

BELL TARGET SHOOTING: an old Black Country sport

by Frank Spittle

At the end of the 19th century and in the first half of the 20th century, thousands of people in Wolverhampton, the Black Country and Birmingham, as well as other parts of the UK, engaged in shooting air rifles at a "bell target" – a metal target with a tiny hole at the bull's eye. If you hit the bull, at bell behind the hole rang. This form of target shooting was engaged in, mainly in pubs, all over the area, with hundreds of teams organised into dozens of leagues. It was a form of marksmanship which was of great social significance to the working classes of the area and which served the country well in war.

This account is taken from "Ring my Bell: an Old Black Country Sport" by Frank Spittle, from whom copies are available at "Ridegway", Victoria Road, Fallings Park, Wolverhampton, WV10 0NG; £3.95 plus £1 post and packing for UK. This book contains a far more extensive history of air gun and small bore shooting generally than appears in this edition.

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BELL TARGET SHOOTING

1. History and Early Origins

Perhaps of all competitive shooting sports, the air rifle is the least remembered when it comes to its origins as a means of giving enjoyment, plus challenge to marksmen. It was looked upon as a toy or popgun when it first appeared in the back streets of Birmingham in the 1890s. The Britannia rifle was not very powerful, but it did the job of firing small darts or solid "cat slug" dM pellets at a "mark" painted on a piece of wood. The distance for shooting was six or seven yards indoor, or ten to fifteen if shot outdoors, all from the standing position.



Gem and Britannia air rifles.

Birmingham staged the first ever "not quite so serious" match using the tiny air rifle in the 1900s. A group of enthusiasts from one public house challenged a group from another pub to a shooting match for the prize of a leg of mutton supper for the winners paid for by the losers. That was perhaps for one or two of them, their best meal of the week. Things were pretty hard in those days. Leg of Mutton pub suppers in Birmingham were very common at the beginning of 1900, and the licensing laws were not as strict as they became two or three years later.

The instigator of this match was a Mr. M. Hirst, who became a leading light in the development of the sport in the Birmingham area following this small competition. Mr. Hirst is on record as saying, "I remember quite vividly. I was one of the victims of that encounter, but even if that most enjoyable of suppers had cost a thousand times more than the losers were called upon to pay, I honestly think the money would have been well and profitably spent".

What these chaps did not realize was the great interest that the match would arouse on the night of the contest. Spectators filled the pub, and like wildfire the thing caught on in such a way that within a few

years a National Air Rifle Association was established in the old Arcade, Birmingham, Mr. Hirst's home town. It had an incredible membership across the country of over 4000 clubs, 1600 of them in Birmingham, with 20,000 shooters, clubs and associations blossoming in almost every town.



A handsome metal and black enamel lapel badge was introduced for the growing membership; circular, bearing the title of The National Air Rifle Association, with a brass figure of St George and the Dragon of England at its centre, it was worn with great pride and a sense of belonging by the airgunners.

So popular and important was the airgun scene, that the Birmingham newspapers carried a column of results every Saturday evening, with people waiting on the street corners to see which team had won, and to compare league placings.

This explosion of the popularity of shooting in the licensed houses, had a marked impact and effect on the City Fathers of Birmingham. They looked upon it as a means of gambling and drunkenness in the crowded pubs, such that the magistrates decided that they would not issue a drinking licence to pubs with airgun shooting in, or in any part of, the premises. Up to this time, no one had ever heard of a complaint against the sport, apart from by a few members of the clergy and the Temperance Society.

A petition in favour of the pub shooters, signed by 47,000 people, half of the male population of the city at that time, drew a thumbs down from the eighty or so justices, with only a couple in favour of the pastime. That is all it was, a pastime that the hard-working man of the day had accepted into his daily life, in exactly the same way that the higher echelon of the self-employed in the Rifle Volunteers had taken to the enjoyment of long range rifle shooting on their county rifle ranges, at Wimbledon, and then at Bisley. They shot the army rifle in their role as back up Volunteer marksmen for a Government that had perceived that Napoleon could invade Britain in his new steamships should he wish to do so, without waiting for a favourable wind or excuse.

What the magistrates thought, and what they could prove, was different matters; no evidence could be put forward to back up their decision. It seemed that they were just "agin it", on principle, believing that the lower orders should not be trained to use guns, even if they were only airguns, as one thing could lead to

another. The possibility of anarchy in the streets was the only explanation for the draconian measure to stamp it out. The official reasons put forward by the magistrates - "drunkenness and gambling" - could not have been further from the truth.

Today, as in those far off days, one does not have to be reminded that it is impossible to shoot straight if one is in any way inebriated. Alcohol is a depressant which could lower the pulse rate of a nervous competitor, but it would most certainly not help his stance or vision. For the first time in years, these pub shooters had a taste of the discipline that shooting demanded then, and still does today: safety, sobriety, and sportsmanship. All had to be learned and applied if they were to succeed in a team, or individually.

Some of the areas of Birmingham at that time were pretty rough to say the least, and so were some of the inhabitants. The landlords themselves knew that their licence was at risk if everything did not meet the highest standards that soon became the norm, and they readily made available a room or backyard. The last person both shooters and landlord wanted anywhere near the pub on a match night was a drunk.

But the Birmingham magistrates did not back down. They stood their ground until something happened that even they could not just ignore. The shooting community had called a meeting with the Mayor at the old Town Hall in the Bull Ring. What then occurred is something that should have been written in the annals of shooting sport for all time, something that the shooting community, whatever its disciplines, has very little knowledge of.

On that day, over 90 years ago, 10,000 airgunners turned up to put their case personally. They filled the streets and they could not be shown to be drunks or ne'er do wells. Their demeanour and strength of purpose for what was, after all, their right as citizens, was so apparent that it could not be ignored.

A special meeting of the whole of the magistrates was called, and the highly offending resolution was set aside. Shooting began again in the pubs

Mr. Hirst took quite an amount of flak afterwards, from people who did not approve of shooting. Some would call unannounced at his home, to berate him on the evils of drink and guns. He would convince some of these people of the harmless nature of the sport by taking them to see a match in progress, having an excellent success rate of changed opinions by doing so.

