

So - What's So Special About Pigeons?

Whilst enjoying a little retail therapy in Blackpool the shop assistant must have seen my badge and asked me how things were going at The Winter Gardens? They looked a little sceptical when I said that it was packed out and then came that question which most of us have had to field over the years – ‘What’s so special about pigeons?’.

Now the words ‘passion’ and ‘emotion’ seldom feature in the public’s perception of something so inconspicuous and humble as a pigeon but then their image is not formed from listening to enthusiastic and dedicated fanciers waxing lyrical about their sport. I happen to know and am about to introduce you to a couple of fanciers who if asked the same question would simply answer ‘How long have you got?’ I read many articles each week and have come to recognise genuine enthusiasm when I am fortunate enough to encounter it. Jo Cuthbert and Chris Williams are two of our younger writers whose prose is both natural and infectious – for such is the pleasure pigeons bring them.

I decided to challenge them to make their pitch and try to explain the appeal. If we are to market our sport as a credible leisure pursuit in order to compete with all the others so readily available then we must at the very least try to explain its ‘X Factor’, why it ticks so many boxes, and can even be thought of as a poor man’s therapy acting as an antidote to the stress and disharmony which seems to dog our busy lives.

Chris and Jo correspond via social media and together they decided to each write a ‘personal statement’ of why pigeons mean so very much to them.

Their accounts are moving and heartfelt and even the die-hard cynics must recognise their sincerity. I do hope you find their stories compelling reading, I know I did, but don’t read on if you want to hear carping, petty jealousy or we have no future, because there is none of that here!

My thanks to them both.

ELEANOR

CHRIS’S STORY

What’s So Special About Pigeons?

The question what’s so special about pigeons is one that is almost as old as our illustrious sport itself and is one that was proposed by the Editorial staff of the British Homing World for myself and fellow scribe and fancier ‘Surrey Bird’ Jo Cuthbert to attempt to answer. From my own perspective my love of pigeons and the pigeon sport began after a trip to Belgium in my early teens. Prior to this I had not really shown any interest apart from when I would sit and wait with dad for his birds to return on a Saturday. But as we made our way around Lier something within me began to change. I started to wonder what it would be like to race pigeons myself so I told dad that after watching him all those years I wanted to have some myself. I am sure Dad won’t mind me saying but he was a little taken aback by my decision and I suppose like most parents when their offspring first take up any new activity he thought that I would soon get bored or else change my mind. I am now 26 and I still feel the same enthusiasm as I did back then, as a matter of fact my passion for pigeons has if anything deepened. In this respect I feel that Jo and I have a lot in common and perhaps this is another quality that is purely unique to the racing pigeon in that our feathered friends have not only a tremendous ability to return from hundreds of miles, but also to bring individuals together from all walks of life and all parts of the world. To be completely honest I would say that my circle of friends consists predominately of pigeon fanciers and as we all know pigeon fanciers like to talk so there is always plenty of lively discussion and debate to be had. As a disabled person it can be hard at times to find activities which one can take part in where you can compete on a level playing field, pigeon racing has given me that opportunity, as on a race day I am just another fancier whose head and heart is in the clouds with our birds who are racing their way home through the vast expanse of sky.

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Another tremendous quality which I feel is one of the sport’s greatest hallmarks is that wonderful and at times almost mystical bond that exists between fancier and pigeon. This to me is the greatest thing about it all and at times can make all the difference between winning and losing races. This particular part of the sport above all has me hooked and I love spending time in the loft getting my pigeons as tame as I can. When I first began racing to a converted garden shed I had a hen who was so tame she would not leave my side and raced like a dream. You never forget pigeons like that. I remember one race from across the water when I was sitting in the garden when she came like a rocket weaving from side to side wings dipped in an arrow-like fashion, my heart rate increasing with every beat of her wings. This is all part of the ecstasy of pigeon racing and what makes it such a fantastic sport to be a part of because in that moment when the bird returns all our dedication, hard work and determination pays off and all the months and indeed in some cases years of planning and dreaming finally come to fruition.

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It’s remarkable to think that it all starts with an egg, but I think this is the real magic of it all as we are there at every stage of our birds development nurturing them and I am going to go as far as to say loving them. Pigeon racing in many ways is the sport without limits, as a fancier of nine years of age can compete with a fancier of ninety. This is a tremendous thing as through the sport generations can be brought together. It is also a sport that the whole family can be involved in, and there is a great social life as there are many shows that take place which I know Jo and I both enjoy, especially Blackpool!

