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Steel fans are launched from the spring-loaded Gyro-pigeon device

Conscientious projectile

Robert Morgan on the roots of clay pigeon shooting and the concerns that brought it about

Clay pigeon shooting seems to have been around forever and has its roots in the sport of live pigeon shooting. Outlawed nearly the world over today, this sport gave rise to many aspects of clay shooting as we know it today.

Trap shooting was called 'trap' because originally live birds were released from a cage trap and the common command of 'pull' derived from the instruction to pull

the cord that opened the trap and released the bird.

One of the first successful attempts to simulate the live bird was made in the US by Adam Bogardus. His idea of taking a small glass sphere, filling it with goose feathers and launching it skywards off a spring-loaded arm was definitely the father of clay shooting. Sadly, there wasn't much variance in the angle of target thrown, but it certainly allowed a keen sportsman to keep his eye in and practise at his leisure. And the visual reward of the glass ball shattering and producing a satisfying cloud of feathers had to be seen to be believed.

Danger

Amazingly, the danger of flying shards of glass never seemed to deter people from participating. The glass target system had

a fair innings and lasted from the 1870s well into the 1920s and Bogardus's idea was widely copied. An American called Hockey even came up with a magazine-fed automatic machine. Also, since the sport began in the Victorian era, people have been striving to find ways of reducing its expense.

The Americans were far more open to shooting artificial targets, with the UK and Europe still preferring the real thing. In 1874, an American called G Hahn devised a machine that launched tin 'flying tops'. Originally a popular children's toy, these small tinplate helicopters were adapted by Hahn to make a target, but they relied on much physical effort to make them fly, as a cord had to be wrapped around a spindle and then pulled sharply.

The patent was taken and modified by George Bussey, an Englishman, around



Glass ball trap shooting is viewed as the origin of today's clay pigeon shooting

It is now rare to find Bussey Gyro-pigeon equipment in the UK



“The Americans were far more open to shooting artificial targets, with the UK and Europe still preferring the real thing”

1877. Bussey's tin targets could be launched via a powerful spring-loaded device that was mounted into wood – and later a hand-held version appeared. These reusable (to a point) targets actually simulated the erratic flight of a bird and were very similar in principle to modern ZZ or Helice shooting.

As the following article from the *London Standard* shows, the benefits were almost too good to be true: “The ostensible object of pigeon shooting as carried on by the various clubs, is to keep the hand of the sportsman in form during the close season, so that his skill as a Shot may not suffer for want of practise during the months when legitimate sport is unobtainable, and with this end in view it has of late years made rapid strides in public favour; but at the same time it has objectionable phases, which cause many sportsmen to stand aloof from it – one being the enormous expense attending a day's pigeon shooting and the other the wholesale slaughter of birds from traps.

“The latter objection is, perhaps, the more serious and difficult to overcome, it being necessary, in order that it may be any use as a practice to have the object to be shot at on the wing. Mr G G Bussey, a gentleman interested in guns and shooting, has for some time past had his attention directed to this matter, and the result is the perfection of mechanical appliances which will afford

unlimited sport at a comparatively small cost, without the use of live birds, thus removing the two obstacles to gun practice at this season of the year.

Motion

“The invention, which is called the ‘Gyro-pigeon’, consists of a steel fan in the form of



Steel fan targets for use with a Bussey Gyro-pigeon device

the toy known as the aerial top, which rises from a rotary motion given to it by a spring. The invention was lately exhibited and tested at the Museum of Firearms, Rye Lane, Peckham; and, to judge from its performance on that occasion, it is likely to save the lives of many pigeons of the future, so far as the gun is concerned, for the penchant for taking life may in some cases tell against it, the

argumentum ad erumenam is always strong, and will, doubtless, have its effect.

“The cost of the ‘Gyro’ with all its fittings, sufficient for 600 shots is, in the first instance, £3; but after this first cost the expense is even more trifling, eighteen pence being the price of a dozen fans, which are sufficient for six dozen shots, that is, assuming that the person shooting has sufficient skill not only to hit his bird nearly every time, but to pour the entire charge into it so as to absolutely shatter the steel.

“The Gyro in its flight exhibits innumerable vagaries, going on with steady flight of a pigeon, resting on the wing like a hawk, or darting swiftly forwards in a straight line like a snipe, thus affording the very best practice for the education of the hand and eye of the shooter. Upon these grounds, and upon the ground of humanity, the invention deserves to succeed. An evidence of the manner in which it is likely to be appreciated is to be found in the fact that a ‘Gyro’ Shooting Club has already been formed.”

It would appear that Mr Bussey would have fitted in quite nicely with today's woke zeitgeist, or at least the RSPB. However, the British were slow to take up this type of target shooting and the majority of these Gyro traps were exported to America, making one of Mr Bussey's devices a rare find indeed in the UK. ■