BELL TARGET SHOOTING

2. History up to 1914

It would be fair to say that the pub shooters were at the bottom of the social ladder when evaluating competitive shooting sport. At the top were The Rifle Volunteers who shot under the rules of the **National Rifle Association**, established in 1860. They could afford to purchase their own uniforms and kit. They were the professional class. But they had to acknowledge the abilities of the bell target shooters. On one occasion a high ranking officer of the Rifle Volunteers was accompanied by **the Air Rifle Club's** secretary, Mr. M. Hirst, to witness a typical pub bell target match. When he left, he said to Mr Hirst: "How anyone can hit that small target with such regularity, in such deathly silence, pressure, and in a crowded room filled with tobacco smoke as thick as a fog is beyond me, and worthy of the highest praise. Any General would be proud to have such shooters".

In a challenge match between the pub shooters and the Volunteers the pub team won, using army full bore live weapons that they found, at first, difficult to load on this their first introduction to them. The volunteers team, some of whom were experienced shots being veterans of the Boer War, were captained by Mr. Lincoln Jeffries.

The bell target team was captained by Mr. M. Hirst. The match was shot at a distance of one hundred yards, each competitor firing five shots. To the surprise of the enthusiastic spectators present to see this small but unique shooting occasion, the Air Gunners won by 13 points, proving that not only were the air gunners better shots but that their "match tension" or mental control was superior to that of the former army men. The air gunners would find that they had the advantage of being used to the more unstable standing position of their bar room sport; lying down to aim, with the whole of the body in contact with the floor, with both elbows supporting the rifle, would have come as rather a luxury to them.

Next, perhaps, in the social ladder of competitive shooting, would be the members of the **Miniature Rifle clubs**. They could afford to shoot live rounds, pay club fees and, in most cases, buy their own .22 rifle. They were the skilled artisan class. The Bell target shooter would usually be found in the pubs and were men who earned their living by hard, laborious work, which practically occupied most of their waking hours in that workshop of the world, Birmingham. They were the working class and in many cases they shared club air rifles. This did give the edge to that sporting pastime of airgun shooting in their local pub, which in some cases was in the same street where they lived.

Many members of the full bore clubs and of the small bore clubs looked a little askance at the mere mention of airgun clubs, particularly those found in licensed premises. But those clubs, then as now, had a certain redeeming feature that British competitive shooting has neglected to pursue for its domestic members: refreshments and a social side. You would find these left out of the Miniature and Small-Bore clubs that had been formed by a General, with many high ranking officers sitting on the Society committee with the sole intent of providing a vast reservoir of potential riflemen of marksman standard to defend an equally vast empire. Patriotism and the defence of Queen and country was the order of the day, but if it meant either travelling to a cold outdoor range for Volunteer, Territorial or small-bore rifle

practice, or going to bell target shooting in a warm room with a pint of home brew, a pipe and pre-match banter with ones mates, the air gunners voted with their feet in large numbers.

This tremendous shooting activity was not lost on the military leaders at that time, and must have been the inspiration to General Luard on the forming of civilian rifle clubs shooting the small bore miniature 22 calibre rifle. He founded **The Society of Working Men's Rifle Clubs**, later to be re-named **The Patriotic Society**. It was very well supported by Lord Roberts. It favoured moving targets and a little more of the positional shooting, as opposed to the English Prone position of lying down facing the target. After several years its title was changed to **The Miniature Rifle Association**.



Bust of Lord Roberts

Lord Roberts had called the attention of the nation to the importance of rifle shooting in June of 1904, with his speech now recalled as the famous "Bisley Address". It had been found that our troops in the South African War were very poor marksmen, against moving targets, and strangely enough, at the shorter distance. The Boer commandos on the other hand were excellent shots, having to shoot to eat. Lord Roberts' acceptance of the importance and value of the air rifle shooter meant that there would be more competitions at the same six or seven yards distance, but using a paper or card target, sometimes bearing the figure of a soldier on it to relieve the boredom of constant aiming at a round black aiming mark.



Paper target with figure of soldier

Another consequence of the Boer War was the emergence of the Boy Scouts under their founder Lord Baden Powell, the hero of Mafeking. In 1910 they were introduced to the air rifle and shot for their Marksman Badge. The Boy Scout national championships were revived by The National Air Rifle and Pistol Association, (N.A.R.P.A), and were held in the large hanger at the R.A.F. Station, Cosford near Wolverhampton in the 1970s. Long before then, however, the National Air Rifle League had made its appearance.

The Society of Miniature Rifle Clubs, who shot the live 22 bullet under the Presidency of Lord Roberts, took a great interest in the air rifle clubs and the undoubted success that they were enjoying. But when they held their all-comers meeting in Birmingham on the 27th and 28th of April 1906, the last thing that they had in mind when organising the event was airgun shooting. It did not occur to them that it would take any part in the programme. Local opinion, however, was so strong in favour of special competitions for the air gunners, that the Society felt that an experiment would be justifiable. They accordingly devoted four of their competitions in the Birmingham programme to airgun shooting, though they could not decide whether airgun shooting would figure in their publicity.

The programme took place in the drill hall of the 1st V.B. Warwicks. What an event that must have been for the Air-Gunners. Attended by the Duke of Norfolk, as well as the Lord Mayor amongst the many dignitaries, it drew 400 competitors to fire on the twenty points provided, with two distances of 25 yds and 50 yds. Airgunners competed at 25 yds only, and this was the first time that both forms of "live" and "air" took place. It was a lesson that was not lost on the organisers.

If there were doubts about the Bell Target shooters of Birmingham and their organisation and ability, they most certainly were cleared afterwards by the two senior officers of the Society, both vice-chairmen who were representatives at the Birmingham meeting. Viscount Colville of Cullross and Mr. R. Martin-Holland were profoundly impressed with the great hold which air gun shooting had obtained in the Black Country and the Midlands. They strongly supported moves to get airgun shooting under the control of the Society of Miniature Rifle Clubs. The preliminary report of the match involving .22 and bell target

shooting was as follows: "It cannot but be admitted that as far as the Birmingham shooting was concerned, the airgunners were entirely out-classed by the small-bore men; in the match, airgunners versus small-bore for instance, the score of the .22 shooters was 1047 out of a possible 1200, whilst that of the airgunners was only 696; and apart from this, the highest score by an airgunner in the competitions was 86, whilst the highest score by a miniature marksman was 98".

Anyone reading that in 1906 would deduce that the airgunners had little to offer in performance or competition against their more illustrious counterparts, and there was an explanation: if ever there was a one sided match this must have been it.