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I am now a member of the Upton Working Men’s Flying Club which is a fantastic club to fly pigeons in with great camaraderie between the members and we all have a good laugh on Friday and Saturday nights. The members of the Club made me feel welcome from day one. This is another great thing about our sport no matter what life throws at you pigeons and pigeon racing can give you a focus and something to channel your energy into. With all the problems we see in today’s society especially amongst some of my generation and I am sorry to say even younger the sport offers another positive benefit because I am sure I’m not the only fancier who feels that the birds have a calming effect when we have had a bad day or are stressed. I can think of several periods in my life when had it not been for my family and my love of my birds I would not be the person I am today. Pigeons really do seem to have

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the most remarkable, life enhancing effect on people so believe me it’s not all about winning races, although I like to give that a good go too. Spending evenings reading and researching various strains and results to try and improve on previous performances becomes addictive. I guess I have been blessed in that because of the sport I have travelled to many places and met some real characters who are now all great friends so I owe the sport a great deal as it has given me a purpose and brings me both pleasure and friendship into my life. It really is wonderful, and just think all the drama unfolds in our own back garden.

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Working with Jo and writing our articles about what’s so special about pigeons has been a privilege and I am sure I can say that both of us have

learnt a lot about each other, once again this is proof of the great strength of pigeons in helping to forge firm friendships. I hope this goes some way towards answering – why pigeons? Why not? They are after all mankind's oldest and wisest feathered friend to whom we all owe a great deal not only for the service they showed in two world wars but also for the pleasure they have brought and continue to bring countless generations of dedicated men and women who all take great pride in belonging to the fraternity collectively known

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as 'pigeon fanciers'. This for me is what is so special about pigeon sport and long may it continue. So to you all I hope you derive the same joy, passion and pride as Jo and I continue to do each and every season.

Enjoy your pigeons.

FROM THE CHAIR
Chris Williams

JO'S STORY

What Makes Pigeons Special?

I honestly cannot remember my first encounter with a pigeon or when my life-long love affair with them began, all I do know is that I have always loved them and always will.

When Chris Williams and I were approached by Eleanor at the Homing World to write an article about our passion for the birds and what makes them special to us, we simply couldn't refuse so here is my take on what makes pigeons 'do it' for me. I have found it hard to explain without it turning into a bit of a 'This is my Life' as without doing so I don't think I could get across just how much pigeons mean to me! I could answer the question quite simply 'I love pigeons' but just exactly why is that?

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I strongly believe in life that a lot of paths we are led down are due to fate and also decisions we make or sometimes, circumstances that at the time we felt were out of our control, but when you look back, you realise that those things happened for a reason.

Most people know that my Dad and Grandad were quite successful pigeon fanciers in their time, what some won't know is that my birth Mum and my Dad split up nine months after I was born and that I was taken to live with my Grandad and my Aunt who has been the best 'Mum' I could ever have wished for. I sometimes think that if this had not happened though, that I could never have been brought up in the pigeon fraternity, perish the thought!

'Pigeons were my first friends.'

So, whilst I don't recall being taught how to hold or ring a pigeon, it is something I have always known how to do (albeit in my own cack-handed kind of way). I do remember spending all of my spare time before and after school down the loft with my Grandad Charlie. Once the birds had been let out and fed back in I would go and sit in the loft in the evenings. I have always found pigeons to be cute, especially when they still have their yellow down and Mohican-type hair dos, maybe that was part of the initial attraction for me. Pigeons were my first friends. I had my favourites and they were all given names and that hasn't changed. I used to think my favourite bird would be the best racer ever and I learnt the hard way that loving a pigeon doesn't mean that is how it will be. I have shed many tears in my lifetime over a lost pigeon and the hours I have spent watching out, keeping hope that they will return, only to be disappointed. I am a bit better at that now, I think sometimes you get a feeling in your gut and you 'just know'. I was very lucky that my Grandad had the patience to let me in the loft when I wanted, cuddling the birds and chatting to them. I did move all the eggs around once and I soon learnt never to play that game again! I knew from day one the dos and dongs of how to act around the birds, be calm, don't make sudden movements or shout and don't be secretly feeding them when you think no one is looking!

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Every school project I got given to do at infant school had to be about my pigeons. I took great pride in knowing information about something that other people knew nothing about. As a painfully shy child this gave me confidence, I could answer their questions at aged six and by the time I was at middle school, I was in charge of all the record keeping at home, writing down the



A younger Jo with her 'best' friends.

breeding pairs and when they laid. I would often correct my Dad when he thought a young bird was off a certain pair and this made me feel important and of great use to him. My Dad was never one to be able to show affection so I liked to get things right. I was also in charge of writing the rubbers down on the race sheets at the club by the time I was about ten, one member Roy Cooper, sadly no longer with us, used to pay me a pound every week for writing his sheet out.

