

**CEO CHRIS SUTTON**

## Balance Sheet

The balance sheet we are being asked to adopt does not make for very good reading and it may be worse than we think. In my first year as CEO I have had cost control at the very forefront of my mind. The situation I took on was a little confusing with the move from The Reddings and the pressing need to recruit a Finance Manager to allow the auditors to produce a balance sheet for 2021-22 in time for the last AGM. I managed to find a freelance accountant who helped to get this done on the basis that he would come on our books at the end of the tax year in April. He then came to Blackpool as instructed and never came back due to illness. I then began the recruitment process once again and Sarah Monger came to us in March 2023. She set about getting to know all our systems and processes completely blind, which over the years has grown substantially and somewhat unwieldy to be able to report the details to council. During this time, we were still dealing with the day-to-day transactions and finding written notes we could not understand, so the monthly reports were not produced and every question I had involved a search through the system for an answer. Year-end approached and the auditors were given a date to come to the office, the preparation involved lots of overtime on Sarah's behalf. The bottom line hit all staff like a hammer blow. The RPRA is clearly underfunded based on the members' belief that extra money is not required, or it is being squandered in some way? At the same time as expectations have risen. Inflationary pressures continue to increase on supplies and government hourly rate rises thus increasing staffing costs.

Our income level for 2022-23 with a subscription rate of £12 per member barely covers the wage bill. Of those £12, £2 went towards an underfunded insurance policy, £3 was retained by the regions to fund their meetings and secretary, and then £7 came to the RPRA and on those £7, we pay VAT. Our ring sales also generate an income, but every other expenditure is from our drastically decreasing reserves, and we cannot continue at this level for more than 12-18 months.

# CEO Annual Report 2024

If a proposition had come into this AGM to increase the subs, it would not take effect until 2025 which would be too late to avoid another huge loss of assets. We have no such proposition before us this year and we are in dire need of a cash injection. The proposition last year to raise the subscription by just £5 was passed but voted against by some regions which surprised me. When I asked one of their councillors why, the reply given was how can we ask for more money from the members when we have £800k in the bank. We do not have that money in the bank, we have no liquidity. By the time 2026 comes along, assuming we wait until the next AGM hoping for a proposition to come in, we will be in the hands of the receivers, of which all members are responsible. We cannot try to or have the time to sell our assets, we need the buildings to run the organisations from, so they would be left for the receivers to take them.

We need to make bold and brave decisions and I for one will be the first in line to take the brunt of any disgruntled membership, but I would rather take the criticism trying to save the RPRA than see it go under, I think all councillors should agree on that. I am a pigeon fancier first and foremost, I have a dogged determination and I cannot see this cherished institution created and carefully governed by our forebears, go under for the sake of the price of a bag of corn. We really are at one minute to midnight and we need to do something now, today, and breathe life back into our dying institution.

## Staff Levels

One of the most often heard criticisms is the cost of wages per year, it has been the biggest issue over previous years by far, and this balance sheet will be no exception. A very simplistic choice has been made to reduce staff numbers by not replacing retiring members of staff, using modern office systems and procedures as justification, that their duties could or should be absorbed by other members of staff. But those employees have their own responsibilities. Although most understand our financial situation and are willing to take on more work, it is a no win situation as the lack of time to complete a task well becomes stressful, overtime paid at a higher rate per hour and control of budget is lost in a need to meet the expectations of our members. When we have recruited, we do so on minimum wage rate and these new and inexperienced staff require training, which takes our experienced staff away from their duties. Whilst the new person gets to know the job, only to find that we are not for them and they leave and the whole process begins again. This has happened four times in the last year with the existing staff continually working under stress. There are several seasonal considerations in the workload which have grown organically with our sport and in the

RPRA office there are three teams each dealing with their own aspect. There is the membership support team who deal with ring sales, transfers, partnerships, stray reports, One Loft admin, sales of basket seals, rubbers etc, stock control and system updates supplied to them from the region secretaries. There are two full time and three part time staff who have distributed 600,000 2024 rings to date in 2,762 packages, as well as all the other duties listed above. We are just about to begin the training season with all the stray issues that will bring, one phone call from a concerned member of the public can and often does take 10 minutes or so to reassure them we will deal with it, and then there are all the follow up calls when irresponsible fanciers do not attempt to retrieve the bird.

The racing support team consist of two full time staff and one part time. They process all the race programmes, manage site bookings for both inland and Continental racing. Continental racing also involves obtaining permits from the FCF and booking ferry crossings. Other duties include providing loft locations and distances, liaising with conveyors and site agents. This extends into the season with cancellations, changes and any issues which may arise. At the end of the old bird season, they pay the liberation sites and distribute invoices which is repeated at the end of the young bird season and at the beginning of the young bird season the whole team are answering 250 calls per day.