The superiority of the .22 miniature-men was not down to expertise, as first thought, but superior equipment for the job in hand. It was not rifles and ammunition alone that were so different, but the airgunners did not have the spotting scopes and field glasses to spot their shots, which would at least have given them an idea of fall of shot and the opportunity to adjust their aim. The .22 shooters used orthoptic micro sights, with a faster projectile, four times the weight of a pellet, with .177 calibre against the .22 bullet making a larger hole. It was quite apparent that the air-gunners with their open sights of a vee and blade, no spotting experience or equipment, and shooting at a distance that they were not used to, were outclassed. The Miniature Rifle Clubs did acknowledge the unfairness of the situation afterwards.

What would have put the whole thing in proper perspective would have been a return match at a bell target club with everyone shooting in the standing position instead of prone, in the licensed house atmosphere of tension and stillness and, of course, the smoke screen of the dreaded twist. Who knows, the first prize could have been the payment of a Leg of Mutton Supper by the miniature men. At least the Birmingham lads did have the opportunity and satisfaction of demonstrating that they were an organised body.

The S.M.R.C. did said that they would make a definite statement, in that they would consider what intended action they would take in the future with regard to airgun shooting. Eventually the decision to enrol bona fide air gun clubs as units of the Society was taken at a meeting of the S.M.R.C. on the 9th October 1906.

What that would do for the bell target is open to some question. Looking at it today it would seem that someone had been very impressed with what they had found the "peasants" doing in the Midlands area, because they were shooting for fun and the enjoyment of the thing. Not only that, they had been doing it for years, before the Government backed and supported .22 rifle clubs had got off the ground. Or was it that someone could see that here were people who could be "helped" to enjoy themselves better if they were controlled by a larger, national body who would channel their expertise and enthusiasm into swelling the ranks of the S.M.R.C.? Politics in shooting sport had arrived.

There is nothing on record to show that the airgunners wished to leave their own established form of shooting with its own rules and leagues. It is to their great credit that they continue to this day, albeit in much reduced numbers, doing their own thing, making their own decisions and enjoying the shooting discipline in much the same way as their forefathers did decades ago. Long may they continue wherever

they exist in bell target areas.

The acceptance of both air rifle and small bore by the British male prior to the first world war, had a beneficial effect on the quality of marksmanship when it was most needed during the 1914-1918 war, a war that saw the sad loss of so many of the "shoot for fun" men over the four years of conflict. They were well versed in aiming and trigger control, long before they even received their uniforms and Lee Enfield rifles.

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3 History from 1918 to the present

Bell target shooting continued after the 1918 armistice, again in some strength, because it was cheap. In 1931 Mr. M. Hirst and Mr. M. H. Sunderland of the Horse and Jockey club, Halifax, initiated friendly postal matches on the paper target of six yards distance. This is a form of competition where the shooters of each team do not meet each other but shoot their cards on their own range many miles away from their opponents. Attending to see fair play would be an impartial witness, who would sign each shot card and then send them away on completion to an official scorer, who would then issue the result of the match.

Mr. Sunderland was a member of the **Society of Miniature Rifle Clubs** Air Rifle Advisory Committee and the air rifle was an important part of activities of the S.M.R.C. between the two Great wars. But due to the association of the bell target form of competition with the public houses, the S.M.R.C. did nothing to encourage this form of sport. Indeed, many years later, it published an article in its house newspaper, "The Rifleman", denigrating the activities of the bell target organisations, causing a serious rift between the airgunners and rim fire shooters.

World War Two had a devastating effect on air rifle competition in Britain, both bell target and card shooting. Many of the returning servicemen just did not wish to be involved with shooting after World War Two. The trials and tribulations that they had just experienced with guns of many sorts and calibres, dampened a lot of enthusiasm. Apart from that, wireless and then television, with other sports now on offer to the working man, took its toll of the pub sport of bell target shooting.

Some of the more established leagues survived and have an unbroken existence of over a hundred years. One of these leagues is the Bridgnorth League in Shropshire, which owes a great deal to Mr. Harry Maiden for its success and continuity. Guernsey, in the Channel Isles, also had a very strong and successful air rifle organisation from the very early days of the sport. In 1939 they made a presentation of a solid silver traditional Guernsey milk can to Mr. Le Paroux for his service to air gun shooting and made him an honorary life member. Not long after the Germans arrived and put an end to activities in this area for four years.

Guernsey won the last major competition for Bell Target shooting in the United Kingdom, when they took the National Championship with a score of 198 ex 200. Second were Nuneaton (195), and third Hinckley (194).

The Society of Miniature Rifle Clubs suspended air rifle shooting during the great conflict. Under its new post-war name of **The National Small Bore Rifle Association** it declared, in a letter from the secretary Mr. Jerry Palmer to the present writer, that it was not interested in air rifle shooting at that time. Moves by an awakening group of bell target and paper target shooters in the Hinkley and Northampton areas in the 1960s to form some reorganisation for the air rifle sport, saw the emergence of a new organisation, **The Air Rifle Clubs Association**. Its secretary and organiser, Mr. Dennis Commins of Northampton, is one of the unsung heroes of shooting sport. The re-establishment of competitive airgun shooting, particularly at

the six yard distance in this country is, in the main, down to him and his committee.

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Bell target shooting in pubs and pub-based leagues continued after 1945, only in a much reduced form. Air rifle and air pistol shooting moved out of the pubs and into the clubs. It developed into an Olympic sport. Today the sport is more directed to the pursuit of excellence, at the recognised international distance of ten metres. Leather clad in special jacket, trousers, shooting boots and glove, the competitive airgunner is faced with a target having a pin head at its centre and no margin for error. Recoilless air rifles of German manufacture, Walther, Anschutz, Feinwerkbau and Hammerli, dominate the world market and international events such as the Olympics and World Championships. A fully equipped competitor could have laid out over £2000 to compete in this class of air rifle shooting.

It would be easy to say the bell target is now history and just a phase of the development of competitive shooting in Britain over the last century. But history is the past and, though the bell target is still being used in much smaller numbers now, it still gives pleasure and enjoyment in quite a number of areas and is still a very competitive form of shooting and means of instruction. It is history that will not go away. Just a few years ago a bell target was given to a group of Cornish war veterans, who wished to form an air rifle club in their old comrades association. The idea was that they would shoot from the sitting position from a table or bench. This would provide an attraction to their recruiting programme, and allow their ladies to shoot with a little more dignity also, should they wish to do so. To the great surprise of many sceptics, membership of both sexes proved almost equal in membership and, eventually, skill. The Duke of Cornwall's Light Infantry Old Comrades Association, based on Bodmin Moor, now has a waiting list for membership for its air rifle club of over one hundred; one of their members is 89 years old.



