
Champion "YOUNG HAWK" Lofts.

## Chapter Two

### Fred Shaw

In the history of man, we often find that one man was essential to our discovery of another. Thus, it might be that the world would never have known of the mighty Bach had it not been for Johannes Brahms, for example.

Such a figure was Fred Shaw in our study of the life of Renier Gurnay. For a real understanding of Gurnay and his contributions, we must put the microscope upon Shaw, and it is ironic that Shaw was less than a heroic figure.

Here was a cocky little figure, vain and imperious; a man obsessed with money, who often played fast and loose with the truth.

Yet he must have been charming when he wished to be, for he was readily accepted into the inner circle of Gurnay's friends and became close to the master, himself, in spite of the language barrier.

In the matter of his race birds, we know that Gurnay refused to sell any in Belgium; surely for the reason that he did not wish to compete against his own blood lines. How often Belgians got Gurnay pigeons by subterfuge has not been recorded, but surely, there were several instances.

However, in the case of Shaw, Gurnay seems to have been willing; even anxious to share his champions with the Englishman.

Shaw relates that Gurnay was not disposed to be hospitable, but Shaw took an interpreter, Clement Kuetgens, and some letters of introduction from business acquaintances, and through Madame Pauline, he got an introduction to Gurnay.

This resulted in a visit to the loft, where, Shaw relates, "All I knew about quality, feather, shape, and beauty in pigeons was shattered."

Gurnay sold Shaw a pair of birds, which Shaw selected, and Gurnay's comment to Kuetgens was that Shaw had a good eye for quality.

The following year, (1914), the hen escaped and, in spite of being untrained, flew the 400 odd miles back to Verviers.

This incident solidified the new friendship even more, and it was then that Shaw sent the English bands to Gurnay, which were to be so dangerous for him when they were discovered by the Germans.

For the following five years, Shaw was in the British Army and serving in the Balkans, while Belgium was occupied by the Germans, who had ordered all pigeons to be killed. Gurnay secreted some birds in various places and even kept in touch with Shaw by a roundabout delivery of letters involving one of the German officers who was billeted in the Gurnay home.

Two pair were hidden in one house, and a young cock was raised whose parentage was in doubt.

At present, the writer has a bronze cock, unbanded, and called, "Great Unknown II," a most delicious "in" joke.

When Shaw was finally discharged from the army, he once more visited Gurnay, who sold him all but 20 birds from his loft for about \$2500.

This was the beginning of the Gurnays in Ireland, for a Mr. Palmer bought four pairs from Shaw and was so happy with them that he returned and bought four more pairs.

Several incidents came together during this period. Shaw doesn't say so specifically, but we believe that he had disposed of his previous birds before he entered the army, so at this time, he had only Gurnays.

For whatever reason, he moved, and in the process, gave or sold a team of youngsters to A.H. Turner, who raced them in the Manchester Flying Club.

One of these, a red check hen, won her section, and of course, Shaw reported it in an ad, whereupon the club officials demanded that he print a correction, since it was not an M.F.C. race, but one ORGANIZED by the M.F.C. Shaw indignantly replied that they were hair splitting and related an incident involving a prominent member who had trapped a Shaw Gurnay and wrote to Shaw asking to buy it. Shaw replied that if he wanted to buy birds, he could come around in a proper manner; meanwhile, he wanted the bird back. The flyer replied that it had left.

As an aside, imagine someone in the US trapping a stray and writing to the owner offering to buy it?

At any rate, relations between Shaw and the leaders of the M.F.C. deteriorated to the point where Shaw was accused of manipulating his clock or cheating in some other way.

On a certain race day, a club official showed up at Shaw's loft wanting to toss 4 birds from the previous race. Shaw asked him to wait until he timed in a bird, but the man insisted that the birds be tossed immediately.

Shaw tossed them, gave a signal, and they immediately trapped. Shaw relates that the man became a good friend and, when people talked about Shaw, he told them, "Go see his handling methods, and you will no longer talk nonsense."

Shaw thus became an antagonist of the leaders of the M.F.C. (250 members) and decided to beat them at racing, since they were obviously hostile to him.

Further, he was convinced that there was an element of jealousy in their views; regarding his importation of the Gurnays.

Today, we Americans would say, "He had talked the talk; now he was determined to walk the walk."

At this time, Shaw had a loft man, but he began to spend more time with the birds; determined that 1921 would find him at the top of the M.F.C.

As he worked with them, he became more and more convinced that the Gurnays were the finest race birds available and that they would win the day for him.

In fact, the small team of yearlings and late hatches won ten of eleven races in the M.F.C.; established themselves as the premier strain in the area; and made Shaw's reputation as a top handler.

At this time, the yearlings totaled thirteen. Mob flyers, please note.

In addition to the wins in that series, Shaw had 3 seconds, two thirds, and a fourth.

On the first shipping, Shaw sent his loft man with the birds, and the man returned to report that many fanciers handled the Gurnays, remarking on their beauty, feather condition, and the like. Shaw objected to the race officials and, of course, that practice was stopped.

Shaw consistently clocked what we Americans would call his "pick" bird; which was invariably pooled all the way. The suspicious and the envious were even more convinced that there was something amiss. Shaw replied with an offer for a series of ten races for about \$500 per race; prize money to be split 60-40- or 50-30-20. There were no takers.

At this point in his book, Shaw attacks average speed; asserting that merely timing in every race does not necessarily make a champion.

Instead, Shaw asserts that he follows the Gurnay method with two columns listing:

Amount Paid                  Amount Received

Shaw points out that some flyers send 70 or more birds to a race, and even if they win all of the prizes, they are still out of pocket.

In 1921, the Stockport Social Club included people from the S.E.Section of the M.F.C. At that time, the custom was to nominate a half dozen birds prior to the series and split winnings 60-40. During that year and the following three, what Shaw had come to call, "The Shaw-Gurnays" won about 80% of the prizes.

At the end of 1924, the club disbanded, because they could not beat Shaw.

Shaw also belonged to the Hyde Homing Society, fifty members, which, he asserts, was used primarily as a training area. Its members largely agreed that the Gurnays could not dominate the Hyde group; particularly in the longer races.

Shaw entered only three races. At Worcester, 86 miles, he entered 5 birds and took first, second, third, and fourth. At Bournemouth, he entered 4 birds and took first, second, and third. For the 529 mile Marennes race, he won first, third, and sixth.

It should be noted that, unlike his mentor, Shaw had no problem with sending yearlings long distances.

During this time period, Shaw reports race velocities from 1300 to 1500 ypm; respectable speeds in most areas of the US today.

Shaw quotes A.P.Taft in a publication in 1923 as saying, "I have been flying pigeons over 50 years, and I believe have tried every known strain and breed and handled as many birds as any fancier in England. For beauty and intelligence, I have seen nothing to equal the Gurnays, and the work they have done in England and Belgium proves they have strength, courage, and speed beyond any other strain."