

Pages from the Past

The Gurnay Strain

The sport of pigeon racing has seen many great fanciers within its ranks over the many years of its existence. These fanciers have become famous for various reasons, some were good administrators, others were great racing men, but there have been some that seem to have been a combination of the many things that go to make up the great men of our sport, those that produced a strain of pigeons that have continued long after the creator's demise.

One such fancier is the late and great Renier Gurnay founder of the famous Gurnay strain, which raced so successfully for him over a period of 50 years from 1886-1936.

It is not surprising to discover that Renier Gurnay was a pupil of the great Alexandre Hansenne, another of the 'greats' of the sport. The young Gurnay used to run for Hansenne in the days before pigeon clocks were introduced. Young Gurnay, being fleet of foot was a very useful acquisition to have, and because of his running prowess he often won races for the Hansenne loft out of turn. The young Gurnay's reward was often a winning pigeon, so quite naturally the base of the Gurnay strain was the Hansenne blood. Upon the death of Alexandre Hansenne, Renier Gurnay obtained some of the best from the Hansenne loft, by careful breeding and blending, he produced a strain of pigeons, that during his lifetime, were second to none. As Pierre Dordin managed to produce pigeons with both beauty and racing ability in more recent times, so Renier Gurnay managed to produce pigeons with good looks and racing ability during his lifetime, for Gurnay won many prizes in the show pen as well as racing. It is however, for their racing achievements that the Gurnays and their founder are best remembered.

Among the many fine pigeons Renier Gurnay had in his loft were such birds as 'Le Gros', 'Le Bosu', 'Bon Bleu', 'Little Blue Cock', 'Bariola' and 'Bronze Favourite'. The latter three were all Grand National winners for Gurnay. Even in those days that family of pigeons were winning big money for M. Gurnay, for instance 'Le Gros' won four consecutive races and the equivalent of £1,000 in prizemoney, a lot of money in the 1920s; 'Le Bosu' won £2,000 during his racing career.



Mons Renier Gurnay, founder of the strain.

It is interesting to note that the 'Le Gros' and 'Le Bosu' were nestmates. These pigeons were not the only winners in the Gurnay loft, for there were many, many birds housed there, of equal calibre. Even in those early days the Gurnay pigeons were being exported all over the world, and with their new owners continued to win and create records. One such record holder was an imported Gurnay reputed to have flown from Havana to Boston, a distance of 1,400 miles.

Renier Gurnay was never afraid to sell one of his champion pigeons, for he was always confident of being able to produce a successor, which of course he did many times. The Gurnay method was always to pair the best to the best and produce better, a maxim that is as good today as it was then. It was this man's ability to reproduce champion after champion that ensured the continuation of the strain long after the great man's death.

It was in 1920 that the Gurnay strain was being talked about in the British

Isles for it was at this time that the great Fred Shaw imported his first Gurnays. In the years that followed Fred Shaw was to become a close friend of Renier Gurnay and because of that friendship many of the finest specimens from the Gurnay loft were to grace Fred Shaw's loft in Cheshire. His performances in the Manchester Flying Club were very soon a talking point for fanciers throughout the British Isles. It is doubtful if many fanciers, even today, could claim such rapid success, for from those original imports in 1920, he was second highest prizewinner in the Manchester Flying Club in 1921. With those yearlings he won ten 1sts in 11 successive races. All of these performances were won on the Belgian widowhood system, a system that was rarely practised in the British Isles in those days.

Many people thought that those performances of Fred Shaw were just 'a flash in the pan' and many openly said so. However, as time went on people began to realise that this was

not the case and the Gurnay strain was certainly a force to be reckoned with.

The following is from Fred Shaw's stud list which appeared as a supplement in 'The Racing Pigeon' in 1924:

Mr. Fred Shaw's Stud of Winning Gurnays.

If any fancier had said in 1920 that a man could start off with a team of Belgian birds, all of one strain, new to this country, and by the end of 1922 reach the topmost pinnacle of success in the English Fancy with their progeny, he would have been laughed at for his pains and privately dubbed a fool. Yet this apparently impossible performance has been accomplished by Mr. Fred Shaw, of Hyde, with his Gurnays, and he has made the feat look quite simple by an astounding sequence of wins at all stages, long and short distance, and with young birds and old birds. It has not been accomplished by mob flying, as an average of nine birds per race were sent in 1921, and an average of 14 birds per race in 1922. Virgin race soil at the beginning of 1920! That year a team of young Gurnays 'kicked off' and caused a mild sensation, winning £60. Then in 1921, as yearlings, they set about the business of winning prizes to such an extent that fanciers were speedily sitting up and taking notice of the Gurnay 'greyhounds.' They could not help but be amazed, for these Gurnays won in the hottest possible competition over £310, finishing second highest prize-winners in the Manchester Flying Club with £198. These yearlings won 10 first prizes in 11 successive races. Two outstanding wins in 1921 were 1st, 2nd, 3rd and 4th over all sections in the Manchester F.C. Guernsey old bird race, 1,000 birds competing—a most amazing win. Quickly followed 1st Granville, Stockport and Dis. Fed. 1,380 birds, also 20th—a real hard race. Fanciers said such form could not be shown and repeated in 1922. Well, last season these Gurnays, a few two-year-olds, and more yearlings, slipped into the winning stride again as easily as a young duck takes to water. They gobbled prizes up by mouthfuls in the Manchester F.C., and never seemed to get a single step out of their winning stride. It was a fitting climax, 1920-1922, that they should be rewarded by securing the coveted Manchester



'Bon Bleu', winner of nine prizes in nine races for Renier Gurnay, hidden from the Germans during the war.