Sergeant Bert Tremain of the Duke of Cornwall's L.O.C.C.A. prepares to shoot once again, with the author looking on.

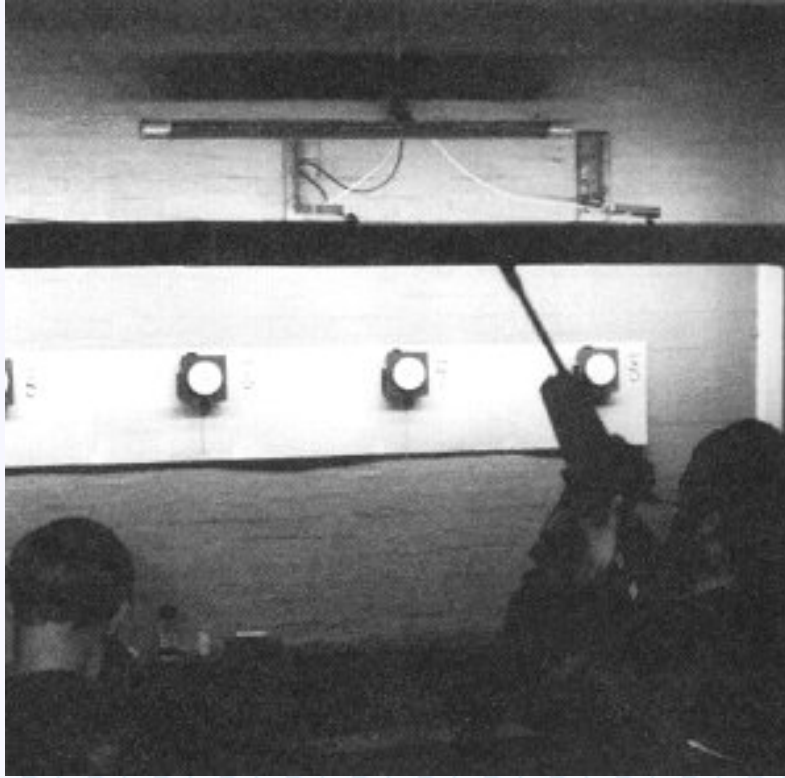
Proving just how enthusiastic they are about their new found sport, they travelled from Bodmin to shoot a friendly match with Wolverhampton. This was over two days of a cold September weekend in 1995; and suffice it to say, they did not go back empty handed. What a wonderful thing it is that these elderly shooters, some of them in the twilight of their years, are now having matches with Junior teams for a trophy termed The Generation Cup; it was won by the Old Comrades on 13th September 1995. It is unique when a group of mainly young people are anxious to spend an evening with a group of mainly very old people, competing on equal terms - and vice versa.



Nick Carter, aged 87, of the Duke of Cornwall's L.O.C.C.A. shows a bell target

The bell target influence in the Black Country did reach one or two local schools, the most prominent being Wednesfield High School. Mr. Les Evans and his wife Joan, both school teachers now retired, had been involved with bell target shooting while serving on The National Air Rifle And Pistol Association

committee. They were presented with some air rifles and equipment by a local gunshop and soon they had established a shooting section within their schools. Mrs Joan Evans taught at Blakely Heath School, Wombourne, Staffordshire. They used the B.B. gun as it was cheap to buy and quite light to handle by young boys and girls whose bone structure was still soft, avoiding any damage to youthful bodies.



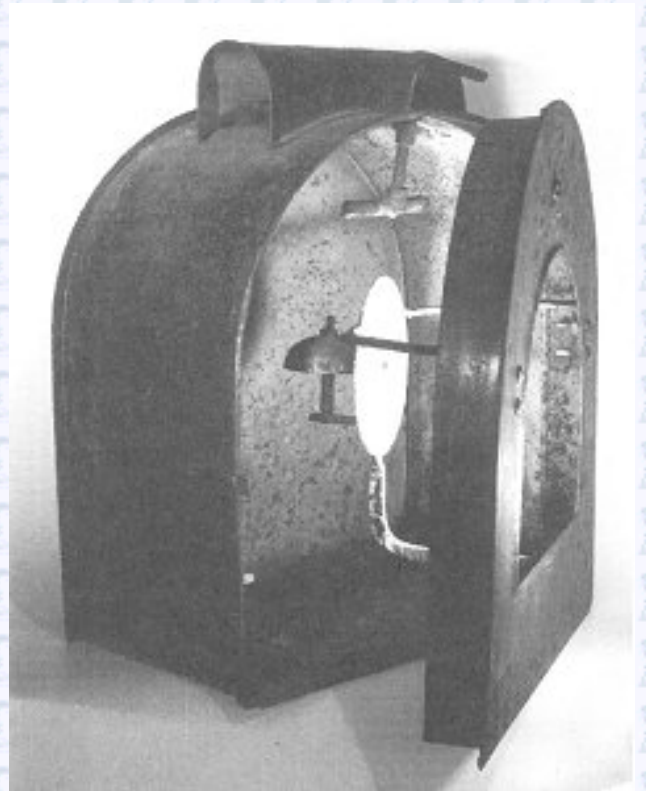
Bell target shooting at the Claregate Boys' Club

Who knows, with this continued youthful interest in target shooting by the offspring of the Black Country shooting community, perhaps the bell target will find a new lease of life in the Midlands where it held sway for so long as an important part of the life of the working man in his pub and club.

BELL TARGET SHOOTING

The Equipment: the target

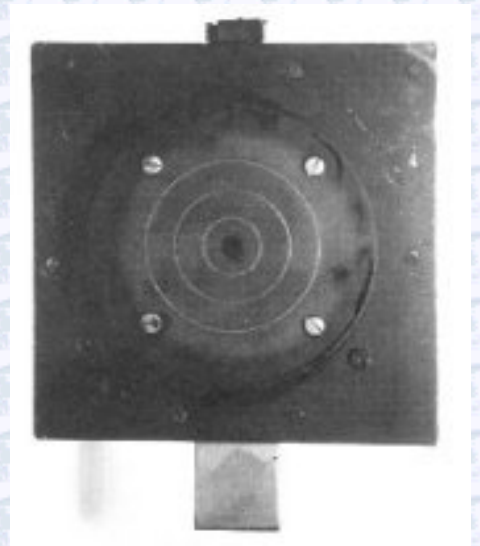
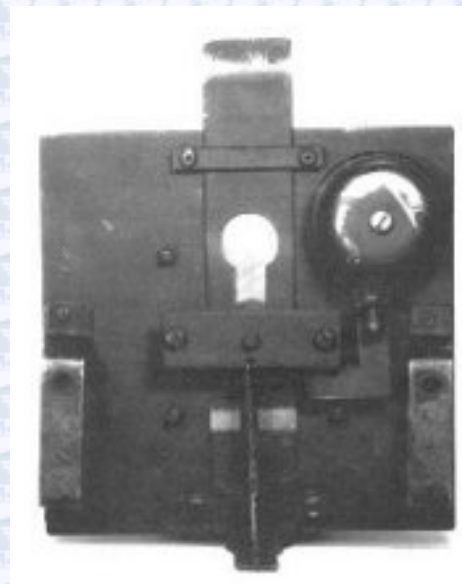
One of the first targets was a square metal plate, painted with whitewash to show the pellet strike. But what rapidly became the accepted and most used target was the Bell Target, a metal device that replaced the square plate, with a 3/8th aperture drilled in the centre of the target, behind which was a bicycle bell. The bell gave an audible "ding" when a pellet passed through the hole in the steel face plate.



