

SCHOOLS' VETERANS' SHOOTING MATCH, BISLEY, 15th JULY, 2021

The Veterans' match this year was shot under strange circumstances. For the second year running, due to the pandemic, there had been no Schools' Meeting, and in 2021 even the Service Rifle competition had been cancelled, and the Imperial Meeting necessarily curtailed in certain respects. Despite the uncertainty, in April the decision was taken by the Magpies to enter a team for the Veterans' match, and when the time came the advertised shoot did happen. There were 45 schools represented by Former Pupils' clubs on the Common, and between them they raised 89 teams; the atmosphere on the firing point was notably free of the 'rule book', and the range staff were extremely helpful in encouraging the competitors safely to complete the shoot with a minimum of fuss. The Magpies had hoped for a full complement of five firers, and although one was prevented from attending at short notice, we nevertheless felt we'd flown the Blundell's flag as we'd intended.

Of those who attended the shoot, Hugo Brooke, Richard Price, Robert Bentata and Peter Ward actually shot, whilst the support party included Linda Smith (Hon. Member), Gilly Cox, Katrina Page, David Bentata (Chairman) and Ben Wrey (our new President). The key figure in our team, however, was Tony Ward, who despite not being able to shoot personally (past rugby injury, m'lud) was not only kind enough to act as coach to all the firers in the team, to lend his own rifle to them for their use in the match, and to lend them all manner of shooting kit which they might have forgotten to bring, but above all to bring his 'Certificate of Competence', without which none of us could legally have shot! (Most of us had owned one once, but they'd all expired.) His efforts were described as 'heroic' by more than one person present, and we are all profoundly grateful to him.



Richard shoots, Tony coaches (Century Range)



Hugo in action (2nd from right), 70 years on...

Although the weather was dull, with a strange pall of grey cloud remaining overhead for most of the match, at least the rain held off, and the ageing Magpies managed to scrape together an average of 42 ex 50 (total 168) which, considering they'd not touched a rifle for two years, could have been a lot worse... We did look out for the Clifton FPs, with an eye to the Anstey Salver, but it seemed they hadn't entered the match this year. One remarkable triumph on a personal level was enjoyed by Hugo Brooke, whose age at that point was 84 years 11 months. The previous record of longevity for a veteran firer had been another former club president,

Dr Herbert Price, who'd shot in 2005 at the age of 84 years 6 months. Hugo therefore now bears the laurels (or the mickey-taking, depending on your viewpoint) for the oldest OB to shoot for the School; a careful look at the records we have does suggest this is valid since 1902, but it is pretty certainly so for the last 60 years. As it happened, Herbert's son Richard was present as a team member, and he agreed that his father would have been very happy to hand the crown to such an excellent fellow as Hugo; Herbert's wide grin must have flashed into several of our minds as he spoke. It was also noticed that Hugo had first appeared as part of the Blundell's Bisley team in 1951, which meant he'd been shooting there for 70 years!

One of the strongest elements of the Magpie teams over the years has been the support of the ladies behind the firing point. Two have actually been awarded honorary membership in recognition of their work behind the scenes, but others have loyally endured bad weather and talk of 'shop' with stoic equanimity. (There are, of course, now many lady Magpies in their own right, and we hope that perhaps one day a handful may venture onto the Common.) This year was not the best environment at Bisley given the pandemic, but the team was grateful for their uplifting presence - who else, for example, would have had the instinctive tact not to mutter when any poor shots were marked on the target? What greater support could a shooter wish to have?



Magpie group behind the firing point: L to R (rear) - Katrina, Richard; (front) - David, Linda, Gilly, Ben. Photo by Rob Bentata

One feature of our usual routine during past years had been to hold an informal dinner in the evening, but Anno Domini has more recently forced us to socialise in the middle of the day, in view of the distance many have to travel back home later on. At a short review of the shoot in the North London RC clubhouse it was agreed that a message of Loyal Greeting should be sent to the Headmaster of Blundell's as from all present, representing the Magpies in general. The Bisley Captain was thus tasked, and was honoured to write to Mr Wielenga accordingly.

It was an added boost to Magpie morale about this time to hear news from Barry Dawe of excellent performances by Blundell's pupils over the last few months in the West Kent Rifle League (surpassing previous efforts), and to feel that despite the current restrictive environment, Blundellians are still forging ahead with traditional sporting skills in the way they always have. The incipient 'zoom' talks on the School's shooting history by Mike Sampson are another sign of interest to engage Magpies and others, and such activity during these adverse times reveals the healthy state of the sport in the Blundell's community, from which OBs continue to draw great encouragement.

Perhaps the final comment on the day's shoot should be left to the combined Magpie party, standing on the steps of the North London RC following the match:



All smiling! Maybe we had a good photographer, but our pride in the Blundell's tradition felt very real...