

The Busschaert Story, The name that made a strain



The late Georges Busschaerts (right) in conversation with Tony Cowan.

The strain in Britain

by Tim Lovel

No strain of pigeon in Britain has scored such sweeping success as the Busschaerts have done in recent times. One has to go back to the Gurnays to find anything comparable, and even though they won fantastically they did not do so all over the country in such amazing profusion. The origins of the Busschaert strain are for many shrouded in mystery; indeed more than one fancier said to Georges Busschaert himself, "How can you call it a strain when you buy pigeons all over Belgium?" To this he always replied: "It doesn't matter where I buy them, when they are in my lofts they are Busschaerts!"

Georges Busschaert was born on 12 May 1911 in St Lodewijk-Deerlijk. His father was a pigeon fancier and his brothers Andre and Marcel and his sister Alice were also keenly interested. (These christian names are complicated because Georges was often referred to by his first name of

Remi! However, he preferred to be called Georges.) A near neighbour was Jerome Vereecke who helped a great deal by putting them in touch with leading fanciers in the area.

At the end of the 1920s they all moved to Beveren-Leie to build up a transport haulage business, using at first horses and later lorries. All their spare cash went into pigeons, and they obtained the best they could buy from Maurice Delbar of Ronse, Pastor Brusseel of Gijzegem, Rene Verhome of Desselgem, De Backer, Delvoeye of Ronse, Robert Tanghe of Roeselare, the Delombaerde Bros of Lauwe, whose strain came from Theo Vandevelde of Oudenberg, Stichelbaut, Commines, Remi Buysse of Hooglede and Coucke of Zwevegem. Probably the most important bloodlines were the Delbars and the Commines which mainly came from Pastor Brusseel, Rene Verhome and Commines himself. At the end of the 1940s they sold their

haulage firm and in order to start in the textile business Georges Busschaert had a clearance sale. Sixty-three pigeons were sold for 250,000 Belgian francs. (In those days a nice house could be bought for 35,000 Belgian francs.)

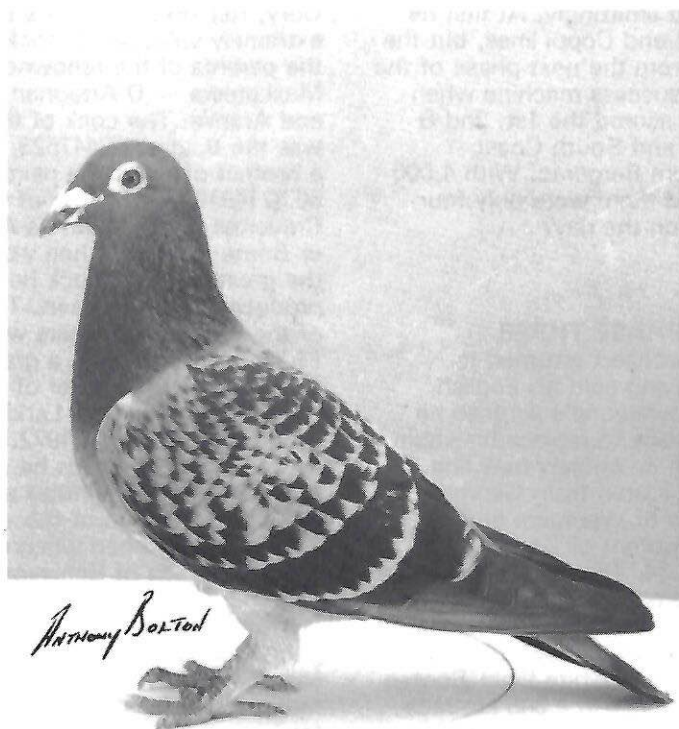
PHASE TWO

Georges then went into partnership with his brother-in-law, Mr Nuyttens, who had married his sister Alice. They bought several birds out of the auction, including a Mealy Commines which became the ancestor of Pluto. Also Georges bought a 1951 pigeon called Tito from Hector Baele of Scheldewinke, De Plattetekop from Vandevelde, sons and daughters of the Coppi and the Witterugge from Michel Nachtergaele of Zulte, and he also borrowed the Coppi to pair to daughters of the Tito. De Fijnen came from Michel Nachtergaele as well. Incidentally the name Coppi is found frequently in the Belgian pigeons of this time. Several fliers called a bird The Coppi and they did so in honour of the famous Italian cyclist of that name who eventually died of tuberculosis. The Coppi of Nachtergaele came originally from a man called Gilbert, a railway worker.