A 1910 vintage bell target, shown on the left in the Museum of Marksmanship. On the right, it is opened to show the interior. The white disc is the target with the bull aperture just visible, with the bell immediately behind it. At the top the inverted T-shaped bar is the gas pipe which, when lit, provided illumination for the target.

The Bell Target was usually surrounded by a metal case. The metal was hard enough to flatten the pellet on impact, so the pellet fell straight down onto the floor of the casing. Ricochets were rare, only occurring when the pellet struck the edge of the metal plate; in those cases the casing caught the pellet. The target was lit by a candle or gas jet depending on the location, as some country areas did not then have gas.

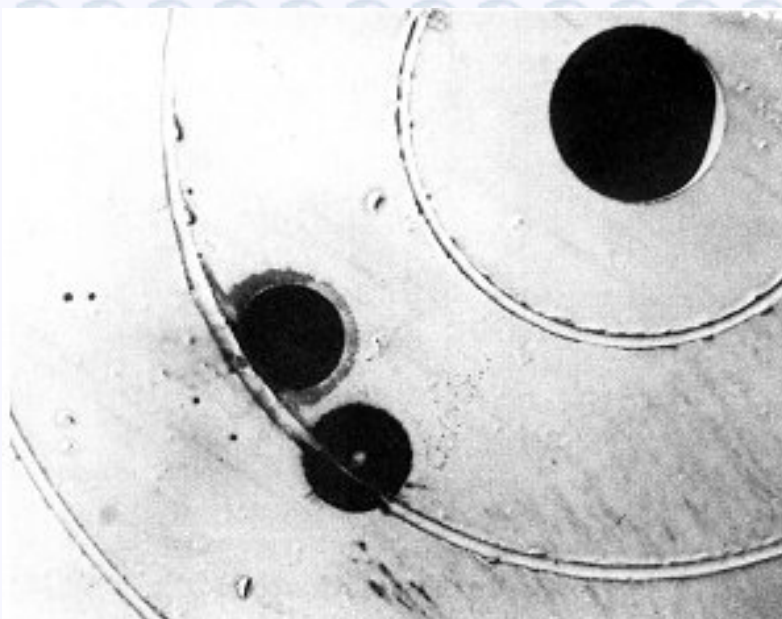
Sometimes a "split shot" could not be heard if a small fragment only struck the bell. This caused some problems for the scorers and so a more advanced target was made. This was the universally accepted "cocking" version. A chain, or length of sash cord, hanging down below the target, when pulled, cocked and held the mechanism until the pellet, striking a plunger behind the centre hole, released a hammer against the bell, giving a much louder "ding".



Cocking version of the bell target

Today's targets are much more advanced, being electrically lit, and in some models a timed buzzer replaces the bell. These targets are a far cry from the days when a bell target could be purchased from the firm of C. H. Ross & Co of Barrow Street, West Bromwich, for as little as one shilling and sixpence, or a top of the range version for ten shillings - 50p in today's money.

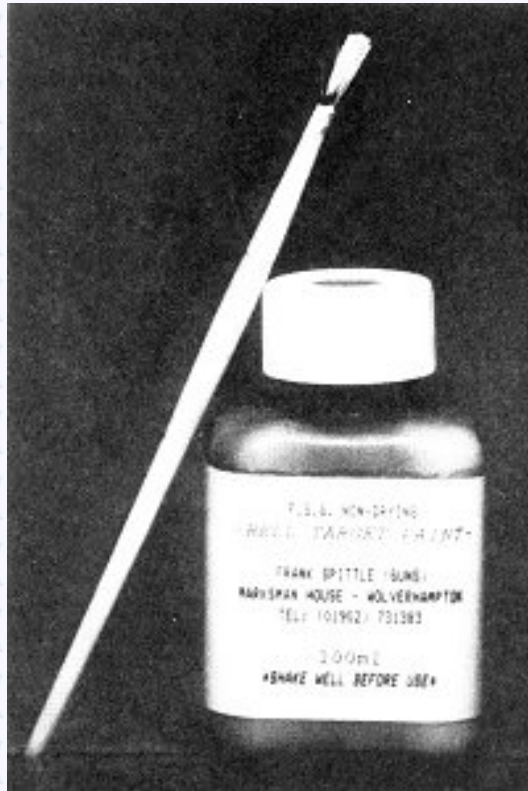
The method of scoring was by graduations engraved on the face plate, recording a five scored for a centre shot, then four, three, two and one, for shots going away from the aperture. Six shots per shooter was the normal practice, and for anyone scoring a 30, a real gold medal was awarded.



Close up of face of target plate, showing the bull aperture and the engraved circles for scoring. The

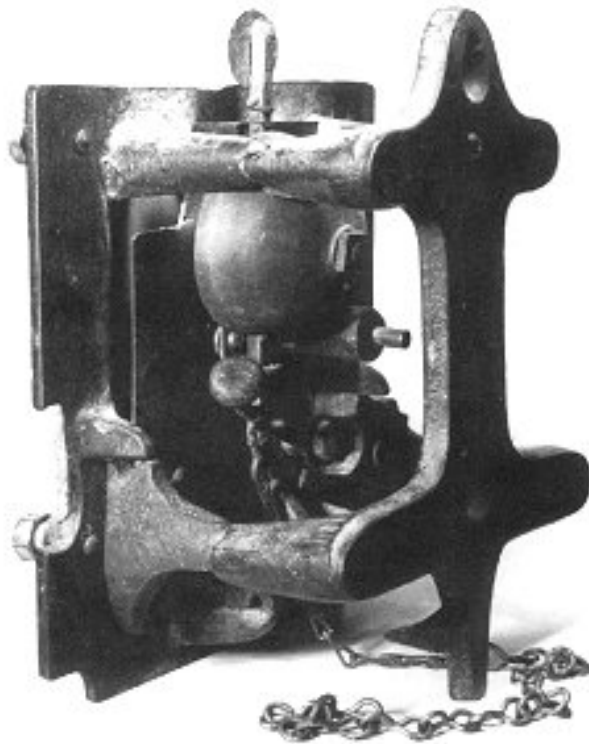
upper black mark on the left is the strike from a flat headed paper target pellet. The lower black mark is the strike from a round nosed bell target pellet, showing the dot left in the centre.

