

A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE BICC.

The British International Championship Club is possibly the premier British racing organisation and is open to membership to any fancier living on the mainland UK. The club organises races at National and International level with the National races catering for the sprint /middle distance members. These shorter National races serve a double purpose as they not only provide sport for the sprint / middle distance members but also provide ideal preparatory conditioning for the pigeons that are later to be entered in the long distance International races. As a result of the club's comprehensive race programme, many fanciers have foregone the trials , tribulations and expense of weekly club racing as they have found that after some early season private training they can enjoy National and International racing within the one organisation from late April through to early September.

In the International races the British pigeons have to compete against many thousands of pigeons entered from all over continental Europe and with a prevailing westerly airstream these gallant battlers certainly have their work cut out to compete at the highest level possible in the sport of pigeon racing. Yet compete they do and the quality of their performances have become greatly admired by our Continental fancier friends who appreciate just how difficult a task the British pigeons have. Nevertheless, the International race has been won on seven occasions by British fanciers and their never say die pigeons, with three International wins being recorded in the 2011 season alone!

This incredible level of success has not been achieved overnight but saw its genesis in the long cold winter nights of 1976 when three forward looking fanciers namely Ted Bennett, Norman Fooks and Tony Cowan got together and hatched a "cunning plan" to try to encourage British fanciers back onto the International racing scene.

At this point I'll let Ted Bennett take up the story:-

"From my 'teens I had been 'sold' on the fact that there was only one ultimate pigeon racing challenge and that was by testing your birds in International races. In the winter of 1976, Tony Cowan, Norman Fooks and I were discussing the future of the Hampshire Two Bird Championship Club and UK pigeon racing. Previously I had expressed my views that the UK needed to return to the International arena and I did so again. After some discussion the three of us agreed that the International scene was challenge and there was a need for UK pigeon fanciers to compete in those races IF the UK pigeons were to be recognised, as they should be, throughout the Pigeon World.

As an aside and to explain further, I had been enthralled in the mid-1940's when listening to (and 'pumping' him with questions) the great George Stubbs talking about his performances in the Internationals races from Barcelona in 1930 and 1931. My interest was also further enhanced when I was W/Cdr Lea Rainer's steward at a London show in the early 1950's. He told a group of fanciers "there was a great gulf between Club, Classic, Amalgamation, Federation, Classic and NFC races. He also said that the greatest difference occurred when a fancier flew with the International Club from Barcelona" where a 'special' pigeon, properly bred, prepared and conditioned, was required. Wing Commander Lea Rayner had been involved with the London Columbarian Society when they competed in, I think, the Barcelona Internationals. Then my interest was again sparked in early 1976 when I listened, at a RPRA Council Meeting, to Guy Barrett speaking about his experiences when he had attended an International prize presentation in Belgium and he said 'the International Clubs would like the UK to participate again'.

In the autumn of 1976 Tony Cowan - Chairman, Norman Fooks - Secretary and I – President were trying to increase membership and interest in the Hampshire Two Bird Championship Club and we met, periodically, to explore ways of giving the Club more prestige. I wanted a challenge and asked whether the Club would consider arranging a race, open to the whole of the UK, in one of the Belgium Internationals. Tony and Norman thought it was a good idea and we planned a course of action to try to get the members of the Club to agree to an open race with the organisation that ran the Pau International. I had met the secretary of the Pau International, Dr Paduwa, previously and I therefore 'phoned him that evening and asked whether our idea would be welcome. He nearly bit my hand off and I received a very warm welcome. He immediately sent me all the relevant information. Tony, Norman and I considered the race was possible and we put a proposition before the Hampshire Two Bird Championship Club AGM for the Club to arrange an Open Race to fly the Pau International. The proposition was accepted and I agreed to be the Secretary for that race. I applied for and received approval for the required RPRA Licence and sent about a hundred letters to obtain sponsorship, etc for the race. "Flyers' were sent to fanciers in the South of England and to every RPRA affiliated club in the UK. Colin Osman of The RP was most enthusiastic and very helpful sponsoring free advertising, publicity and printing of the result of the race in The RP.

Interest in the race was overwhelming but, unfortunately, on the day entries to the race were very disappointing. The Pau International then had a 5-bird limit and they gave something like £6 (I think) to a Hospital Charity for every bird entered and therefore the entry fee (34 years ago) was £10 per bird to compete in the International race. On top of this the UK costs for transporting etc had to be added. I can't remember the exact figure charged per bird but it was about £15 – a lot of money 34 years ago. That was the major reason, we thought, why the entries were few (about the mid 50's) in number. However the organisation,

transporting to the International convoy etc went smoothly. The race was flown with the UK participating and was like dipping ones toe in the water to find out whether it was acceptable. The birds were liberated on the Saturday at 2 pm UK time. Obviously no UK birds could reach their loft until the next day. I remember that the Sunday morning was very foggy and humid as I waited for my sole entry. The UK birds started to be timed in from 10 am. I timed in at about 10.30 to be 3rd GB and something like 40th International hens and the bird looked as if she could have flown more – immaculate and showed me that we could compete.

The Open race vindicated us and the interest shown was very pleasing. I felt then that this was the way forward. That Open race was really the start of the BICC being created. In the August, September and October, following the 1977 Pau International race, Tony Cowan's and my 'phone was 'red hot'. In late October some Kent and London fanciers, who had sent to the International race, contacted us regarding International racing. They wanted to know whether we were going to arrange another International Open Race in 1978. We talked for hours on the telephone, mainly with the Kent fanciers who were very keen to fly more International races, and we came to the conclusion that a Club should be formed to enable UK fanciers to fly in the International races.