In the accounts department there is normally one full time manager and one part time assistant which is not enough to keep abreast of their work. It is the most important cog in the machine doing the bookkeeping for both the RPRA and the BHW, the One Loft and Auction website. It is very stressful work, and we are currently recruiting yet another new Finance Manager, leaving a lot of the responsibility of the work on a part time finance assistant who is at risk of being overly stressed. It is very expensive to recruit managers as they tend to go through recruitment agencies who charge a percentage of the salary agreed. If in a few months' time the employee decides to leave, that money is lost and the whole process begins once again. It is clearly more cost effective for our organisation to take care of our staff and historically we have prided ourselves on our record, but the recent years reluctance to fund the staffing levels required have not proved beneficial to our staff.

We have an Office Manager who has taken on extra duties as retirements came and were not replaced, working many extra hours to get reports out in the nick of time. We have a Council meeting at the end of October, with all the work that entails in November and December up to and attending the Blackpool Show in January, followed by another council meeting in February. This is all deadline work which increased in the decades past

when staffing levels were good and experienced staff knew what was expected of them, and all on top of the normal duties of an Office Manager and Secretary to the CEO. The run-up to Blackpool week is hectic dealing with last minute changes to hotel and travel arrangements and packing the office for the Winter Gardens. The team leave on Thursday afternoon, work right through the weekend, and return to the office again on Monday morning to continue with the post show work verifying the card winning birds to get the results out in the BHW and website as soon as possible. The staff who process the results on the Friday evening often work until midnight and then work on the RPRA stand all day from 8.30 on the Saturday morning. Our Development Officer organises all of the RPRA Awards and Gala Evening presentation as well as being available for trade stands as they set up during Wednesday, Thursday and Friday evening. They are dedicated to the RPRA, they work for twelve days straight on top of all their normal duties. Yet they feel undervalued and even worse made to feel culpable by some. In truth we should be proud of them all and not make them responsible in any way for our underfunding issues, it is not their fault.

## British Homing World

At the last AGM we were given the task of taking the British Homing World into profit. This could be achieved by following the previous year's directive of raising the cover price and making the American quarter fold version into British tabloid size, thereby being able to reduce printing costs. The cover price of £1.35 per issue and previously planned to go up to £1.55 in 2022 but the opportunity was missed making the raise in 2023 to £1.85 seem like a steep 50p increase. In fact the BHW had lost out on the previously planned increase of 20p for a year. The printing of the old quarter fold size was limited to just two printers in the country, achieving a competitive quote was difficult, so the move to the tabloid version was deemed the best option to ensure we could explore all avenues available to us in the publishing world. Working with Mypec, again a company which had been in place for many years to achieve the best printing and distribution costs available to us, we set about making the switch over and for this I also had the assistance of Richard Chambers who was asked to accompany the Editor and Assistant Editor on a day's training, with a specialist in the software used to edit the BHW. Although both Richard and I had very little experience in the publishing world, we took up the challenge to move the magazine forward towards a more modern future.

Resistance to change from a previous comfort zone is human nature, and the staff at the BHW had been producing a weekly publication for decades and quite

understandably wishing to continue with a procedure they knew very well. The changeover involved a new layout in the software for every page, adverts required resizing and the club results came in several different formats, all of which meant an extra effort over and above the busy demands to keep the BHW rolling each week. I also wanted a fresh layout with larger text. In a team meeting at Welshpool, I took out a book at random from the weekly pile and counted thirteen pages of adverts before I reached any editorial and that was a page full of obituaries. The number of pages changed each week without any recourse to printing costs and all subscriptions were sent out by first class post. I explained to the staff that changes needed to happen and that they would need to prepare the book for printing a day earlier to take advantage of savings on second class post.

As the Assistant Editor was booked in for a knee replacement which would take him out of the business for twelve weeks, it was clear that some professional help would be required, whilst Richard set to task reviewing all the established procedures. I took the decision to employ a freelance artworker to gain some fresh ideas on layout. Richard bought some similar publications, and we studied them, taking note of how the advertising was distributed in such a way as to make the whole reading experience more inclusive, with the editorial from the first page right through to the last and the advertising spread throughout the pages. Realising the change was for the good, the staff began to embrace the new format and suggested new ideas themselves which were implemented, and the BHW changed from April onwards.

In the quest for savings and modernisation, Richard and I visited the printers in Horncastle to meet the Managing Director who advised us of best practice in page numbers to ensure printing costs were minimised. Restricting to eight-page increments ensured no material wastage. Differing paper weights also offered savings on top of the postal saving of moving to second class post. We had our difficulties and at times it seemed that as fast as we plugged up a hole, two others would appear.