A rather unique way of determining the pellet strike for match scoring was by coating the face plate with a non-drying white paint. This replaced the old whitewash system which was discarded as messy and not quite so readable. The paint, made up from white paint powder and castor oil, is still the accepted way of scoring the bell target today. Nothing has been found that would do the job better. The .177 calibre round nosed slug and the waisted pellet, gave a clear indication of the point of impact by leaving a clear dot in the centre of the strike. After each shot had been duly recorded, this mark and dot would be dabbed out with a small brush, ready for the next shot.



Bell target paint and marker's brush for removing the strike marks after each shot.

Bell targets were manufactured by several companies. I have one with a battered brass badge, on the front of the large metal door, that bears the title "Lincoln Target". It was originally lit by two naked jet gas lights, or a candle. It is non-mechanical, with the bell and plate fixed to the opening door - a treasured unit that gave much service to the Bridgnorth Salop Airgun League.



A heavy 1920 bell target, showing working parts. Made by Cox & Sons, Weaman Street, Birmingham

Another is a massive target made by the firm of Cox and Sons, Weaman Street, Birmingham. This one has a little story to it. Mr Harry Wedgebury, a dedicated air rifle shooter and former committee member of the former National Air Rifle and Pistol Association (N.A.R.P.A.), was in conversation with an old workmate in 1960, about the licensed house bell target shooting between the wars and following World War Two. He told young Harry that he had shot for the Army and Navy pub on the corner of Great Brook Street. "They are just pulling it down" he said. "The guns were kept locked up in a cupboard by the fireplace in the bar. You never know, they could still be there."



The front of the heavt target rescued by Harry Wedgebury from the Army and Navy pub, Great Brook Street, Birmingham

Hot-foot, our enthusiast sped to the pub only to find it derelict. The doors of the cupboard were hanging open with the gun racks still in place but empty. It had been a long shot and as he left the rubbish strewn bar room, he kicked an old rusty biscuit tin, which split open to reveal the old Bell Target. How many matches had this old friend seen through its single aperture eye? How many shooters and the sons of shooters, going out to two world wars, were never to hear again "Ding", "Five scored", "Correct". Now in happy retirement, hard shots giving a mark of character to its battered face, with years of dust and white paint clinging to its working parts, it seems a shame to clean its spirit from it, so it remains as found, shoulder to shoulder with the most advanced target rifles in the world, and flanked by two stately Lincoln Jefferies B.S.A. rifles.

BELL TARGET SHOOTING

The Equipment: rifles and pellets

Rifles

With practise and competition the standard of shooting improved, demanding more powerful and accurate air rifles. The early Gems and Britannias came to be replaced by Lincoln Jeffries and B.S.A. Also available were imported German models, Haenal and Militia. These were followed by the Webley and Scott Mk. III sporting version in .177 calibre, fitted with match sights.



Lincoln B.S.A. Militia and Original air rifles

Then, as now, harder competition demanded better and more advanced sights. The early air rifles relied on the simple vee and blade. But the orthoptics clamped under the caps and hats of the .22 men, and their adjustable backsights, would not be lost on the bell target fraternity. They had one of the best sight manufacturers in the world on their doorsteps and it was not long before adjustable peep sights were being fitted to their Lincoln and B.S.A. rifles: A.G. Parker, "old Alf", a well known marksman with the full-bore rifle, was making first class sights for the Wimbledon, and then Bisley, competitors.

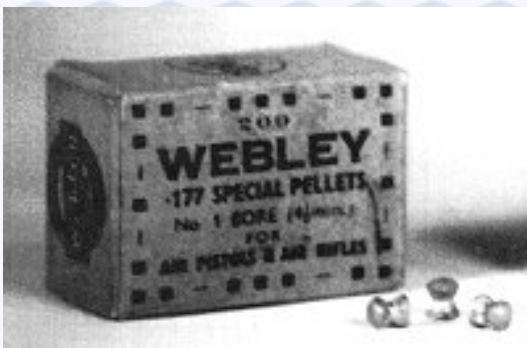
Miss E. R. Parker, (Eleanor, his daughter), still runs the firm. One of the publications to be found on my bookshelf is her excellent book "A Century of Sights and Shooting Aids", signed by the good lady herself, showing again the impact that the Midlands has had on British shooting and the tools of the trade, as well as the excellence of marksmanship.



I am not the world's tallest chap but, in the left photo, you get an idea of how small and light the old bell target rifles were. On the right, again standing in the Museum of Marksmanship, I am demonstrating the position the old bell target shooters would have adopted.

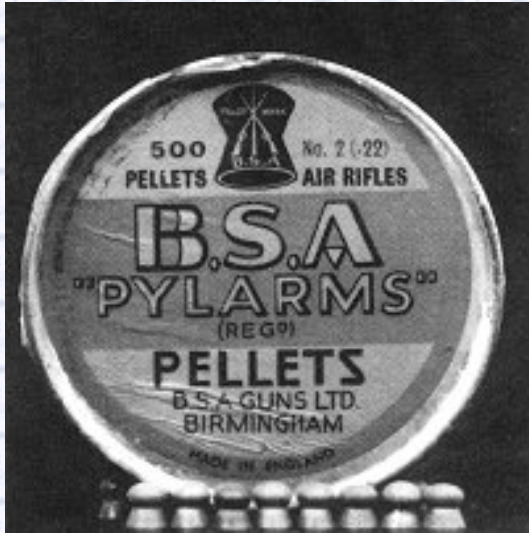
The stance used by the air gunners was the standard one for those days. The weight of the body was thrown slightly forward, the marksman leaning towards the target with the stock of the rifle held in the cup of his hand. This stance served them well, especially when they were using very lightweight rifles for short periods. But with heavier rifles and longer shooting sessions this stance soon caused tiredness and thus unsteadiness. In the modern stance, which bell target shooters would adopt to-day along with everyone else, has the body upright, so that the whole frame, not just the arm and shoulder support the weight; and the stock is supported on the fist.

