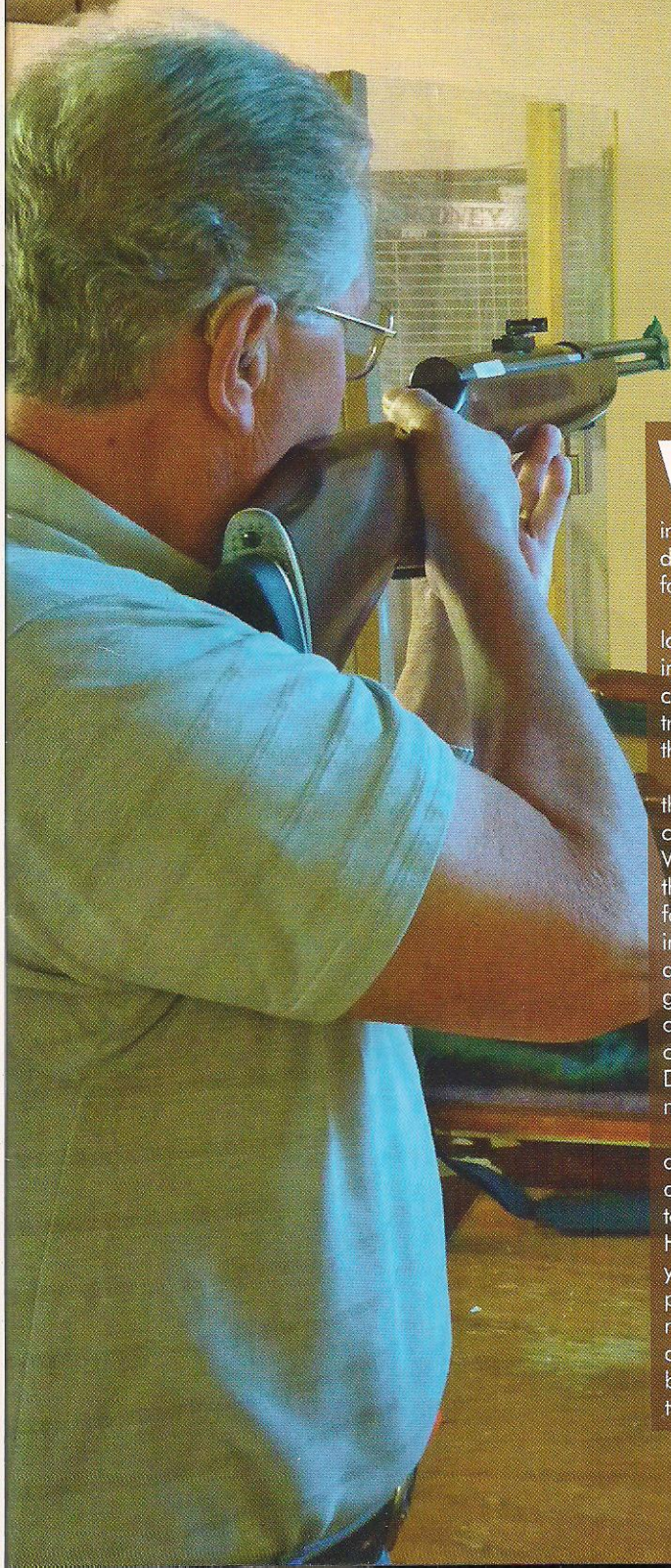


RINGING *Endorsement*

Mike Pennington introduces us to the oldest airgun league in the UK



What? You mean you shoot in the pub, actually in the bar? I expect to see darts and skittles but I've never seen anything like this!" I've lost count of the number of times that such comments have resulted in an innocent bystander being pinned to the bar for an hour or so for a description of the history of bell target shooting and its current enthusiastic following in NW Worcestershire.

That description never fails to acknowledge the origins of the sport in the late 19th century when it would have been difficult to go into a pub or club in Birmingham, Wolverhampton or the Black Country and not find a team competing in a bell target league. Sadly, those days are gone, but the tradition lives on in the Lord Ednam League in Worcestershire which has kept the sport alive and well in the area for over a hundred years.

The origins of the League are interesting. It was started by Lord Ednam, the eldest son of the Earl of Dudley who lived at Witley Court, a magnificent country house near the village of Great Witley ten miles north west of Worcester. Lord Ednam was a friend of Robert Baden Powell, the founder of the Scout movement who, during a visit to the Court, spoke of his admiration for the shooting skills of his opponents during the Boer War compared to the indifferent marksmanship of the British forces. At that time gun ownership and shooting was pretty much the preserve of the landed gentry but, with the growing availability of relatively cheap airguns, Lord Ednam recognised the opportunity to encourage interest in shooting and improve the shooting skills of local men. This was not without a degree of self interest as the Earl of Dudley and Lord Ednam were both major shareholders in BSA which was manufacturing airguns!

Rules for the formation and the conduct of a league were drawn up and although these have been added to over the years, the basic principles that applied in 1907 are still strictly adhered to. The league was originally open to teams of ten drawn from villages within a ten-mile radius of the Hundred House Hotel in Great Witley, but that restriction has been relaxed over the years as personal mobility has improved. Since the majority of the participants were likely to be farmers, with little free time in the summer months, the league season was to run from September to April and it still does. A central point was needed for such social activity, the natural choice being either the pub or the village hall, and that tradition continues today with two of the league's 12 teams based in village halls and the rest in pubs.