Creating the BICC

The interested parties decided that a series of meetings would be held to agree the way forward with the sole objective of forming an International club for the UK. In winter of 1977 Tony Cowan and I travelled three or four times to Maidstone in the evening after work. Our meetings were with the John Cecil, Geoff Hunt, Cyril Wells (I think) one of the Castle brothers and three or four other fanciers from Kent (I think they have all passed away now). These meeting resulted in a unanimous agreement that a new UK International Club be formed and this would be the way forward.

The first step was to arrange an Inaugural Meeting to form the Club at a convenient location in London to put the flesh on the bones of our agreed decisions. I agreed to make this happen and contacted Colin Osman and we framed an advert to be published in The RP and BHW calling a meeting with a view to setting up a Club to fly the International races in 1978. I also sent a flyer to every RPRA Club using the addresses published with the 'ring' list in the BHW. Colin agreed to chair this meeting and (if my memory is correct) it was held in late February – early March at the Moseley Football Club. Prior to the meeting I had formulated a draft set of rules – an A4 sheet – and our aims and objects were those thrashed out at the meetings held in Maidstone.

The Inaugural meeting was (in my opinion) poorly attended - Colin Osman (chair), John Cecil, Geoff Hunt, Cyril Wells (I think) one of the Castle brothers, Joe Szarvas and his son, Joe Stediford, A, Silson from Tring, Stan Biss's loft manager, Tony Cowan, Norman Fooks and myself – plus about three others. It was agreed, after considerable discussion, by all those present to

- a) Form a new club named the British International Championship Club.
- b) Obtain approval and obtain affiliation from The RPRA (the necessary forms had been obtained, names and addresses given with an agreed entry fee to the club and an annual subscription being paid where possible) and
- c) Fly race programme in 1978 in conjunction with the International races that competed for the Europa Cup (i.e. the race from Pau, Narbonne, Barcelona, Marseilles and Perpignan).
- d) Elect a President (Colin Osman was elected), elect a Secretary (John Cecil was elected) and appoint Vice Chairmen (Geoff Hunt, Tony Cowan, Joe Szarvas and myself Vice President's) – [I think that is correct but memory can do funny thing].
- e) Arrange two marking stations somewhere in London and Kent. The question of clock stations was discussed and, if possible, fancier should obtain agreement to use the NFC station nearest to the member.

John Cecil and I agreed to liaise with the Belgium International bodies for their agreement (I had already received an assurance that this would be a formality) and Geoff Hunt agreed to arrange transportation to take the UK birds to wherever the International organiser required.

In the 1978 season the Club flew all the Europa International races. This saw the re-start of International racing for the UK fancier's who had joined the BICC. However the membership take up was disappointing and in all the races the average number of birds sent was about 50 to 60 BUT the racing was enjoyable and very different. 1978 saw a successful start to the new exciting venture that had occurred (as an aside I was again 3rd Pau same hen as in 1977 and 4th Narbonne BICC).

At the 1978 AGM it was agreed that in 1979 the BICC continue to fly the Europa Cup International races. However it was felt that there was a need to organise more publicity to attract more members in 1979 and again Colin Osman agreed to give this free in The RP (although he had resigned as President). The aim was to attract a greater number of UK fanciers (it was felt that many were sitting on the fence) and to get them to accept the challenge and compete in the International races. To assist this process it was proposed and

accepted that the BICC organise the Marseilles race as an Open race to all UK fanciers. As an incentive a first prize of £1,000 was guaranteed by four members of the club (I was one of these I think). Tony Cowan agreed to speak to his many contacts to get young birds and to hold at least two young bird auctions. These auctions were held (Tony was the Auctioneer) and the £1000 was achieved. About 330 UK birds were sent to the Marseilles International race and it did create a great deal of interest.

The 1979 racing was again enjoyable, very different from that flown normally in the UK and the results good, particularly the Barcelona International where the Fear Bros were 1st & 2nd BICC and were in the first 5% in the International result (as an aside I was 3rd BICC). The Marseilles Open race attracted nearly 350 birds (again I think) and was a hard race, a two or three-day holdover but the returns in the UK were good. The UK fanciers showed great interest and it was obvious that the BICC had arrived and the foundations laid were secure for the future.”

That then is a brief account, literally from the “horse’s mouth”, of how the BICC came into being, chronicled by one “who was there” at the outset. My thanks to Mr Bennett for taking the time to put down on paper his recollections of the genesis of this great club.

The club has since grown to its present membership of more than 1,200 competing members and it is to be hoped that many more will join us in our quest to compete against the very best on the International stage.

None of the present day success could have been achieved without the hard work and dedication of the officials some of whom are listed here. My apologies if I miss anyone out – I can assure it is unintentional. Secretaries, hopefully in chronological order:-

John Cecil .Pat Longyear, John Lyden[John completed two stints as secretary], John and Rose Wills, George Gelder, Clive Bennett, Jan Deacon and Carol Francis.

Chairmen:- Geoff Hunt, Trevor Hardwicke, Albi Deacon.

Presidents:-Colin Osman, Geoff Hunt, Brian Long, Mike Bunney and John Tyerman.

And finally, take a bow the International race winners namely – Brian Sheppard, Mark Gilbert [x 3], Dave Posey, D.Bullen & son and Geoff and Catherine Cooper. In addition to these outright wins in International races there have been literally scores of other commendable positions won against the very best competition in Europe. Let’s hope that in the years to come there will be many more top class performances achieved by British fanciers with British pigeons. The opportunity is there for each and every fancier who reads this to enjoy success on the International stage – all you have to do as a first step is join the BICC, what follows thereafter could well be history in the making.

Gareth Watkins

(Written in 2012)