F.C. 50-guinea cup for best average all races all sections, and you can class any loft that wins this cup A1. Among many good wins last year the outstanding one for the Gurnay breed was 1st Rennes over all sections Manchester F.C., in a downright disastrous race, velocity 942, 14 minutes ahead of the next bird, only a handful home on the day. Six birds to Marennes, 6th prize M.F.C., four of them yearlings, all six home, and five of them clocked in. Best young bird average S.E. Section; best Y.B. average over all sections; biggest prize-winner M.F.C. with £215 12s 1d. Two seasons' winnings, 1921-1922, total £610. To carry on a winning career such as this, it's got to be in the breed of the birds, and the Gurnays have proved again and again that they can win in the strongest

company. I know plenty of hard work has been done to get the best out of the birds. I know nothing about systems to make birds win easy, and I know nothing about any so-called 'Gurnay system'. But I know this, over a course of from 60 to 530 miles no 'fancy tricks' will pay in the long run, and especially in the cross-Channel and Continental races. And what about the 'home end', the loft of Mons. Gurnay and his work with the birds. We know the value of the many wins by Mr. Fred Shaw, and what the £610 won by him in two seasons represents—it means a 'thundering' lot of wins to rake in that amount. Substitute thousands of pounds won in Belgium for hundreds won by Mr. Shaw, and you get some idea of the amount won by the Gurnay 'prize collectors' both in Belgium and this



Blue chequer cock 'Picture', flew Guernsey and Rennes as a yearling. A winner of many prizes for the late Fred Shaw.



Blue chequer hen, 'Double Event' photographed as a young bird, bred from the celebrated 'Angouleme' when 10 years old.

country. There are plenty of hard facts scattered about the advertisement in today's issue for anyone to see, and there is no need for repetition here. To show the value of the Gurnay strain, one has to realise the fact that many winners have been sold, and yet others take their place immediately, apparently springing up almost like mushrooms. Such birds as National winners, and about half a score of the 1922 team of 25 racers which are credited with winning £9,400 last season, have been distributed to all parts of the world. This has been done each year, and yet there are always other birds ready to carry on the good work. It would almost appear that if an average man knew how to fly pigeons at all he could romp home with material such as this to play with. I have on more than one occasion tried to give a pen picture of these Gurnays, but it is a poor substitute to actually seeing the birds in their lofts. I again handled at The Grange many of these Gurnays quite recently, both those bred M. Gurnay and those bred by and raced by Mr. Shaw. They are a most handsome type, not single birds, but all of them are very captivating, and many of our best and cleverest fanciers have seen them and fallen completely under their spell, and, as good sportsmen, they have not hesitated to express their admiration of the birds in unstinted terms of praise. They have a true racer's outline, they 'look' racing pigeons, their colour is extra, a black chequer is



Blue chequer cock 'Quality' winner of 1st Stockport Fed., 1,380 birds competing.



Blue chequer cock 'Neaty' winner of 1st Open Rennes in the Manchester F.C. Winner of R.N.H.U. gold medal.



Blue chequer cock 'Telephone' winner of 38th Open National then sold to U.S.A.

black, a blue is sound in colour with striking bold black wing bars; the chequering is amazingly even, making the chequers look pretty. Abundance of rich feather, well above the average size, and a good 'body' feel, are characteristics that strike one when handling the birds. The great outstanding feature, however, and one that perhaps helps more than anything else to put these birds on the handsome side, are the eyes. Brilliant, bold eyes of remarkable shades of colour, many quite different to the eyes of what one might call our native pigeons. They have to be seen on bird after bird to appreciate what I am trying to depict. You can trace relationship to the great majority of the Gurnays through the eyes alone, if you saw no other part of the body. Mr. Shaw is always ready to welcome a true fancier who takes an interest in the racing pigeon, and he does not expect a man to buy because he calls as a fancier to see the birds. There is no obligation on anyone in that direction. If any real fancier calls, sees the birds, and is not satisfied with them or their type, and can give a satisfactory reason, Mr. Shaw will gladly pay his railway fare and give him a note to spend on the way home. Given the same close attention that they have had, there is a racing team at The Grange that should make the best gallop all the way in the coming season, and this is the opinion of many good judges who have seen the birds this winter.—Nor'-West.



Bronze cock 'Bronze Excellence' bred from a brother x sister of the famous 'Le Gros'.