

# from Out of the Past

by  
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As I review the research on pigeons collected in a lifetime of search, I often regret that the young are usually denied this privilege because of the value and rarity of the older books and journals. W.B. Tegetmeier is one of the founders of the present day pigeon fancy. It was through Tegetmeier that the knowledge of Rev. E.S. Dixon, B.P. Brent and J.M. Eaton was brought to the attention of Charles Darwin. The impact of Darwin's works on science is well known; but we often miss the point, it was the breeders of England who provided the data and experimentation which developed into the evolutionary thesis he presented. Darwin properly credits Tegetmeier, "I have drawn up this brief synopsis from various sources, but chiefly from information given me by Mr. Tegetmeier" (*Animals and Plants Under Domestication*, Vol. 1, 1868).

Tegetmeier in 1868 wrote his famous "Pigeons: Their Structure, Varieties, Habits and Management" which is a foundation work on fancy pigeons. Three years later (1871) his work "The Homing or Carrier Pigeon (*Le Pigeon Voyageur*), Its History, General Management and Method of Training" established a scientific base for Racing Pigeon knowledge. All his works are collector's items, but I have found the only record of a speech delivered to racing fanciers. It was recorded by an unnamed club secretary in April 1889. Might I share with you the words of a man who through his friend Charles Darwin, has influenced scientific thought more than any pigeon racer in history?

## Mr. Tegetmeier on Homing Pigeons

The great authority on Homing Pigeons — Mr. W.B. Tegetmeier, F.Z.S. — honoured the town of Basingstoke



*These common pigeons gathered at a garden fountain are today's representatives of birds with an ancient and colorful history.*

with his presence, and gave a lecture on the subject, in connection with which he has acquired quite a European reputation. Mr. Tegetmeier addressed the audience as follows: "Ladies and gentlemen, I did not intend to deliver a formal lecture on this subject. I think a conversational discourse, stating what's been done with regard to the utilization of these birds, will be lighter and more amusing to you. To begin with, I may tell you that all pigeons with which you are acquainted are descendants from a wild bird that inhabits this country and almost all other countries

in the globe. It varies a little in plumage in one place and another. To us it is known as the blue rock pigeon. It inhabits the cliffs along the sea coasts; in India it is found among the excavated ruins; and in other parts of the world in corresponding situations. As its food is not very abundant in the places where it lives, the parent birds have to fly a long distance — sometimes twenty, thirty, and forty miles — in search of food for their young. Hence it is necessary that the bird should have the instinct of locality. It flies very high, has a very acute vision, and possesses the faculty

of domesticity and also that of returning to its home, which unite to give the peculiar value of this pigeon as a homing bird. It was proved by Darwin — with whom I had the honour of working many years — that the homing pigeon has . . .

### Descended from the Blue Rock Dove.

Like all domesticated animals, they are subject to great variation; in some of the varieties the faculty has been cultivated to a very high degree, in others it has not. The birds used for flying home are birds in which the instinct I have spoken of has been developed by breeding from the best strains, i.e., from those who returned home with the greatest rapidity and the longest distance. Taking a bird from a wicker cage, the lecturer said: "This is a Belgian Homing pigeon. Long before the birds were used in this country, pigeon flying constituted the national sport of Belgium." Pointing to a map marked with circular lines, showing distances from Brussels of one, two, three, four, five and six hundred miles, the lecturer said that on national sport days every year the first prize was given by the King of the Belgians, and the heir to the Belgian throne was the donor of the second prize. "The race usually takes place from some town in the south of France. On these occasions they send down some 30,000 birds, and at four o'clock some fine summer's morning the birds are liberated, and all the winners get back to Brussels before the day is out." Here Mr. Tegetmeier referred to the races which were organized by him from the Crystal Palace to Brussels. The Belgian Homing Pigeon is not much unlike the common English pigeon. Its great characteristic is a well developed wing — of which the feathers overlap each other — and which is tolerably square instead of being pointed at the ends; so it has a broad, fine wing to strike the air with.