As I said, I was a very shy little girl and probably regarded as strange by a lot of people. When anyone came around for tea after school, they would get shown my pigeons, whether they wanted to see them or not! I think I felt comfortable around my birds as there was no squabbling or falling out with them over silly playground arguments. They didn't like me one day and not the next. They liked me whatever mood I was in and I loved them even more for that.

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As I got older and started secondary school I still wouldn't say boo to a goose, I only had three really close friends. I was a bit of a square and kept my head down and got on with my work. That didn't make you popular and I really did not enjoy my early teenage years. I never went out after school and spent all my pocket money saving up to race my pigeons. Whilst other girls were going to youth club or out shopping and stalking boys in the town centre on a Saturday, I would be at home, absolutely dedicated to my pigeons and I wouldn't have had it any other way. I wouldn't say I was bullied in any way during those years but I was the butt of a lot of jokes and teasing, as many were, but I took comfort in my birds as they were always there for me after a difficult day.

'Just as with any love affair I have obviously had blips along the way.'

It never bothered me when we didn't win, they had flown home to us and that was enough for me. The highlight of my weeks were going to the club on a Friday and Saturday and I just loved hanging out with and listening to all the pigeon stories the guys at the club would tell. The winter months felt like they would take forever but even then I never looked to branch out and have other interests, because I simply loved my birds too much to be able to do justice to anything else and nothing else offered the same appeal to me.

This all sounds really 'hunky dory' but just as with any love affair I have obviously had blips along the way. When I reached seventeen I started to feel that I was 'missing out' in some way and started to want to go out more with my friends. I think a lot of this was due to my Dad paying to get me through my driving lessons because he wanted a trainer, I suddenly had a bit of independence and realised there was more to life than pigeons! My Grandad found this very hard. I met my boys' Dad, John, at sixth form and suddenly had a boyfriend, my first one. My emotions were all over the place and once I reached eighteen it was a real struggle being at home and I had a big row with my Grandad and went to live with my best friend Helen and her parents. This was only meant to be for a few weeks but ended up being for a year. I didn't spend anytime with the birds then and when I went to visit Grandad, it wasn't just him that felt like a stranger to me. I stayed out of the loft, I don't know whether it was because I felt guilty for 'abandoning them', or because I felt I

didn't need them in my life anymore because I had a boyfriend, I just know that I chose at that time not to be around pigeons.

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I didn't move back home until my Grandad passed away. I started to get back into the birds but it was all a bit awkward because I didn't have a relationship with most of these birds, I didn't know them and they didn't know me. My Dad had his own way of doing things, most of which I didn't agree with but I didn't feel I could say or change anything because I had left him to get on with it for so long. I stuck with it because my love for them was finding its way back to me and because the pigeons really were the only thing my Dad and I had in common. We had never had a close relationship and this was the only way we were able to spend time together and feel comfortable.

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We plodded on like this until I was twenty one and did the unthinkable, got pregnant. My Dad was not happy at all and I did not see him for most of my pregnancy. John and I didn't live together and I was still at home. I think this is when my defiant and stubborn attitude first surfaced. I couldn't understand why my Dad was so angry, I had been with John for nearly four years and it wasn't as if I was sixteen? I really threw myself into the birds again. I kept an amount which were manageable for me and that I could afford to keep. My Sam was born at the beginning of February 1996 and when training started in March, he would be in the car seat next to me. Those first few races I amazed myself, the first week I was 1st Club, 2nd Fed, losing by a few yards to the Trussler Brothers, my good run continued for half of that old bird season and I had numerous Club and Fed positions. I visited my Dad, taking the baby with me and he had heard about how well I was doing racing. My Dad must have realised what he was missing and slowly started coming to watch the birds come home, before I knew it he had taken charge and my interest was dwindling again. John and I were lucky and bought our first house so I was no longer living where the birds were. We got married and had another baby and I was once again a visitor to the lofts a couple of times a week and at weekends. It wasn't the same. I realised then that I could do well with pigeons, but only if left to my own devices.

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My dream as a little girl had always been to marry a man that loved pigeons as much as I did. John wasn't that man and we separated when our boys were five and nearly two. Sam had been diagnosed with ADHD and Aspergers, which is a form of autism and I had moved back to Mum's, me and both the boys in one bedroom. Again, the pigeons became a quiet haven for me after dealing with autistic melt downs and I would often hide myself away in the loft to try and calm down. I could vent any emotion down there and knew that I wasn't going to be judged for it. I was eventually offered a council flat and the boys and I moved in there so once again I was away from the birds but it was more important that the boys had their own space, especially Sam. I missed the birds but found that being a single mum and working meant that I only got round there on race days, my Dad was doing it all really and I just loved watching them arrive home at the weekends.