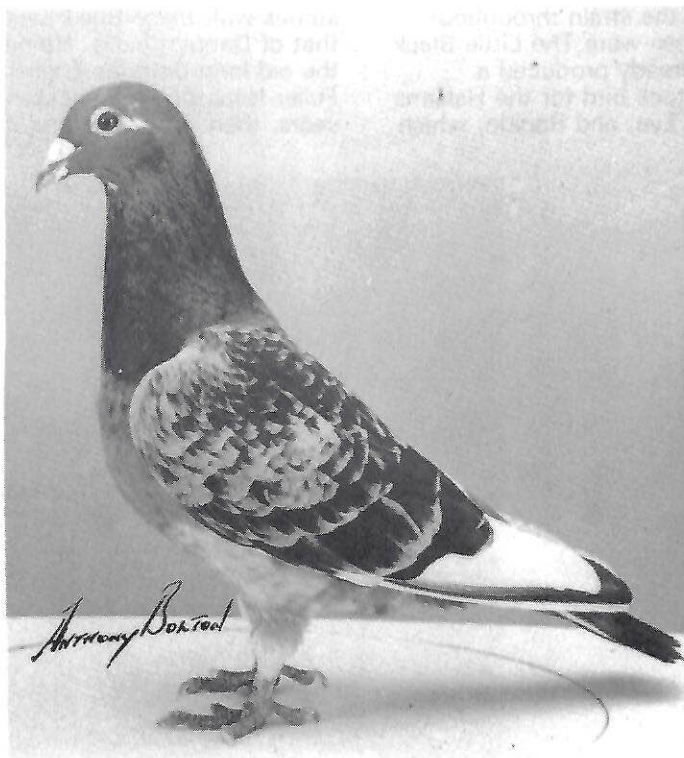
These stock birds stayed with Andre in Belgium, but their offspring were taken to England when Georges Busschaert opened a carpet factory in Kent. They were responsible for many wins; such birds as the Crack, the Coppi-Cock, the Great Coppi, the Bonten, the Blesse and many others scored wonderfully for him. He had formed a partnership with Gil Duncan of Deal and their wins in the Kent clubs and Feds became legendary. Between 1956-62 they won over 150 1st prizes, often being 1st, 2nd & 3rd in the Fed result. Their fame soon spread and discerning fanciers began to order birds from them. One such was Mrs Newton, whose husband raced pigeons without much success in the West Durham Amalgamation. She bought a pair of birds for her husband as a silver wedding anniversary present. When they arrived they were very young and in heavy moult, and certainly they did not look the part. Only because they were a present did Mr Newton not send them back as unsatisfactory. Instead he retained them, the birds developed, and the following year they bred young birds which set the West Durham Amalgamation alight.

Compiled and written by F.G. Wilson and Tim Lovel

No one could believe that this previously average fancier could do so well, and indeed every possible investigation was made to ensure that his wins were genuine. When satisfied, everyone wanted them, and more stock was obtained from Georges Busschaert and his agent Gil Duncan. In the early Sixties most of the Busschaerts at this time went to North East England, and this severely competitive area became a great proving ground for them. Although not the first, one of the earliest fanciers to obtain them was that great pigeon flier and breeder Dr J J Horn. He founded his loft on sons and daughters of the Newton Pair and then obtained the Newton Pair themselves, the Broken Keel Cock and his grandson the Wilkinson Stock Cock. It was the bloodlines of these four pigeons, blended skilfully together by Jeff Horn, which in the end resulted in many unsurpassed records in the great Up North Combine classic races. Even today this bloodline is producing winners; for example the dam of Mr & Mrs Bedford's 1st Open N.F.C. Nantes 1984, the dam of P Pettit's 2nd Open Midland National 1981 Rennes, and



Belge 60.3442447, *The Newton Hen*, owned by Dr. J.J. Horn.