### The Method of Training

"I think I must say a word or two about the method of training. It is commonly supposed that these birds fly by instinct, but that is not the case. But you may ask — How can a bird which is taken away for a long distance in a basket and cannot see its way — how can it get back to the place from which it is taken if not by instinct? The answer to that is that the bird in its flight round its home gets accustomed to large tracts of country, and if a bird is trained for a race

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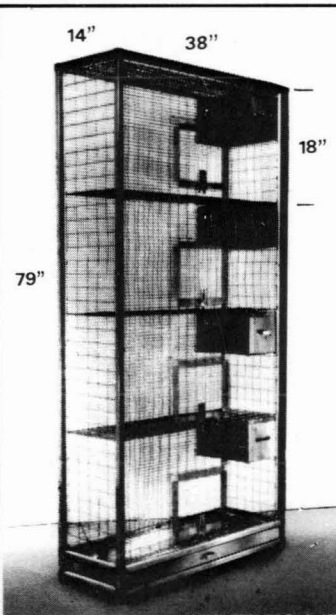
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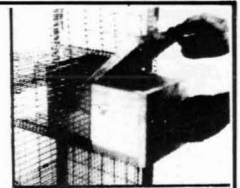
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it is taken away long distances increasing from ten or twenty to thirty, forty, fifty, and a hundred miles. You must recollect that the height at which the bird flies enables it to see a stretch of country embracing fifty or sixty square miles. If you go to the Paris Exhibition, and exercise your legs by going to the top of the Eiffel Tower, you will be able to see a distance of forty miles. The pigeon flies higher than the Eiffel Tower and has a larger scope of view. The bird roams around its home at various distances, and by and by gets a knowledge of the surrounding country for hundreds of miles. It is in this way that the bird knows how to return. But if you take the best bird in the world, and send it off on a long journey home on a foggy day, it will settle somewhere until it clears up. If it flew by instinct it would return home as well on a foggy day as a clear day, or as well by night as by day; neither of which statements are true.

#### **Swift Messengers from the Seat of War**

“There were pigeon flights in this country before the introduction of the races, but they were only for short distances. When a boy I was always fond of pigeons and natural history. I had then a good pigeon which was supposed to be a wonder because it had flown from the Nore to London, but now we think nothing of races that do not extend some hundreds of miles. Many years ago, before the introduction of the electric telegraph, pigeons were utilized chiefly by stock brokers and the lower class of racing men. It is known that the Rothschilds had relays of pigeons from Paris to London. They flew them then in stages comprising only short distances. There were stages for pigeons then, just as there were stages for coach horses at the same period. The news of the Battle of Waterloo was known to Rothschild before it was known to the Government, and was communicated by him to the Government, the intelligence having been brought over to him by pigeon express.

#### **Pigeons Beating the Electric Telegraph**

“In one of the races which took place from the Crystal Palace to Brussels, on the birds being liberated at twelve o’clock I rushed up to the telegraph office and sent off a message: “Pigeons off; day fine, wind so and so.” The first pigeon arrived at Brussels at twenty minutes past five, the weather not hav-

ing been the most favourable, but the telegram which I sent off announcing the departure of the birds got there at half past five, so that the winning pigeon beat the telegraphic service on that occasion by ten minutes. Of course if the telegraph had been properly communicated it would have reached Brussels in five seconds, but as a matter of practical experience it did not. Some time ago I was talking to the superintendent of the police at Ipswich. He told me that his son kept Homing Pigeons, and he often found them very useful. When going on a journey in his police cart he generally took two or three pigeons with him, and if he found himself in a part of the country far removed from any electric telegraph, and wanted to communicate with the police station at Ipswich, he wrote a message on a piece of paper, tied it with a piece of thread round the leg of the pigeon, liberated the bird, and in a few minutes it was at the head office with its intelligence. On 2 or 3 occasions the information thus conveyed has been used with great advantage in apprehending persons who otherwise would in all probability have escaped. I know several medical gentlemen who take Homing Pigeons with them on their journeys; and if they find themselves in urgent need of a particular sort of medicine or surgical appliance, instead of having to drive back to fetch it, they have simply sent the pigeons back with the message. It has got home in five minutes, and in half an hour’s time the requisite medicine or appliances are at hand.



#### **Newspaper Carrier**

“Here is a case of the utilization of pigeons a little nearer to you. A gentleman who lives at Rotherfield — Mr. Scott — has his daily paper brought to him from Alton, a distance of five miles, by pigeon post. There is a grocer or tradesman of some kind at Alton who is a pigeon fancier, and he and Mr. Scott exchange birds every day. What is done is this. The little parcel which the bird has to carry is the Daily Telegraph, which is rolled up into a very small compass, and hung over the pigeon’s neck so that when the bird flies the parcel is not in its way. It is rather hard work for

the bird, and I don’t mean to say that it would be right to send it a long distance with a weight like this, but the distance in this case is only five miles. The bird flies off home to its trap, and the man goes and cuts off the parcel. Here it is. (Mr. Tegetmeier unrolled the little parcel, and amid applause showed the audience a copy of the Daily Telegraph.) It gets home six or eight minutes after the paper arrives at Alton, whereas by an ordinary messenger, driving along the road, it would take half an hour or more.