'I truly believe that during this time pigeons helped keep me alive.'

In 2006 I met the man who was to become my second husband and ended up moving to Dunstable with my boys to live with him. I had left everything I had ever known behind in Surrey but luckily for me, maybe it was fate, he found the whole pigeon racing lark quite exciting and agreed to us having a loft of our own. We did ok racing-wise, nothing spectacular but had a few wins under our belt. Without going into detail this period was the most miserable of my entire life and culminated in me becoming very ill during 2010 and 2011. I had lost one of my children, who had chosen to live with his Dad and knew the other was not happy, my own Dad had died and I was stuck in a relationship I didn't want to be in and felt I couldn't get out of but didn't feel I had anyone I could confide in. I felt lost and I ended up becoming clinically depressed and having a nervous breakdown, I had to leave my job and I truly believe that during this time pigeons helped keep me alive. I found it hard to leave the house and if it wasn't for the fact that I still had Max with me and the pigeons to see to daily I don't think I would be here now. I was very lucky that the Crisis care team found me the most wonderful therapist called Mark who not only listened and gave excellent advice but who understood my love for my birds and encouraged me to use

them to help me get back on track. I didn't understand what he meant at first, I felt so low and as though I would never feel any better! Every day he would ask me about the birds, I think he had sussed they were the one and only area of my life I felt confident and comfortable in at that time. I went from throwing the corn in and topping their water up, to trying to clean out and then to letting them out. Eventually I was getting to be back in a routine with them and enjoying it. I slowly started to think that if I could look forward to doing the birds and enjoy it, that there was no reason why I couldn't use that as a positive starting point for other areas of my life. I started to find my smile again.

'I started to find my smile again.'

Cutting an extremely long story a bit shorter, in 2012 I was strong enough to walk away from that person I didn't want to be and found myself on my own and living at my Mum's again although she too had sold up and moved to Dunstable to be near me. I left with nothing and now had two children living hundreds of miles away in Devon. I had no pigeons but I used the last bit of savings I had to buy a loft and was gifted pigeons from friends. I threw myself into these birds because I literally had nothing to lose anymore and last year had the best racing year of my life, ten Club wins, two Federation wins and Combine positions.

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So what's special about pigeons? To me, everything! They are the most amazing, under-rated creatures! Where else can you have a sport that can involve generations of the same family, where disabilities, age or gender hold no boundaries, where you do not have to spend big money to do well (well I haven't) but you can if you choose to? In this sport you can make life long friends. Pigeons bring people together, what other sport has events like Blackpool, Doncaster and Epsom? You can experience highs and lows, win sprint races or marathons. Pigeons give a purpose, all year round, not just in the footy season or summer months. They make us laugh and cry. They

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can be both exciting and tedious, where else can you get that buzz we feel when seeing your bird trap home (without having to pay for it) or sit for hours waiting, having pure faith and belief that your pigeon is going to do the

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business for you? Pigeons make believers of us. Pigeons are addictive, once you are hooked, there is no going back! There is a saying 'pigeon widow', well better that you know your man is off down his loft with his feathered friends than out on the town doing who knows what? Pigeons have historical value and helped win the wars; they make us both historians and scientists.

'Pigeons can be, quite simply, a life long love affair and life savers.'

Pigeons are our friends and before you all start rolling your eyes, I bet you have shed a tear or two over a pigeon! They can keep a secret and love us unconditionally. Pigeons make us passionate and keep our brains busy. Pigeons can be therapists and calm us on the most stressful of days. Pigeons make doctors of us when they come home injured. Pigeons fill us with pride and give us fire in our bellies. They make us want to be better, how many of us change our lofts on a yearly basis, try out new breeds or systems because we want to do well? Pigeons teach us how to win and how to lose. Pigeons show us it is ok to start over. Pigeons are loyal and if treated right, will not let us down. Pigeons can be, quite simply, a life long love affair and life savers. What other sport manages to be all of that?!

'We need to make pigeons cool, because they are!'

Pigeon racing needs to be acknowledged and accepted as a credible sport by the sceptical general public. They need to be educated about all the positives of pigeons. We are now in a generation where technology rules, we need to make pigeons cool, because they are! Pigeon racing needs to be known about, not just by those of us that are in the sport but those that don't realise just how easy it is to love pigeons yet. Most of us have social media; it would probably be easier than we think to spread a bit of positive awareness, I think we should all try!

JO CUTHBERT