

## BLUNDELL'S MAGPIES' 2012 SEASON

Our traditional Spring Lunch took place on 6th March, organized by **David Bentata**, and once again we were fortunate enough to be able to meet in the Special Forces' Club in London. Altogether 12 Magpies plus 2 guests were present, which in view of the relative distance most had to travel, and the perennial impossibility of finding a date and time to suit everybody, was a remarkably good number. Those present included (beside David) **Ben Wrey, Peter Moore, George Tilley, John Batten, Tim Motion, Mike Chandler, James Postle, David Condy, Alex Rainey, David Willoughby, and Peter Ward**. Our guests were **Linda Smith** (a governor of Blundell's) and **Diane Davey**. The impressive flow of reminiscences produced by the members was only matched by the courteous attentiveness of the lady guests who were obliged to listen to it. An apology was received from **Dr Peter Jones**, who was undergoing an eye operation that day, and another from **Lt. Col. Tim Courtenay**, who was leading a battlefield tour in foreign parts. The group dispersed after a most pleasant few hours, and thanks were universally expressed to David for his initiative and enterprise in making the occasion possible in so distinguished a setting.

For some reason it was not possible for the School to arrange a mini-range match on OB Day (16th June). Nevertheless Col. Tim contrived to set up a 'Magpie table' in the marquee at lunchtime, and he, Ben Wrey, David Bentata and David Willoughby were joined amongst others by Hugh Bayley and Alan Fradgley, two OBs with markedly military antecedents. Although the weather did not smile on the proceedings, it is understood that the customary bonhomie of such reunions was as much in evidence as ever, and all mightily enjoyed themselves. One idea discussed at this gathering was the holding of a clay pigeon match between the Magpies and the School. Whilst this would conceivably not have impressed our late coach Stan Davis, it is the germ of quite a promising concept, and though the Magpies' RC might not be the best vehicle to move it forward, it has definite attraction if the School proves favourably inclined.

On 12th July the national Public Schools' Veterans match was held at Bisley, for which Blundell's Magpies had booked 2 teams in advance. This shoot always takes place on the same day as the schools' annual shoulder-to-shoulder competition for the Ashburton Shield, and gets under way in the early evening on the Century Range.

The main characteristic of this year's event was undoubtedly the appalling weather! The rain set in steadily about an hour before the veterans got down to start their shoot (conveniently for the current school cadets, who had managed to finish theirs before the deluge began), and whilst some very experienced marksmen had the kit and savvy to survive wet conditions, the majority of enthusiastic 'occasionals' didn't find them so easy to endure. In fairness, heavy rain had only occurred during this match for the second or third time in the last 30 years, so we couldn't really complain, although to judge by the numbers on the range it seemed that many potential competitors had preferred to stay at home - or were watching from the comfort of some nearby clubhouse.

We were fortunate that our principal coach, David Bentata, had brought along his target rifle and that he was prepared to let the other Magpies use it (not every Bisley shot would be as generous). David shot first, then **Mike Chandler, Ian Anderson, Chris Barker and Hugo Brooke** performed manfully in the unusually miserable conditions, resulting in a team score of 212 with 12 'V' bulls. Individual scores were commendably steady, and the team's eventual position, whilst not in contention for the top prize (the winners being the Old Greshamians with a quietly resolute total of 250 ex 250, with 33 'V' bulls), nevertheless showed a determination not to be beaten by the elements. Top Magpie individual was Hugo Brooke, with 47 ex 50 (5 'V's), whilst Mike Chandler also displayed his customarily steadfast approach with a useful 45 (5 'V's). We were extremely pleased this year to welcome Chris Barker, an OB of 1960s vintage who had recently decided to take up shooting, and who after having enjoyed some activity with smallbore weapons, had decided to try the open range - the Veterans' match of 2012 was his first attempt at full bore shooting, and despite Murphy's Law

dictating that this would be in atrocious weather, he produced creditable results. (He also claimed to have enjoyed it, which was either very polite, or perhaps he's just another shooting nutter?)

Magpies who had sent their apologies in advance included Lt. Col. Tim Courtenay, David Willoughby, **Richard Price** and **Mike Hallows**, and warm good wishes were expressed in their direction.

Other Magpies who attended the match were Ben Wrey and Peter Ward. In point of fact, a second team had been booked, but we'd only been allocated a single target, and by the time the first five had got their rounds down the range, the assembled company were well into the first stages of exposure; it was pretty unanimously agreed that there wasn't much point in hanging on until one more practice had been fired - which would have left the rest of our valiant crew with advanced hypothermia. The clubhouse beckoned, and the call was followed with unprecedented enthusiasm. On the way off the range, it emerged that Hugo Brooke had ended his own shoot with five successive 'V' bulls. This amazing fact was greeted with mild suspicion (did Ian Anderson, who had been coaching him, have access to a crystal ball? Or, worse still, had Hugo been secretly practising with intent?) but fairness prevailed in the end, and it was generously conceded that his efforts hadn't been at all bad for a chap in his mid-70s.

Once back in the civilised surroundings of the North London Rifle Club (as guests of David Bentata and Ben Wrey) and after a much-needed change of clothes, the Magpies could get down to the serious business of complaining about the weather, lamenting the state of the nation and generally advising the Powers- that- be how they should be running everything. During this interlude we were very pleased to encounter **James Postle**, and to learn very positive things about Eve's first year in charge of Cheltenham Ladies' College. After some chewing of the cud, there was then a migration to the Fox at Worplesdon, where similar socializing went on over a pleasant meal until the late hour prevailed on those who had long journeys to undertake.

It is noticeable that the number of schools taking part in the national meeting, whilst the standards of the leading teams are as high as ever, has gradually reduced over the last few decades, and is now a mere fraction of what it had been in the 1950s and 60s. The number of veterans' teams is still much as previously, although this year many of the teams entered failed to field the required complement of members, which may not have been influenced purely by the weather. Former pupils of many schools seem to agree that it is sad that so many school students are now denied the positive and pleasurable experience of Bisley competition, with its emphasis on careful preparation, critically sensitive team building, and endurance through significant psychological pressures whilst focusing on a clear, long-term objective.

One topic which occupied some of those present at Bisley was the poignant photograph which Col. Tim had copied of the Blundell's Bisley team of 1914: this had been taken approximately 3 weeks before the start of the Great War, and of the teenagers pictured, virtually all had either been killed or wounded within the following 4 years. I, for one, wished heartily that I had been made aware of this whilst I was a pupil at the school, as it would have given me a greater and more immediate sense of tradition, and of awareness of what our forebears had gone through. We are indeed very grateful to Mike Sampson (current school archivist and author of the recent 'History of Blundell's School'), Col. Tim, and John Hollands (compiler of the Blundell's Roll of Honour) - amongst others - for their part in enabling us to appreciate this most sobering aspect of our collective inheritance.

Peter Ward.

Per pro David Bentata, Lt.Col.Tim Courtenay and Ben Wrey (elders of the Magpie Chapter).