Pellets



Early pellets and their cardboard box container and an early tin of pellets

Pellets, from a number of makers, were widely available in shops. But every shooting pub had a "penny in the slot" machine that dispensed so many pellets per coin. It was more convenient to the poorer club shooter to purchase his pellets this way as the best "Arrite" pellets cost 1 shilling (5p) per thousand. They were hand cast and examined for flaws or damage in the same way as a participant would in the higher echelons of today's National Squad membership.



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BELL TARGET SHOOTING

AT THE MATCH

During the early days of the pastime of pub shooting, it was the backyard of the licensed house that was the popular venue. But in the main it was the warm room, with close proximity to the contestants and bar, that drew the airgunners indoors to make pub shooting a mainly indoor event.

So, before the arrival of the teams, the room would have to be arranged if it was during the winter months. A space would have to be made for the scorer and the checker, who would stand each side of the massive 10 lb Bell Target. Usually this would hang on the wall in the recess by the fireplace. There was a reason for placing the apparatus in this place: the metal casing around it collected spent pellets or ricochets, protecting the spectators and the flatback Staffordshire china dog ornaments, so popular on mantle shelves in pubs and homes at that time.

A cupboard in the opposite recess of the chimney breast usually held the club guns, Lincoln Jeffries or B. S.A., and the scores would be recorded on the cupboard doors for all to see in much the same way as a darts match now. The penny in the slot machine that dispensed the pellets would be filled and checked, then hung in its place by the "line" or "mark" of six yards distance

On the morning the floor would have had the attention of the scrubbers - women, wearing long herden sack aprons, on their knees with large wooden scrubbing brushes and red carbolic soap, ensured that the red tiled floor was spotless when it received its covering of clean sawdust. Ash trays and tapers for the clay pipes were put out on ledges and sills, coal was placed with the polished fire dogs behind the steel fender, with its stern warning "Keep your feet off", and of course the spittoons for the tobacco smoking and chewing customers were put in strategic positions.

Gas lights were adjusted, home brew barrels were tapped and put in position to meet the stream of pots. Cash boxes were placed under the counter tops to receive the money dropped through slots on the surface, a method of collecting money preferred by some landlords to the cash drawer or new-fangled till.

Soon the room would fill up. Men who had a short time earlier raced from work for a wash or a "catlick", wolfed down their faggot and grey peas fittle, in order to be on time either to shoot or to get a place to watch the weekly league match.

Space would be limited so, in order to accommodate as many people as possible, the shooters would in many instances shoot over the heads of several tables of spectators in front of them. The beer would be quietly passed from the bar counter along the tables and benches lining the walls as movement could put the shooter off his aim. This was not only frowned on by the visiting team but by the home side also. Anyone with a persistent cough could be asked to leave or move to another part of the premises, for no

one wanted the dubious decoration of being a bad sport. To leave the cocking chain slightly swinging from side to side, to hypnotise the airgunner, was considered a disqualifying action if it was thought by the panel of three scorers to be deliberate.

This was serious business and as the match progressed, the strain and mental effort would show, especially on a shooter with a bad case of "trigger shyness" - the inability to pull the trigger even though he desperately wanted to. Sweat would pour down his face, with the concentration on the target and the smallness of the aperture, coupled with the knowledge that for the first time that evening everyone was watching him alone, his own team willing him to score a five and the opposition putting the evil eye on him to miss. He would be well aware of the advice that he had been given by the more experienced members of his team – "fire when the sights are coming onto the target", remember that there is "lock time" and "barrel time" to be considered; and don't worry too much about body sway as it's physically impossible to keep dead still. He would remember the joker by the bar reciting: "There's a breathless hush in the pub tonight, five to score, and you're the last man in". At last with his sixth shot away scoring a five, he could now relax and smile his thanks for the short round of applause from both teams for his effort.

Only people who have shot in this form of target sport, in the environment of a crowded pub, know of the match tension that many an international shooter would never experience.

By now of course the room would have a fug in it that would "kill a dog". There was the warmth of the fire and close proximity of bodies that had laboured all day without the benefit of showers, anti-perspirants and the toiletries that now crowd our bathrooms. Then there was that most evil of all: "twist", a dark brown ring of compressed tobacco that was hand rubbed to feed those many personal furnaces of meerschaum and clay pipes. Its effect would be in evidence everywhere, in its yellow-brown sticky smoke stain on everything that was not accessible to daily cleaning, such as pictures, walls and ceilings etc.. Pipe smoke poured forth in the owner's anticipation of the next man to shoot, it poured forth from the man who had just shot, and from the spectators too, it rose to the ceiling in clouds to drift towards the fireplace, there to be suddenly pulled towards the chimney to join the coal smoke fighting to get up the "esshole" to cleaner air outside in the darkness of the quiet street.

The match drew to its close amidst the sounds of the strident, authoritative voices of the team captains calling "order for the gun", the "wack" of the rifle, the "ding" of the bell, the "five" of the scorer, the "correct" of the checker. The match would end with a result that bore no animosity to the losers or winners. Both had enjoyed an evening of competition that, while it lasted, was like life itself but, when finished, ended with more all round friendship than when it began.

BELL TARGET SHOOTING

SOME TEAMS AND PEOPLE



The Kendrick brothers of the Pleck. Standing: Ben, George, Herbert, Harry. Seated: Jack, Sam

The Black Country could boast of a full team of six brothers, all shooting from the Newport Arms, Pleck Road, Walsall. This was a National record at the time their photograph was taken in 1904, where they are shown with the National Air Rifle Association Trophy, the Mackie Cup. They could perhaps have had fielded three reserves from the same family of nine brothers. Mr. Norman Kendrick of Wolverhampton, now 89, well remembers the shooting prowess of his late father George Kendrick (standing second left in the picture), and his ability to use his target air rifle on rabbits and small game for the stew pot, in the fields around the Bentley farm where he was born. One of the brothers, Fred, emigrated to the U.S.A. to found a firm of engineers in Pittsburgh.