#### **Pigeons and Fishing**

“There is another use to which the Homing pigeons are put. In the north of Scotland the fishing boats go out to catch herrings. Sometimes they catch enormous quantities, and sometimes they are not so fortunate. A quantity is generally left on shore, and it is important to know whether these should be preserved or sent to distant markets, which is regulated by the success or otherwise of the fishermen at sea. If they know what fish have been caught they know better what to do with those on shore. So the fishermen take out with them in their boats some of these pigeons, and if they make a good catch or a bad one they send off a message by the birds ‘Sell’ or ‘Salt’ as the case may be.”

#### **The Siege of Paris**

“But above all the services that have ever been performed by these Homing Pigeons, their utilization during the siege of Paris in 1871 is the most wonderful. You’re aware that the Germans surrounded the city in such a way that it was impossible for any that were inside the capital to get out, except by balloon, and then you ran the risk of being fired at and shelled by the Germans. It was rather hazardous work, for if they caught you, you were liable to be treated as a spy, and by the laws of war you could be shot. During the siege, 64 balloons left that city, conveying in addition to the sixty-four aeronauts, sixty-one passengers. It was found that the only means of getting messages back into Paris from the outside was by using these Homing Pigeons. The Parisians ate nearly every other live creature in the city, horses, cats and rats, but not the pigeons, because they were used to bring messages from friends outside. Three hundred and sixty-three pigeons were taken out in the balloons, and 3 million

letters. Only fifty-seven of the pigeons returned.

### Balloons Engaged

"I have here a book which contains the accounts of all the balloons that went out of Paris during the siege. The first which went up on November 30, under the management of a sailor named Prince, and bearing 500 despatches, was lost at sea. The balloon was found in St. George's Channel, and the bags of letters, but the man was never seen. He went up from Paris saying in the characteristic French way — 'I go to make an immense voyage. Hereafter they will speak of my ascension, and will recount my adventure.' Well, it was so. Here is one of the letters which was taken out of one of the bags that he threw overboard. It is addressed to Mr. Simpson, Herefordsquare, London, England. Here is another written by a young man to a relative of his mother, and giving an interesting description of the fighting and shooting and killing, and the manner in which they were living. It winds up in a truly characteristic manner — 'Please don't tell my mother that I am to be in the thick of it. The bugle sounds now, and I know not but that it may be my last call.' These letters came out in a balloon, and as I said just now, the only way in which replies could come back was by means of pigeons. The despatches that were sent back were in the first place, printed on small pieces of paper.

### Cipher Message.

It is a very wonderful little document. It is a despatch in cipher signed by M. Tachard, who at that time was the French Ambassador in Brussels. As soon as it was known that the pigeons would bring back messages, a celebrated photographer, M. Dagron, placed his services at the disposal of the Government, for the purpose of developing the pigeon post. M. Dagron and his friends with his apparatus, went up from Paris in balloons, but the investing army of the Germans at once began to shell them, and one of the balloons was so far pierced that it came down almost immediately. The other balloon went a little farther but came down within the lines. However, with the help of the inhabitants, who, of course, were friendly, M. Dagron got away with his apparatus and despatches, and eventually he reached Tours, a town situated about forty miles from Paris, and out-

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side the German investing lines. When he got there, M. Dagron organized