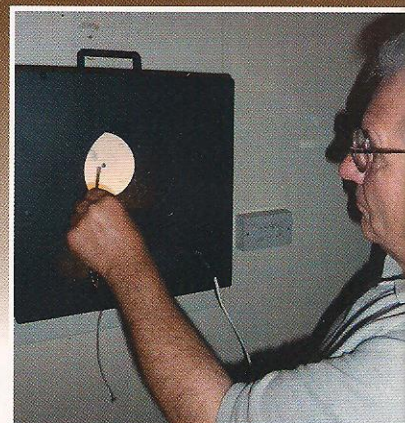


Above: A diverse range of rifles from a pre-War BSA to the HW77.

Above middle: The scoreboard.

Above right: The target is painted after each shot.

ADMIRAL RODNEY									
HOME					AWAY				
					DAN	22	21		
					JOHN	22	21		
					RETHUR	22	21		
					ED	22	21		
					STEVE	22	21		
					MIKE	22	21		
					RON	22	21		
					ROGER	22	21		
TOTAL					TOTAL				



A shooter from those early years observing a match today would find much with which he was familiar. Although he would probably be amazed at the variety of rifles available and the advances in design, not to mention the cost of a pint. He would still see standard .177 spring powered

air rifles with open sights (no apertures here) being used on a bell target at a distance of 18 feet. The bull size, at one third of an inch, would be a fraction smaller than the traditional 3/8" and the shooter would have to be free-standing with no shooting aids. He would see that five scoring shots are still allowed with the option to take two 'sighters' as long as they were declared beforehand.

The target is a circular steel plate, slightly convex to inhibit pellet flyback, set in a metal case with a hole at the centre for the bull. The height from the floor to bull centre is five feet. Circles are engraved on the plate at one inch intervals to give scoring options of 5 for a bull, 4, 3, 2 and 0 for an 'outer'. The plate is painted with a mix of white gloss paint and oil (to delay drying out) but each team swears by the quality of their own favoured mix. The splash of the pellet on the plate registers on the wet paint, the score is called by the marker, verified by a member of the opposing team and the mark is then brushed out ready for the next shot. A shot into the bull strikes a plunger behind the hole which releases a striker against the bell as long as sufficient of the pellet has entered to put four pounds of pressure on the plunger. The target is then re-cocked. These days the metal case is lit internally by an electric bulb, but when the league started this would have been candles, an oil lamp or even a gas jet. Having seen the scores of even the best shots in the league tumble when an event was held by candle light using an old Lincoln

Jefferies rifle, it is difficult not to admire the skills of our predecessors who would have travelled miles in winter on foot, bike or horse and cart to compete in those conditions with just the one gun between the whole team.

To maintain the rule of standard .177 spring powered, open sight guns, the league has a template with which all rifles must conform. A match night will produce, nevertheless, a wide

variety of rifles, all beloved by their owners. By far the most popular is the Weihrauch HW77 used by probably 90% of the shooters in the League, although this writer would not swap his well worn Mk1 Air Arms TX200 for any of them. Safety is paramount with venues regularly checked by the League Safety Officer and in over 100 years of existence the league has never had cause to contact its insurers, except to pay its premiums. All league registered guns are chronographed at least annually and must be maintained below the legal 12ft. lbs. limit.

Teams compete on a home and away basis for a league placing and there are a number of special competitions open to individual shooters, doubles and teams. Some 17 trophies are shot for annually, notable amongst them being the Lord Ednam Cup for the league champion club, the Nabarro Shield donated by the late colourful Worcestershire MP Sir Gerald Nabarro and the Bank's Shield donated by Bank's Brewery for the individual knockout top gun in a season. A glance at the Great Witley team minutes of 1945 reveals the decision to award a prize to the top scoring under 21 member of the team in order to encourage youth participation. The prize? A packet of 20 cigarettes; try to get that through a committee meeting today!

Ladies have shot in many teams over the years but 2008 saw the welcome addition of the first all ladies team to the league. I wonder what Lord Ednam and Lord Baden Powell would have thought of that?

So, if you wander into certain pubs in North Worcestershire at 9 o'clock on a Thursday evening during the winter don't be surprised to see enough guns to fill a small armoury and two captains tossing a coin to commence a match. Watch and enjoy the skill and sportsmanship that is present and hold your breath, like the rest of the pub, as a hush falls and a shooter prepares to take that final shot to give him (or her) that elusive 'possible' of 25, or the last man in a team goes up to shoot what could be a match-winning five shots.

It all started over a hundred years ago and it's still going strong. Let's hope someone can be saying that in a hundred years from now.

Mike Pennington is the captain of the Admiral Rodney shooting team based at the Admiral Rodney Inn in Berrow Green, Worcestershire and Secretary of the Lord Ednam League.

For more information on bell target shooting in your area, visit www.belltarget.com ■



Below: On practice nights, other rifles make an appearance, like this BSA Stutzen.