With the war in Ukraine, rising fuel and energy costs were passed on to us as customers, and with the pressing demands

of the weekly product, the unavailability of experienced staff at a busy time of year meant I had to employ a second artworker on a part time basis to keep the product rolling. Richard and I spent many hours ploughing through the supply chain which had been left on a rolling contract for years, and identified areas which required the most attention. The whole production process throughout the office was scrutinised by Richard and gradually we make improvements which will all add up. The print costs in the office alone were astronomical, with the movement of work being by hard copy since none of the computers were linked to a central server, this has been rectified and the workflow will now be completely digital.

The club results submitted online were printed in large print and handed out to two or three operatives who would spend a day retyping this out to remove typos and correct the inevitable mistakes. Richard found a programme builder who gave us a price of £1,800 to create a 'widget' which would run in the background of the website and deliver the results right into the editorial software with nearly all corrections made automatically, reducing the readers' work to minutes and eliminated the need to print any hard copies. The staffing levels were adjusted with part time staff being utilised more effectively, and as the last few months have progressed, they are much more positive towards the changes. The improvements are still ongoing, and we should all be aware that we have just completed the first of a three-phase plan towards the optimal best practices in the modern publishing world. We can never rest on our laurels, as from the 1st January this year the Post Office having just put up the cost of second-class postage by 3p, this consumes most of the savings made by moving from 1st class post. In a world of pre-paid subscribers, this must be absorbed by the business. We need to be constantly looking for savings in production and make our cover price increments based on well informed decisions.

The BHW is the life blood of the sport in the UK and it will require our passionate care in order to prevent its loss. The recent sharing of the digital version on social media resulted in a marked drop in subscriptions in August 2023 which wiped thousands off the bottom line. We managed to identify and stop it happening and for a few days it felt like a kick in the

teeth considering all the hard work that had been put into turning the production process around to save money. Those responsible should hang their heads in shame and with the closure of the Racing Pigeon announced to take place this July, do not ask for whom the bell tolls, it tolls for thee. We are proud of the great history we have with the BHW and want to see it flourish in the future.

## One Loft Race

Once Jeremy decided not to continue his contract with the RPRA to set up his new venture, our own one loft race suffered with lower entries in 2023 and we faced the prospect of moving the loft to a new premises or to close it down altogether. Since its conception our one loft race has been run for the future of the sport allowing us to place pigeon lofts in schools and promote our sport in the national media. It was deemed vital by council that we continued with the project as we were among the first on the One Loft scene in the UK and its success has prompted others to take up the concept as a private business. This has indeed created healthy competition where those who like to take part in one loft races, now have many to choose from. As the RPRA One Loft would sell out in under a week, fanciers wanted to put their money into the great cause the One Loft supports.

Our first challenge was to find a new loft manager with the premises to build the loft on. We had many applications, most with a plan to rent a plot which would leave us at the whim of the land owner and just four who owned the prospective site outright. All were very good fanciers who would be capable of being loft manager for the RPRA, two of the four were in a more central location of the UK, which I deemed important for the prospective race programme and for participants to visit the races. As we are the RPRA, it was important for us to gain planning permission for the loft. Of the two remaining candidates one was in an area classified as outstanding natural beauty and would require permission to build on a green field site and the other was within the curtilage of an existing equestrian centre on a disused outdoor riding arena. Located right on the westward edge of the fens in the East Midlands where pigeon racing both north and south is undertaken,

this would provide a fair and suitable distance for a one loft final on either route. Mr Jonathan Swift, whose family own the land near Spalding, is a young man and very keen to pursue his lifelong passion of racing pigeons along with his limited equestrian duties and I proposed to council in October that his appointment should go ahead, pending planning permission being achieved.

Once the final race was flown at the existing one loft race in September 2023, a period was allowed for late returns, Jeremy had planned a holiday late in October so it was not until early November that the pigeons sold at auction could be distributed once paid for. This left a very small window of opportunity to dismantle and remove the fifty-five metre loft and deliver it to Spalding. Three companies tendered for the removal with the one being central to both locations appointed. During December the work was undertaken to dismantle the loft and placed in a small barn under cover.

A planning application was made just before Christmas 2023 and with the expert services of the South West Region Councillor Mr Ron Shirley, it was granted by delegated powers on 9th February 2024. Jonathan had cleared the area in the north east corner of the plot and the new position will be L-shaped facing south east to gain the most benefit of the summer sun. A local company priced for the foundation works and rebuilding of the loft which began on 20th February with a three week schedule, weather permitting. They will construct a thirty metre loft to completion before beginning the second twenty-four metre loft section then construct a connecting trapping area with aviary in the corner between the two. The first intake of birds should be around the end of March with the loft being fully open to entries until the middle of May.

The first route taken will be on the North Road with planned racepoints being from Wetherby 77 miles, Darlington 120 miles, Hexham 154 miles, Kelso 199 miles with the final being from Thornton, just across the Firth of Forth at 245 miles. There will be a grand final day with all the usual provisions for spectators and we look forward to a very successful One Loft in 2024 and with all your support, a very prosperous future.

**Chris Sutton**