Belge 60.3404158, *The Newton Cock*, owned by Dr. J.J. Horn.

the sire of the 1st N.F.C. Sartilly 1984 were all Jeff Horn's breeding or bloodlines.

In 1972 Ray Callender decided to try these sprinting Busschaerts, and sent to Howard Henson of Deal for two matched pairs to fly up to 300 miles inland. These stock birds, together with two from George Latcham that went back to the Crack, Tito and the Atomique of Roger Verecke, and two more Henson birds including the Tube, founded the Powderhall strain that scored resoundingly in the fierce competition of the North East. They won the W.D.A. from Eastbourne with Lisa, topped the Tyne and Derwent Fed 23 times, scored 1st, 2nd, 4th, 6th, 7th & 8th out of 3,650 birds in a headwind over 145 miles and bred at least three Open Combine winners for others. The only fault that Ray had with these birds was that young bird losses could be heavy, and so in 1976 he bought in Silvy (sister of The 85) as an out-cross to calm them down a bit!

With the passing of time many other fanciers got them; whole clubs existed where the only strain flown was Busschaerts. This gradually led

to further selection. In the hands of good fanciers the pigeons were improved and individuals could be picked out which could fly a longer distance.

Meanwhile, back in Kent, Ron Hallam of Belvedere had become a very close friend of Busschaert and he obtained birds from him which again scored instantly and amazingly. At first he had the Tito and Coppi lines, but the best came from the next phase of the Busschaert success machine when the Hallams scored the 1st, 2nd & 3rd London and South Coast Combine from Bergerac. With 4,000 birds entered there were only four birds home on the day.

PHASE THREE

In 1960 Busschaert returned to Belgium, having sold his English factory. To everyone's surprise he began gradually to replace his strain of birds with an entirely new line. He bought The Klaren from Georges Doetreloigne of Waregem and from F Declercq (Sooten) of De Klinge he bought The 14, The Old Sooten, The dark chequered white flight Sooten hen, and a black chequer The 817. Most of these were stock birds, but the dark chequer white flight Sooten hen won 1st prize in a 345 km race out of 25,000 young birds and Georges bought her the same day. Also the Klaren had won 33 top prizes before he bought him and he had to pay 30,000 Belgian francs to become his owner. Again the dam of the Klaren went back to the old De Lombaerde strain. From these few stock birds he began to breed and already in 1961 he won the Championship for young birds to race the longest distance. Gradually the old Tito-Coppi-Crack lines were almost totally replaced by these newer birds and, when asked why, Georges said that he found that they were pigeons that were smaller, with softer feathering, and with the ability to fly longer distances for him. The best of all was The 85, an outstanding winner that was tragically shot in his prime. In his short flying career he won 2nd Inter Provincial Poitiers, 3rd Provincial and 4th National Perigueux and 1st Limoges National in 1968. In three short years from 1968-1971 Busschaert won 1st Limoges National twice, 33rd San Sebastian International, 5th Cahors National, 1st Perigueux National, 2nd Cahors National, 3rd Brive National, 27th Barcelona International and 3rd Cahors International. These racing machines also produced such a wealth of winners that one can only marvel at their output.

