

Pigeons - clay and feathered - then and now



You could say pigeon shooting is the best practice of all to keep your eye in ready for another game season come autumn, but this does the bird a grave injustice

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Another game season has finished. So what do you now do with the gun? Put it in the cabinet again until October; or keep using her?

I doubt many *Sporting Gun* readers would dream of mothballing their musket, especially when some of the best shooting this island has to offer is about to kick off in the shape of woodpigeon. Getting under woodies at roost or on a spring drilling is the sport of Gods. No question about it.

I suppose you could say pigeon shooting is the best of all practice to keep your eye in ready for another game season, come autumn, but this does the bird a grave injustice. If you want practice, try your hand at clays – it's a century old pastime that continues to grow in popularity.

Glass balls

Back in the 1800s when our forebears wanted to practice shooting a flying target they used to throw all sorts of things into the air – fruit, potatoes, bottles, coins, cowboy hats, you

“Glass balls were filled with feathers, powder or chopped paper”

name it – up it went.

But then along came glass balls. Using a shotgun to smash these new targets to smithereens quickly became popular amongst the more wealthy sporting sections of society and competitions flourished in both the United States of America and England.

The balls were filled with feathers, powder or chopped paper, to provide a more spectacular presentation of a “hit”.

It's rather ironic that the demise of a real

pigeon was required to provide the feathers to fill the glass ball, which was used to provide practice for the demise of another pigeon! I suppose the Victorians may have called it “sustainability”.

Large wagers were associated with some of the more famous competitions on both sides of the Atlantic.

In parallel with the shooting of artificial targets, the sport of shooting live pigeons, released from traps, was also widespread.

Strong flying strains of pigeon were specifically bred to provide explosive flight



Glass balls

Smashing these with a shotgun quickly became popular



Live pigeon shooting in the 1800s – the term “pull” comes from the Victorian era when a Gun would have told the trapper to pull the cord to release a live pigeon

patterns on release from a cage or “trap” placed up to 30 yards from the shooting position. Most famously the so-called British Blue Rock pigeon was said to provide the most challenging target and, as such, was used in the biggest competitions. Fortunes were made and lost with wagers up to £500 being laid on the outcome of just a single shot. Not that the gambling bug was confined to the competitors – spectators would also put large side bets on which shooter was going to win.

Live pigeon shooting layouts existed all over Europe with the leading club in France being the Cercle des Patineurs, based in the Bois de Boulogne, Paris. However, to pocket the richest prizes you needed to enter

those competitions organised by the club in Monte Carlo.

In this country it was the Hurlingham Club and the Ranelagh Club – both in London – which were central to the social round of sporting activities.

Many countries have now prohibited the shooting of birds released from traps, but the practice continues in Spain, South America and elsewhere. Legislation was introduced in the UK in 1921.

Alternatives

One of the disadvantages with glass ball targets is, of course, broken glass and this, coupled with the cost of making them, led to

the invention of alternatives.

In the USA a patent was granted on the manufacture of brown pottery discs for



Early clays

The use of earthenware discs spread rapidly



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Annie Oakley, London, Eng., 1892

Annie Oakley

Annie Oakley used clay targets in her 1883/4 UK shows



Clay production

In 1880 a patent was granted on the manufacture of brown pottery discs for the use as targets

use as targets and two years later, in 1882, a patent was given to George Ligowsky for a device to put the discs into orbit. Others were also working on the idea, but it was Ligowsky who is remembered for the first “clay” pigeon.

The use of earthenware discs spread rapidly and the first demonstrations of clay targets in the UK occurred in 1883/4 when Annie Oakley travelled to London to demonstrate her shooting skills in the Buffalo Bill's Wild West Show.

Around the same time a number of inventors in the USA and UK were also experimenting with coal or petroleum pitch filled with powdered mineral, from which discs could be formed in a hot melt process.

And the rest, as they say, is history.

Pigeon technique

So what about those live woodpigeons eating their way through the spring crops right now?

I've no intention of suggesting how you should go about decoying pigeons because the expert pigeon writers of this magazine are your “go-to” source of information on such matters. However, a few words on shooting technique might not go amiss.

So picture the scene: warming spring sunshine is lighting up your decoy pattern, and there you are – in the confines of a carefully placed hide, waiting for a bird to set its wings and head your way.

If you have any sense you will be sitting down to minimise the chances of an alert woodie spotting you among the foliage and netting.

But shooting from a sitting position brings its own difficulties because it doesn't allow us to bring foot position into play – the optimum starting point for all good shotgun shooting. And sometimes sitting still for long periods between shots isn't ideal either.

However the wait is usually well worth it – the target presentation you get with pigeons over decoys is the one of the most varied to be found anywhere and chances are you will get every speed and angle when the action does finally kick in.

To make up for lack of foot movement we need to aim for maximum upper body flexibility, as if we were standing relaxed, waiting to call for a clay from any, unknown, direction.

Sitting on a swivel-seat decoy tub is a real benefit; or do what some of my pals do and use an old office swivel chair or stool, cut down. If you decide to stand to take a shot the swivel helps get your feet into the right position before you start to rise and mount the gun.

As ever, practice beforehand is useful to establish that all important smooth upper body movement and consistent gun mount.

As all pigeon shooters know, target selection is very important; try not to take the long chancy one when there may well be an easier bird behind which you can't see.

And if you have a blank day, chuck your hat in the air like they did in the old days and have a go at that! **SG**

TERMINOLOGY

The terminology of live pigeon shooting remains with us today; the clay launcher is called a “trap” and the shooter calls “Pull” to request the target's release – just as an old Victorian would have done to tell the trapper to pull the cord and release a live pigeon.

In this PC age of ours some shooting clubs now score targets as being “hit” or “missed” but many more – like my local ground – still call “no bird” for a broken clay from the trap and “kill” for that cloud of dust we all want to see as the clay breaks.

Dr Malcolm Plant is chairman of the Institute of Clay Shooting Instructors and a Clay Pigeon Shooting Association senior coach.

The Institute of Clay Shooting Instructors was formed in the 1980s to provide qualified coaches with opportunities for further professional development, by the provision of seminars, workshops, practical activities and educational visits. ICSI coaches can be found at www.ICSI.org.uk