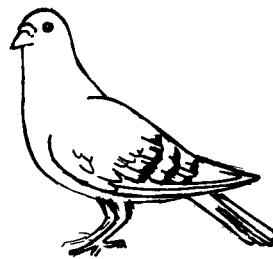
### **A System of Pigeon-Post,**

which was used in connection with our own postal system in this country, though very few people seem to know anything about it. Here is a bill issued by the Postmaster-General, dated November 16, 1870, which gives publicity to the fact that letters could be transmitted to Paris by means of Carrier pigeons, and pointing out the conditions under which such letters were to be sent. They were to be written in clear French, and were to be left open, and must not exceed twenty words in length, including the address of the sender. No figures were to be used and no allusion to political questions or to the war was permitted. The charge was at the rate of fivepence per word, prepaid. These letters were sent to Tours, in a large envelope such as you see in my hand, marked "On Her Majesty's Service." At Tours they were set up in type and microphotographed on thin films of collodion. I don't know whether you can see this little dark patch. (Mr. Tegetmeier pointed to a dark patch appearing in the middle of a card and just visible to those at the end of the room.) This square patch, which is divided into three columns, contains 200 such letters as I have described. It does not weigh but an eighth of a grain, and yet the postage of it was 40 Pounds. Sixteen of these squares were prepared on one sheet of film and were numbered consecutively. One of these films, therefore, contained 3,200 different communications, each limited to twenty words, and the weight of the whole was only two grains, while the postage on it was sixteen times 40 Pounds (640 Pounds)! Thus prepared, these films were rolled up tightly, placed in a very small quill, and tied to the feathers in the tail of the pigeon, which was then left off. So exceedingly light were these films that one pigeon could have carried the whole of the communications that went into Paris during the siege, amounting to 300,000 letters! Tours being only forty miles from Paris, the flight was a mere bagatelle to a good bird. If the weather had been fine, and the pigeons had been good, all of them would have got back to Paris; but some did not return, so duplicates were sent, all consecutively numbered, until the French postal authorities at Tours received an intimation by balloon that they had been received. I will show you one of these duplicate films presently

on the sheet. This system of pigeon post was continued up till the close of the siege.

### **Pigeons and Wrecks**

"I will relate to you another instance of the utilization of these birds. Some years ago there was a dreadful wreck of a German emigrant ship on the Goodwin Sands, and in consequence of the great loss of life there it was thought desirable to attempt to make communication from the lightships to the shore. The Elder Brethren of Trinity House appealed to me to supply them with Homing Pigeons. I thought it was a risky experiment, fearing the effect of the oscillation on the birds. However, we tried it, and on more than one occasion the birds were the means of saving both lives and vessels. The place selected for the experiment was Harwich, where an old lighthouse was placed at my disposal, and where I had a stock of young pigeons, the object being to send some half a dozen or more to each of the lightships, and then when any message was required to be communicated to the shore, certain letters taken from the maritime code of signals were stamped on the wing of the pigeon. For instance, 'R.G.F.' might mean 'Send a life boat,' and 'S.D.W.' something else. The loss of pigeons, however, was so very great that the experiment was discontinued.



### **Fortresses**

"At the present time there is scarcely a fortress on the continent which has not its loft of Homing Pigeons, trained by officers regularly appointed for the purpose, to return sixty or a hundred miles. Supposing a large fort such as Metz is invested. The telegraph wires would all be cut, and all the ordinary means of communication with the outside world would be removed. Before its investiture you could send out thirty or forty pigeons, or even after its complete investiture you could organize and send out some pigeons by balloon. You could take them to some loft out of the reach of the enemy, and if you

wanted to communicate with Metz, all you would have to do would be to attach your message to the bird and liberate it. Nearly every European Government is employing the birds for these purposes. England is one of the exceptions, the idea of our authorities being that should they ever be wanted they will be able to get plenty for the asking. The value of Homing Pigeons in such places as the Channel Islands, in case of a war with any European Power that had the means of cutting off telegraphic communication, would be inestimable.

### **Training**

"Some of you may probably wish to hear how to get Homing Pigeons to perform these services. It is impossible to buy them and set up a flock for immediate use. You must make a commencement with young birds that have not flown, or a number of birds must be allowed to breed in a large aviary, and the young ones reared, liberated, and trained. Here is a young one — we call it a squeaker — the down on it proves it to be scarcely out of its nest. Well, that bird would make its home wherever you liked to take it. You cannot establish a loft of old Homing Pigeons, because if they are good for anything they won't stop with you. My own practice is to take my young birds five, six, or eight miles out, and then let them off. Some of them don't return, but then I always say, 'Well, I'm glad you're gone. If you'd been any good you'd have come back.' (Laughter.)

### **Chinese and Pigeons**

"Mr. Tegetmeier then proceeded to show how the Chinese amuse themselves by attaching to the tails of pigeons various curiously constructed whistles made of light fragile bamboo, and which produce their sound by striking against the air during the swift flight of the bird. This practically concluded the lecture, and the gas being turned down one of the films referred to above was thrown on the screen by means of a magic lantern. Mr. Salter proposed a vote of thanks to Mr. Tegetmeier for his interesting lecture, which had not only amused but had enlightened them on the instincts of these remarkable birds, the culture and training of which had been the work of Mr. Tegetmeier's life, and the development of this branch of Natural History would be indelibly associated with his name. The meeting signified its approval, and the lecturer having replied the proceedings terminated." ●