Tom Larkins obtained some to import into England for himself, and soon he

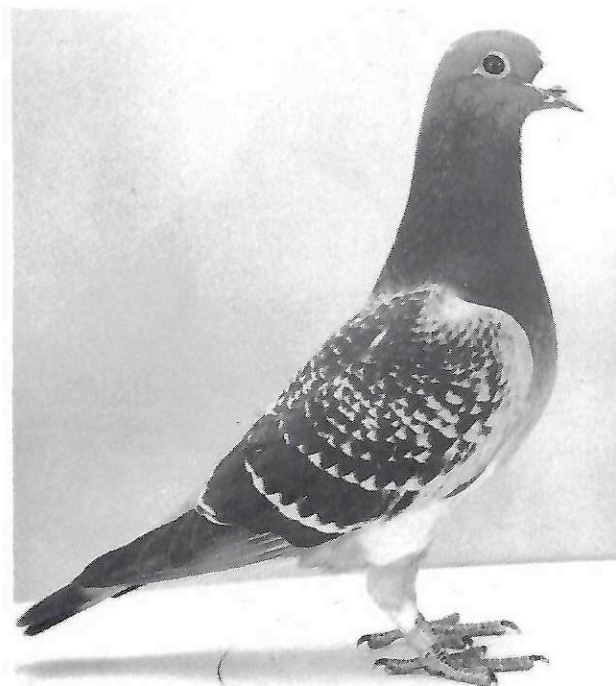
became Busschaert's agent. He brought in such famous birds as the 505 cock (one of the very few sons of the great 85) which bred both Champion Tracy to win the Young Bird National in 1973 for J Haywood and also the mother of Schiavon. Georges Busschaert badly wanted to get the 505 back but he was never successful. The four brothers Pekito, Gory, Rapido and The Pe were extremely valuable at stock, as were the parents of the renowned Three Musketeers — D'Artagnan, Porthos and Aramis. The cock of this pair was the Belge 71.3447523, bred from a brother of Schiavon paired to 66.3714916, a daughter of the Pied Crayonne (also known as Atomique or Bonte). This 916 hen was probably the greatest of all stock hens produced by Busschaert. The mother of the Three Musketeers was 71.3447542 bred from a grandson of 85 x Nica Nora, a sister of The 85. A typical result for Tom Larkins was the Wadebridge Open in 1972. With four entries flying 276 miles he clocked all four together, 70 minutes ahead of the next bird! Two of these were sons of the 916 hen when she was paired to a son of Schiavon and two were her grandchildren, being two of the Three Musketeers. Almost as good a stock hen was 72.3322722, called the Coppi hen, which bred many winners and good stock birds too.

By now everybody had heard of Busschaert and he began to hold an annual sale in England. At the first one, in 1976, Ken Aldred bought two birds that were to have a big influence on the strain throughout England. These were The Little Black, which had already produced a marvellous stock bird for the Hallams called Wonk Eye, and Rapido, which

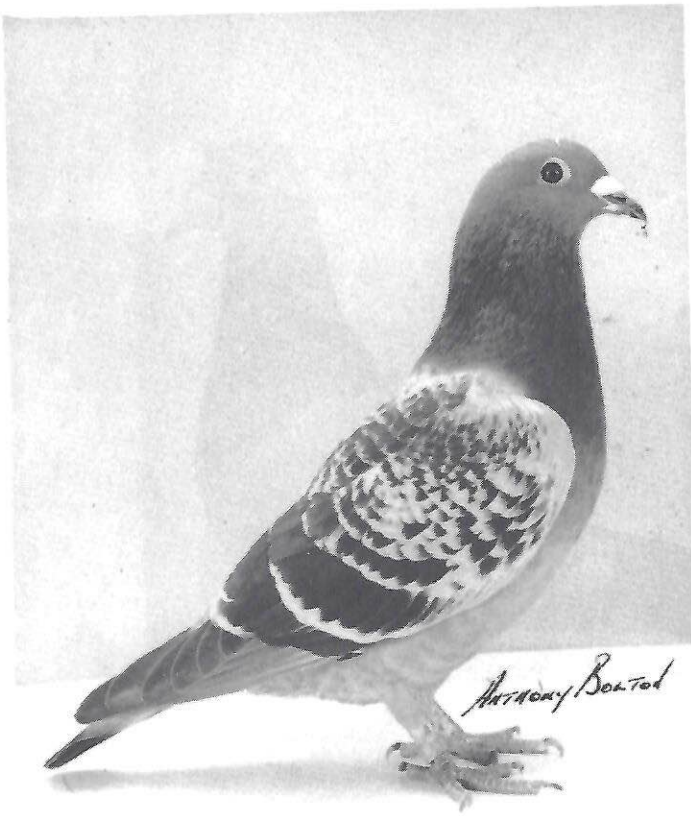
particularly produced fantastic sprint birds. Up to 200 miles they were totally unbeatable and Ken Aldred found that in 40 years of pigeon flying they were by far the fastest birds he had ever owned. George Corbett obtained direct stock both from Busschaert direct and through Tom Larkins to produce the famous Dark 'Uns. Particularly valuable to him were a cock and a hen bred from Tom Larkin's Coppi hen (already mentioned) when she was paired to the sire of the Three Musketeers. The blood of the 916 hen ran throughout his strain and Big 66, the sire of The Professor and Domingo, which was bred from the 182 paired to Lady Bird, was also important.

