

## WHAT PRICE OUR HERITAGE?

Britain's history is littered with great names and achievements; Nelson, Churchill, Douglas Bader, Waterloo, the Falklands, the Enigma machine. Without these people, without these events our heritage and history would not have been carved.

In addition to our great soldiers, sailors and airmen there were also some unsung heroes of the last two world wars, the humble homing pigeon.



Over a quarter of a million pigeons were used in the last war alone. British pigeon fanciers donated thousands of their best birds to help in the war effort and all three of the Armed Services plus the Civil Defence, used pigeons for carrying messages.



Pigeon Officer – Africa WW2

It is too easy today to scoff at the importance of these feathered message carriers as today we have satellite technology and the internet sending almost immediate communications but these birds were literally the difference between life and death for our servicemen and the civil communities in many cases.

Every bomber and reconnaissance aircraft that left our RAF stations both home and abroad carried two homing pigeons. If the aircraft had to ditch then it was feasible for the crews to send a message back to their base in the hope that the search and rescue teams could locate the stricken crew.



Bomber crew with Pigeon containers

Pigeons were also carried by ground forces and dropped by parachute to resistance workers on the continent. The pigeons, when released with a message or other intelligence such as maps strapped to the pigeons' back in a special tube, would then use their natural homing ability to get home, using their magnetic and solar compass, following landmarks by aerial recognition and their sense of smell, all attributes proven by scientists over the years.



Pigeon being loaded into parachute container.

The Germans, who also used pigeons as message carriers, were so concerned about intelligence getting back to the Allied Forces on mainland Europe and England that they employed hawk handlers along the coast of the North Sea. Their mission was simple; to release birds of prey to attack the pigeons. Moreover, such was the threat to the carrier pigeon from peregrines in particular that the British Government ordered a cull of these birds along the south coast of England where they were most prevalent in order that the message carriers had every opportunity to get home. Once the war was over pigeon racing, which had been curtailed for the duration of the hostilities, was resumed.

Probably the most telling and significant acknowledgement of the pigeons' contribution to the war effort was when Maria Dickin, founder of the People's Dispensary for Sick Animals (PDSA) instituted the Dickin Medal, widely called the 'Animal Victoria Cross'.





Commando – “For successfully delivering messages from agents in occupied France on three occasions; Twice under exceptionally hazardous conditions whilst serving with the NPS in 1942”.

Of the 62 medals awarded to date the PDSA awarded 32 to homing pigeons. These included pigeons such as Dutch Coast “For delivering an SOS from a ditched Air Crew close to the enemy coast 288 miles distance in 7½ hours, under unfavorable conditions, while serving with the RAF in April 1942” and Royal Blue “For being the first pigeon in this war to deliver a message from a forced landed aircraft on the Continent while serving with the RAF in October, 1940.”

The significance of this last pigeon was that it originated from the Royal Lofts at Sandringham, donated by the King to the war effort. Indeed the Royal family have had a strong connection with pigeon racing since the late 1890s when the then Prince of Wales, Albert, was gifted racing pigeons from the King of Belgium. From that day to this there has been a Royal loft at Sandringham and Her Majesty the Queen is patron of the Royal Pigeon Association today.



Royal Loft Exterior – pre WW2.

By the 1960s the numbers of some species of raptors were decimated by the agricultural use of DDT pesticides. Peregrines numbers in particular reached an all-time low and measures were taken to remove chemicals from farming. However when the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981 was introduced it protected raptors and their numbers have increased substantially over the years.

Fast forward now, if you will, nearly seventy five years from those dark days of conflict and the homing pigeon is engaged in yet another war. The irony now is that pigeon breeders and racers are finding the threat from, particularly, Sparrowhawks and peregrine falcons, to be as devastating as the DDT effect had on the raptors. It is a fact that 85% of a peregrine falcon's diet is...racing pigeon.

There is no protection for racing pigeons under the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981. The act does give livestock breeders protection of sorts from birds of prey however racing pigeons are not considered livestock under the terms of the Act (despite the fact that racing pigeons ARE classed as livestock under other Acts of Parliament!).

Recommendations in 2000 suggested that pigeon fanciers should attempt trials of the use of deterrents to help alleviate the peregrine problem. A £32000 study was therefore commissioned by the Royal Pigeon Racing Association which was undertaken by Bangor University. It concluded that deterrents did not work.

So, what price heritage? What price history? We do not ask for miracles, we do not ask for preferential treatment. We ask for fairness, and for a pragmatic solution to the current decimation that is affecting the sport of pigeon racing..

For further details contact

PigeonRacing UK – [www.pigeonracinguk.co.uk](http://www.pigeonracinguk.co.uk)

Or the Royal Pigeon Racing Association - [www.rpra.org](http://www.rpra.org)