Walsall Air Rifle League emphasised their competitive ability in a challenge match with the Walsall Army Territorials in 1909. This was the first time that the match participants used each other's rifles and at the distance each was used to firing. It is interesting to note that four of the Kendrick brothers had two shooting places in each team. The first series, with the air rifle at 6 yards, was won by the League by 19 points. The second series, shot with .22 calibre miniature rifles at a distance of 25 yards on the range in Wolverhampton Road, Walsall was again a victory for the airgunners with a margin of 34 points,. The Individual and the Earl Roberts' merit medals were won by J. Hykin for the Territorials and T. Sadler, for the League, each scoring 142 out of a possible 145. Mr. N Hirst, who now worked for the ("Sporting

Mail"), refereed both matches and must have been delighted to see the result which was more in keeping than earlier encounters between the rifle shooting factions. Six years later would see both the contesting Walsall match shooters engaged in a far more serious contest in France, wearing the badge of South Staffordshire on their uniforms. How many of these men left their names on War Memorials, or returned home grateful for the skill and experience acquired in the friendly shooting matches?



Arthur Gunn's medal. Note the shooting posture.

There were many other centres of interest in the Midlands besides Birmingham. One of these was in the Cannock area of Staffordshire. **The Royal Exchange pub in Bridgtown** had a very good bell target team lead by a Mr. Albert Gunn. There was an occasion when Albert and his team were Gunn-ed Down - by the ladies! Albert Gunn was more than a good rifle shot. He had that certain commodity that quite a few fellows of his era had in abundance - a sense of fair play and a respect for the weaker sex, before the equal rights movement removed a lot of that old fashioned "after you madam" attitude, which hitherto had been the norm. This story is set in the late 1920s when shooting at a bell target was in full swing throughout the Black Country and areas adjacent.

Albert's shooters from the Exchange were a team to be reckoned with. They had won match after match. Medals swinging on their watch chains put the frighteners on the opposition before a trigger was pulled. Home or away, the Exchange were seemingly invincible in the local leagues and Albert, with his younger brother Harold, was a top man. With the inevitable flat cap and scarf, they would sally forth and do battle with the opposition in other parts of this mining and industrial district, and to sample the home brews in the pubs at that time, before they returned to the Exchange. Mr Thomas, the landlord of this famous shooting public house, situated on the Watling Street at Bridgtown, looked upon the team as "his boys"

and as more than a match for the miners who came from the other side of Cannock towards the Chase, Norton Canes, and Rugeley.

However there were rumblings from down the A5 of a team of ladies from Brownhills, who had not only taken up this preserve of the male pub shooters, but had the audacity to enter the leagues. This information soon spread to the airgun teams in the area and indeed, when Mr. Thomas was asked if he believed in clubs for women, he replied "Yes, when kindness fails".

It had to happen. The Brownhills Ladies had a point to prove and the match was arranged. Albert, who worked at Hawkins Tiles, Bridgtown, was viewing the coming occasion with a little trepidation: should they beat them out of sight or extend the hand of chivalry? When he returned to his house in New Street, Bridgtown, his mind was made up. A photograph, taken in 1930, shows the team's proud record: 17 matches shot, 16 won - the only defeat was by the team of Annie Oakleys, the Brownhills Ladies!



Royal Exchange Air Rifle Team, Bridgtown, Cannock, around 1930. Albert Gunn is second right, seated. His younger brother Harold is kneeling at his side. The landlord, Mr. Thomas, is standing, centre without cap. The legend painted on the box holding the trophies reads: "Shot 17 Won 16". They had reason to be more proud of this than "Shot 17 Won 17".

This was during the years when men were men and the ladies were not to be beaten; and even if it is on record that the Royal Exchange Airgun Club lost this particular encounter, it was a day when the real winner was the sport itself. Albert went on to win more awards, and one of his medals, showing a shooter in action, is pictured here. It was won around 1932, the event being a charity match that was shot over a week of competitions.

Owing to the betting on individuals and matches that crept in some years later, Albert gave up the sport on principle, though it was hard to leave a pastime that had given him and his mates so much pleasure.



BELL TARGET SHOOTING

THE SOCIAL AND CHARITABLE SIDE

There were no social security payments or grants in those days, with very little relief from poverty from anyone but the "charitable". Air rifle shooters were certainly that.

Amongst the many charities that benefited at these early times from the activities of bell target shooters, was the "Birmingham Daily Mail" fund for the support of the wives and families of the reservists and troops of the Boer War and World War 1. Furthermore they raised a great deal of money for the "Mail Christmas Tree Fund" in aid of the hundreds of children in the local hospitals.



Birmingham Hospital's Charity Cup

The Birmingham Hospital Charity Trophy is still shot for to this day, and on the front of this magnificent object is a coloured Bilston enamel showing a long-skirted nurse standing by high sided child's cot with two shooters standing near.



Close up of the Bilston enamel on the front of the cup

Several of these early day pubs have left a record of their charity work at the time: **The Brown Lion, Lodge Road, Birmingham**, who won the 1902-1903 League Championship Shield of Birmingham; **The Wolverhampton Airgun League** of 1905-1906; and the **Horse and Jockey, Bordesly Park Road, Birmingham** who collected £50 (probably £5000 today) in a few weeks in 1905 to provide toys and other little necessities to enable the poor, suffering children to obtain some little enjoyment during the festive season. This is not just pure sentiment. Perhaps it should be borne in mind that it was nothing unusual to see children barefoot in the streets of Birmingham and the Black Country. The Boot Fund did not reach everyone.

Hundreds of air rifle clubs annually assisted in the same good work, some, voting part of their club funds, some making daily collections amongst their members and friends, some arranging a friendly shooting match and some a smoking concert at which a public celebrity occupied the chair.

At these functions, another form of fund raising took place. This took the form of throwing coins to the ceiling, on which they stuck by means of a tack and a piece of cork placed with the coin in a piece of coloured tissue paper.

Many of the sick and helpless children of the Midlands in the Hospitals and Cottage Homes (or "Spikes" as they were sometimes called) had the airgun clubs to thank for their little extras at Christmas. It cannot be emphasised enough how valuable this fund raising was at the time. Charity Hospitals were the norm and one could count oneself very lucky to even get into one for constant attention. Most of the poor had to depend on neighbours or family in times of need, when rabbit stew or chicken broth were saved for a sick neighbour or elderly person.

The fundamental principle on which most of the clubs were formed and based was fund raising, and the very nature of the people who took part, their financial circumstances at the bottom of the social ladder, in pubs within close proximity to the seat of the need, made the sport not only enjoyable to the competitor but also accomplishing charity fund raising that had never been so successful before. Publicans must also come in for some praise here, for putting their club rooms at the disposal of the airgun shooters.