Paul Smith and Michael Boulton had bought 30 young birds from Busschaert in 1975, particularly children of Pluto, The Little Black and Schiavon, which produced many winners for fanciers all over Britain. Pluto himself was in the 1976 sale and he too went to Regency Lofts. In some respects his breeding was unique for on the sire's side he went right back through Nachtergaele to the Commine sprint strain. The dam was a sister of The 45, again showing Busschaert's great breeding skill in using his stock sense to the full. In his racing career Pluto won over 70 prizes and more than £3,000 in prize money. Among these wins were 3rd International Cahors, 3rd National Cahors, 3rd National Brive and 29th National Tulle.

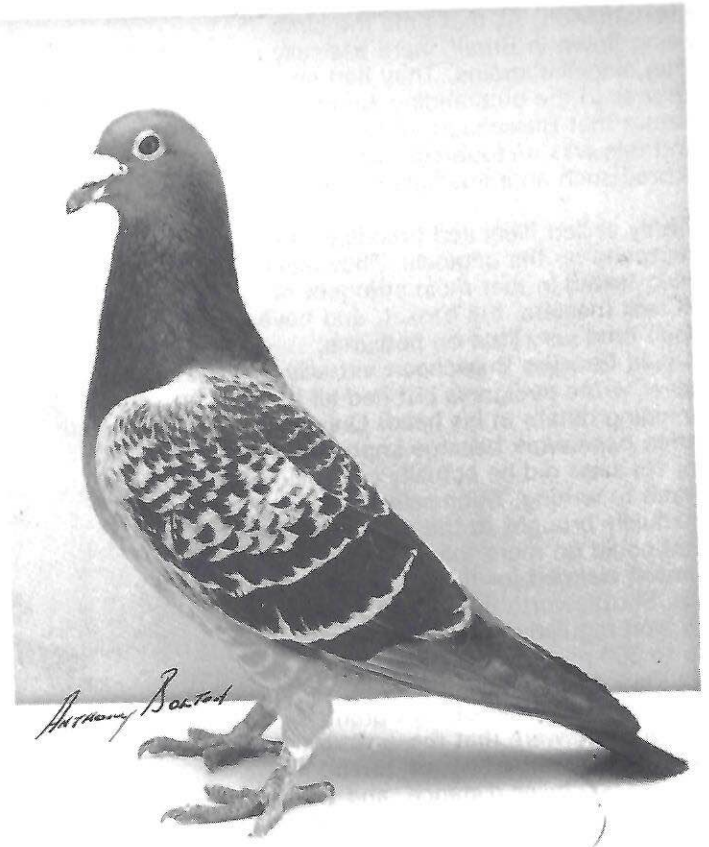
One of the most resounding success stories with these Busschaerts was that of Danny Challis. He had flown the old long distance English strain of Fuller-Isaacson with success for 30 years. then in 1975 he and a friend



D'Artagnan, one of the Three Musketeers bred by T. Larkins.



Aramis, photographed as a young bird, another of Tom Larkins' Three Musketeers.



Porthos, the third of Tom Larkins' famous trio, sire, g.sire and g.g.sire of countless winners.

decided to "try one of these new Belgian strains". So they sent for 16 young birds from Tom Larkins and shared them out on arrival between themselves. Danny's first choice was a medium to small blue chequer hen that was to become world famous as Shy Lass. This double grand-daughter of the Little Black was winner of the Open Wessex Combine herself and breeder of five Open Combine and 15 Fed winners when paired in turn to each of the cocks that had come with her. Even more remarkable was the fact that her winning children have gone on breeding winners. For example, the famous Moneypacker has so far won four Opens, 1st Combine and 1st Fed, 5th Combine and has also bred Wilber to win the Rennes Central Southern Classic, Blue Steel to take 1st Open Parkstone, 1st Dorset Fed, Imperial Black to win the Solent Fed and Black Fire who won the Solent Fed. Nor was this a one off success due to the tremendous breeding potential of Shy Lass, for the other birds in that original consignment, which were mostly children of the Three Musketeers and grandchildren of the Little Black and the Crayonne, also bred good pigeons when paired amongst each other. Indeed those 16 young pigeons must be regarded as one of the best bargains that any fancier ever bought. At one time this small loft contained 40 Fed winners and five Combine winners.

