

BLUNDELL'S MAGPIES' RIFLE CLUB

REPORT ON 2013 SEASON

As described in the May Newsletter, the first event of note was the annual Magpie Lunch, the 7th in the series, organized by David Bentata, our Club Coach, at the Special Forces Club on 5th March. A good turn-out (13 Magpies with 2 lady guests) ensured that a convivial time was enjoyed by the group, and a message of good wishes from Mrs Huggett, the new Head of Blundell's, was most gratefully received. The occasion was also marked by the presentation of an antique Devon Regimental shako badge by Ben Wrey to Lt.Col. Tim Courtenay, in acknowledgement of his sterling work as Chevithorne Captain in liaison with the School. Sadly, as we were to learn a few days later, Ian Anderson also died elsewhere on this same day. Ian had been Captain of the VIII in 1953, and an active Magpie marksman during the last few years of his life. Hugo Brooke later represented the Club at Ian's cremation.

OB Day at Blundell's (June 15th) saw an unusual number of Magpies in attendance, partly because Col. Tim had been doing a splendid job as Chief Whip, but also because the Day had been designated as a 'Gaudy' (Ted Crowe's influence lingers yet, God bless him) for those OBs who had left the School between 1950 and 1970. In vain did the cynics point out that this group contained those who were the wealthiest, and most likely to drop off their perches soonest. Such was the response, that there were TWO Magpie tables at the marquee lunch, one graced by the now traditional Falling Plate, suitably painted with the Magpie symbol. 11 members, including Col. Tim, Ben Wrey, David Bentata, Brig. Rob Tailyour, David Kyd, Tim Motion, Hugo Brooke, David Condry, Chris Barker, David Willoughby and Peter Ward were joined by Linda Smith (School Governor), Suzie Condry, Gilly Cox and Katrina Page as guests. We were also privileged to have Emily Roffe-Sylvester, Dagmar Armstrong and Paddy Armstrong sitting at one of our tables. (As they are part of the School's permanent establishment, were they perchance just keeping an eye on us?!!) It was a very memorable day, as we heard speeches by Mrs Huggett and the well-known war reporter Robert Fox, amongst others, and the School's archivist, Mike Sampson, had worked hard to produce a most interesting exhibition of memorabilia which contained several items of particular relevance to Magpies. The only disappointment was perhaps that the School felt unable to raise a team of pupils to shoot against the OBs in the mini-range; apparently the demands of cricket were all-pervasive. (Which didn't seem to be borne out by the distinctly sparse numbers of cricketers in evidence out in the fields on the day, it must be said.)

On to The Public Schools' Veterans match, shot on Century on July 11th, luckily again in the sort of idyllic weather conditions we've seen during the recent past. Just one team had been booked, but by Murphy's Law there were 7 people who turned up, so two of us had to stand down. I had no problem in exercising captain's prerogative (quite a relief, actually) but I did feel some sympathy for Richard Price, who arrived well in time, but just after the team card had been signed. We were rather fortunate in knowing that David Bentata (Club Coach) would turn up, because he had the only rifle, and not for the first time everything depended on his letting everyone else use it, and in coaching them individually. Good job that he's such a clubable fellow!

The actual shoot, though dry, was bedevilled by a fresh, variable and veering breeze, which affected the righteous and unrighteous alike, and resulted in the top teams missing the usual quintet of possibles. The Magpie stalwarts, David Bentata, Hugo Brooke, Mike Chandler, Chris Barker and Robert Bentata, despite this being their first open range venture this season, performed with verve and panache, and although the final score of 204.8 lay rather towards the lower end of the spectrum, manifestly enjoyed the experience. Hold - I lie! In Mike Chandler's case, he had broken the amateur code and had actually been practising. Which he was constrained to admit, after he'd just scored 49.6, which was of course a very fine shoot. This impressive effort made us all feel we could face anyone on the range, and you could feel the swagger as the Magpies headed towards the bar of the North

London RC to continue the day's celebrations. Thank you again to David, through whom we were able to enter the North London's hallowed portals. During a most pleasant interlude on the sunlit lawn of the Clubhouse, many snippets were exchanged and memories related of the good old days, which seem to get more and more golden the further off they recede... It was also very good briefly to meet James Postle, who is still busily involved in organizing the Athelings for their annual Canadian trip, but made time to come and socialize with us.

There was subsequently a move to the Fox at Worplesdon for dinner, to which seven of us were able to stay. Whilst the meal was indifferent (the new management operates on the principle of creating an exotic veneer, halving the volume and doubling the price), the bonhomie was - as always - excellent, and the unofficial AGM of the club rolled itself out. One item agreed was that a message of loyal greeting should be sent to the new Blundell's Head, Mrs Huggett, a sentiment from those at dinner, but felt to be equally representative of absent friends. This was done as instructed a few days later.



The Magpies on the range: Brooke, Barker, Bentata R, Chandler, Bentata D, Price, Ward

One or two interesting statistics from the day's matches:

31 schools shot in the main Ashburton competition, which was won by Dollar Academy with 757 ex 840 (3 distances these days, no slumming it like we used to). Runners up were Epsom College with 744. There were 46 Former Pupils' clubs represented in the veterans' match, but a total of 96 teams were competing (ie on average each club had more than 2 teams firing). One school had entered 6 teams, and at least 2 others had 5. The top 3 team scores were all 248 ex 250, but the Old Marlburians clinched the title through amassing more V bulls than the others. Unfortunately the Old Cliftonians led us by a few points, so take the Anstey Salver if it still exists anywhere.

Next year we are all too aware that it will be the centenary of the outbreak of the Great War, and it is the general intention for us to reflect some remembrance of this into whatever activity the Magpies take part in. It appears certain that the vast majority of Blundell's pre-1914 Bisley team members were caught up in the conflict (as of course were equivalent groups from all Blundell's sports), and thanks to John Hollands we know something of those who fell, who were wounded, and whom the fortunes of war allowed recognition in the form of decorations etc. Col. Tim intends to lead a Blundell's - orientated pilgrimage to the Flanders battlefields in April, which any interested Magpie is recommended to join (see the Blundell's website for full details). Mike Sampson (school archivist) has records of the Bisley teams of 1903 to 1914, and the carnage evident from just 2 or 3 of the ones I have seen is quite appalling, something approaching 50% fatalities, with most of the rest wounded. The trip will incorporate visits to a number of cemeteries and memorials in which Old Blundellians lie or are commemorated.

Peter Ward
Bisley Captain