The Royal Lofts

Almost 130 years after the King of the Belgians gave racing pigeons to the Queen's forebears as a gift, Her Majesty maintains a keen interest in the sport, says MATTHEW DENNISON

IN HIS DIARY for 17 August 1949, George V's official biographer Harold Nicolson wrote, 'I fear that I am getting a down on George V just now. He is all right as a gay young midshipman. He may be all right as a wise old King. But the intervening period when he was Duke of York, just shooting at Sandringham, is hard to manage or swallow. For seventeen years he did nothing at all but kill animals and stick in stamps.'

As Nicolson himself was aware, his flippancy contained only a germ of the truth. Aside from royal engagements, the future George V nurtured another interest. It was one he inherited from his father Edward VII and which he in turn passed to his son, George VI, and his granddaughter, our present Queen. It remains a little-known aspect of royal sporting life: the royal family's interest in pigeon fancying.

King George V spent much of his adult life on the Sandringham estate. Despite plans hatched by Edward VII and Lord Esher that he rent neighbouring Houghton Hall from the Marquess of Cholmondeley, he preferred, both as Duke of York and afterwards as Prince of Wales, to live in the relatively cramped confines of York Cottage – dismissed by his father as 'hardly… a country house'. It was at Sandringham that George built his pigeon loft, described by a newspaper at the time as 'a pretty, two-storeyed building, capitally fitted up'.

It is at Sandringham that the royal pigeons continue to be reared and housed. Today the Queen maintains her predecessors' interest in the royal pigeon lofts, which currently contain some 240 birds: 160 mature birds and 80 younger pigeons. A number of the Queen's pigeons are 'stock' birds used for breeding purposes. The majority are used for racing, in a tradition that now stretches back more than a century.

The pigeon-racing season in Britain runs from April to September. During that period, royal birds are entered into club races weekly, alongside more prestigious national races, on each occasion distinguished by their distinctive leg ring marked with the Queen's cipher, ER, and the royal crests on their travelling boxes.

During the course of her reign, the Queen's birds have won every major race in Britain and the Queen herself is patron of the Royal Pigeon Racing Association and the National Flying Club. By contrast, in his earliest days as a pigeon fancier George V was required to adopt a more covert approach to the sport.

From 1893 onwards, George's birds were raced not in his own name but that of a schoolmaster from neighbouring West Newton, Yorkshireman Joseph Walter Jones, known as Walter. Although the Royal Household never formally employed Mr Jones as a member of staff, he went on to enjoy a long and versatile association with the King's family.

George V's eldest son, the Duke of Windsor, remembered childhood nature lessons with Jones and occasions on which, during the absence of the Princes' tutor, Jones stepped into the breach; thrillingly he took them into the woods or across the Sandringham marshes looking for birds' nests, a distinctive figure in cap and bulky tweed plus fours. Jones became the favourite teacher of the King's second son, Prince Albert, the future George VI, for whom he continued to assist at the royal pigeon lofts. Under his supervision, both monarchs bred and raced a clutch of first-class birds.

The birds themselves were not Norfolk natives. The first royal pigeons came from Belgium, a present to the royal family in 1886 from the King of the Belgians, Leopold II. The future Edward VII responded with enthusiasm to this unusual gift. On a site at Sandringham a few hundred yards from where his son George would shortly build his loft, Edward commissioned a small but handsome loft, whose inmates were supplemented several years later by a second gift of birds from Belgium.

From the outset, Edward planned to race competitively; from the outset – a tribute to the quality of bird dispatched by Leopold – he did so successfully. By 1899, contemporary newspapers were able to focus on one particularly outstanding bird, prosaically called 189, which 'won for the King the coveted first prize' in the National Flying Club's Grand National.

'The good bird… flew from Lerwick to Sandringham, a distance of 510 miles, 1,705 yards, at an average rate of 1,307 yards per minute… Many a pulse beat strongly with loyal gladness when it was flashed along the wires that 189 had come in first, and nobody was more pleased than… King Edward VII himself,' reported one newspaper. ➤

OPPOSITE PAGE: King George V and Queen Mary outside York Cottage with Walter Jones in February 1925

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George V's pigeons were bred from the same Belgian breeding stock as those of his father. In George's two-storey loft, the ground floor housed Belgian birds kept for breeding purposes, while the upper floor housed birds in training for racing and homing; in time its walls were hung with certificates and prize citations.

Walter Jones evidently knew his business: George's alias was rumbled and his pigeons soon acquired the same prestige as those of his father, despite the latter's seven-year head start. In 1901, pigeons belonging to Edward VII came first and third in the Grand National organised by the National Flying Club. The bird that came in fourth belonged to the King's son, George.

George's interest in pigeons subsequently embraced the birds' usefulness in time of war. The War Office co-opted a number of civilian pigeon lofts during the First World War to form the Army Pigeon Service, an initiative that used carrier pigeons to convey important messages to and from the front. George himself donated royal birds to this service, as would George VI during the following war. ➤

ABOVE: Corporal Randall holds Royal Blue after the King's pigeon was invested with the Dickin Medal

LEFT: Princesses Elizabeth and Margaret and their parents visit the Sandringham lofts in the 1930s

OPPOSITE PAGE: The sibling Girl Guides in 1943 with a carrier pigeon destined for Lady Baden-Powell

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Lieutenant-Colonel A H Osman became an early recipient of the newly introduced OBE, when George invested him with the honour in acknowledgement of his wartime work with the Army Pigeon Service. In 1945, Royal Blue, a pigeon belonging to George VI, was awarded a Dickin Medal for Gallantry for its role in reporting a lost aircraft.

Happily, Elizabeth II's reign has not demanded such endeavours by inmates of the royal pigeon lofts. Instead, the Queen has donated a number of royal birds to charitable auctions, from causes as diverse as research into pigeon fancier's lung (a condition like asbestosis) to raising funds for a monument to animals killed in war.

With thanks to the Royal Pigeon Racing Association, www.rpra.org, for their help with the illustrations.

Matthew Dennison is the author of 'Queen Victoria: A Life of Contradictions' published by Collins *(see page 57).*

TOPFOTO

ABOVE: The Queen reviews an avian fly-past at the Royal Army Veterinary Corps in Melton Mowbray in 1996

RIGHT: Len Rush, an earlier manager of the royal lofts, with one of Her Majesty's prize-winning pigeons in 1963