Mr and Mrs Shuttleworth of Harrogate bought a pair from Tom Larkins which they called the Larkins Pair and these proved the foundation for their stud by producing such famous birds as Anchor Jack and Wharfedale Producer. The cock of this famous pair was from 72.3154143, a son of Schiavon when paired to the 916 hen already mentioned, and the hen was a grand-daughter of the Crayonne x Sylvie. In Northern Ireland W Parkes obtained both strains of Busschaerts, ie the Tito-Coppi line and the Klaren-Little Black line, and he crossed them with outstanding results once again. John Palmer's No 1 and No 2 pairs were both important influences on his loft.

PHASE IV

Georges could never resist buying outstanding pigeons to mix with his own strain. Therefore such birds as Jeroom, Daniel, Atleet, the Dax hen and the Barcelona and many others were bought in by him as out-crosses; they became known as Busschaerts and their progeny were sold as such in his annual sales up to his dispersal sale in 1982 which shortly preceded his death.

It must be asked why Georges Busschaert was so successful both in producing birds to win for himself and even more to win for others. Firstly it is clear that he could choose outstanding breeders to buy, often

from small pigeon fanciers who were not well known. He did not necessarily buy birds that had flown well themselves, he could just recognise quality in a pigeon. Although he was a very successful flier in his own right his birds did even better for others than they did for himself.

Secondly he had a remarkable flair for pairing up the right birds to produce winners over and over again. Thirdly his base pigeons were not closely related. He then skilfully in-bred them, especially to the Klaren, the Sooten and the Crayonne. As already described, there are four phases of Busschaerts which had originally virtually no relationship one to another. These different phases have been crossed by Busschaert and by many others so that hy-bred vigor is undoubtedly obtained by avoiding the in-bred hazards that others have suffered from.

Fourthly his birds were basically sprinters. They won at once because they would break from liberation and stick together. Tom Larkins described how he sent his team of 30 young birds to a race of over 2,000 pigeons; 21 dropped at his loft at the same moment! John Palmer had 10 drop to win the London and South Coast Combine 30 minutes ahead of the next bird in the Fed. Gil Duncan and others experienced the same

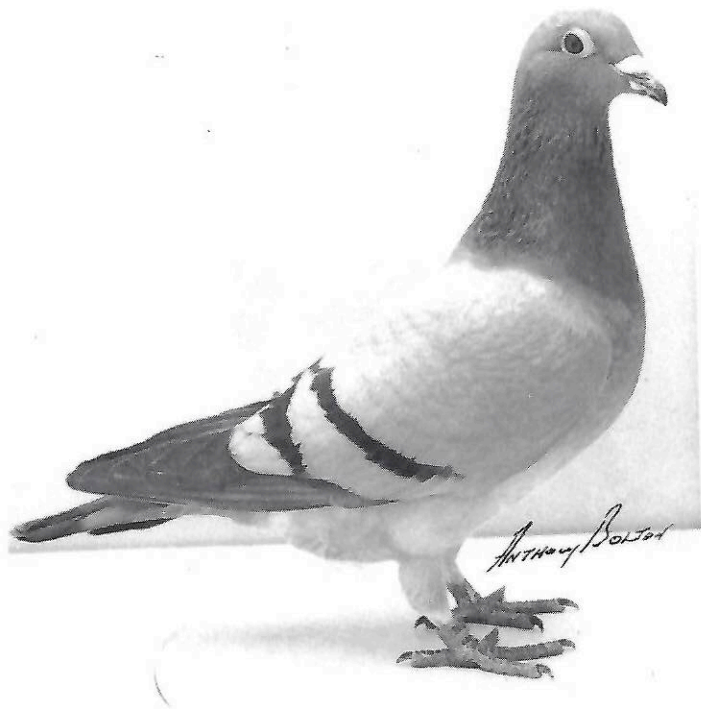
phenomenon. At that time the birds being flown in Britain were basically long distance strains. They had no answer to the outstanding sprint nature that Busschaert introduced and this was undoubtedly why they scored such an immediate success.

Fifthly skilled fliers and breeders have improved on the originals. They have been tested in that most stringent of all task masters, the basket, and have been bred very little on pedigree; indeed Georges Busschaert virtually never wrote pedigrees but had all the breeding details in his head! Only when paperwork became important for his sales did he actually commit much to writing. Such selection gradually brought to the surface birds that could do more than Busschaert himself claimed for them; for instance Joe Shuttleworth noted that whereas he won regularly on the North Road up to 300 miles, some birds consistently came back late. These he religiously disposed of. But gradually he became aware that these were the birds that were capable of getting 400 or even 500 miles distance, and when he kept them and put them into the longer races from Lerwick he began to win at these races too.

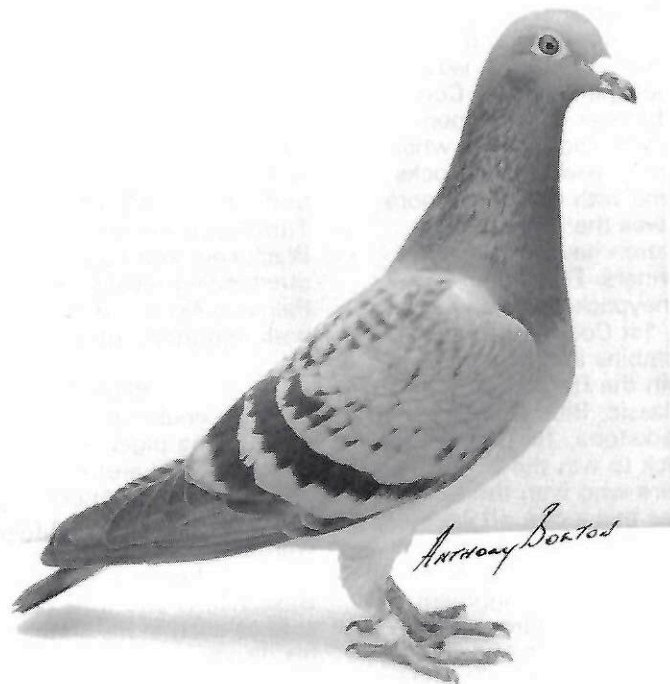
Finally, they seem to be remarkably adaptable birds which are easy to manage; they are tame and friendly, not much given to flyaways as young birds, or to be easily put off by head winds or bad weather. They do not have to mature to two or three years of age before they can race and they adapt equally well to Natural and to Widowhood methods. For all these reasons it seems very doubtful whether another strain can now arrive to destroy their present position as Britain's most popular racing pigeon.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This article could not have been written without the generous help of all the well-known fanciers mentioned in its pages. Much valuable information was also received from Romain Nuyttens and Jules Gallez about the early days in Belgium. To all these gentlemen I offer my grateful thanks. I regret that many good fliers of the Busschaert strain have not been included but clearly only some could be mentioned. Further reading: Georges Busschaert, RP Pictorial Nos 59 and 60. John Palmer, RP Pictorial No 62. Danny Challis, RP Pictorial. G Busschaert, American Bulletin April 16 and 23, 1984. R Hallam, RP Pictorial No 47. De Geheimen Van de Gebroeders, De Lombaerde, E Baeten (1982), De Reisduif (in Dutch). Nuyttens Bros, BHW December 12, 1980. Sales lists: Georges Busschaert, The RP 1976 p1588, 1977, 1978, 1979 p1790, 1980 p1594, 1981, 1982 p1436. D Challis, The RP 1981 pp68 and 1564. K Aldred, The RP 1979 p1571, 1981 pp1409 and 1457. A Wright, The RP 1981 p1722. R Hallam, The RP 1981 p1784. G Corbett, The RP 1981 p1461, 1983 p8 1984.



Blue hen 76N28840 Charter Flight, winner of 1st U.N.C. Lillers 1979, 2nd U.N.C. Lillers 1981. The only pigeon to win 1st & 2nd Up North Combine, bred and raced by Dr. J.J. Horn.



Blue chequer hen Charter Maid Marion, winner of 1st U.N.C. Ashford. Maid Marion is sister of the dam of Charter Flight. Bred and raced by Dr. J.J. Horn.