

Forage Friday: Catch the Pigeon Friday 5 June 2020

Welcome to Forage Friday: Catch the Pigeon - sharing our heritage from Bruce Castle Museum & Archive.

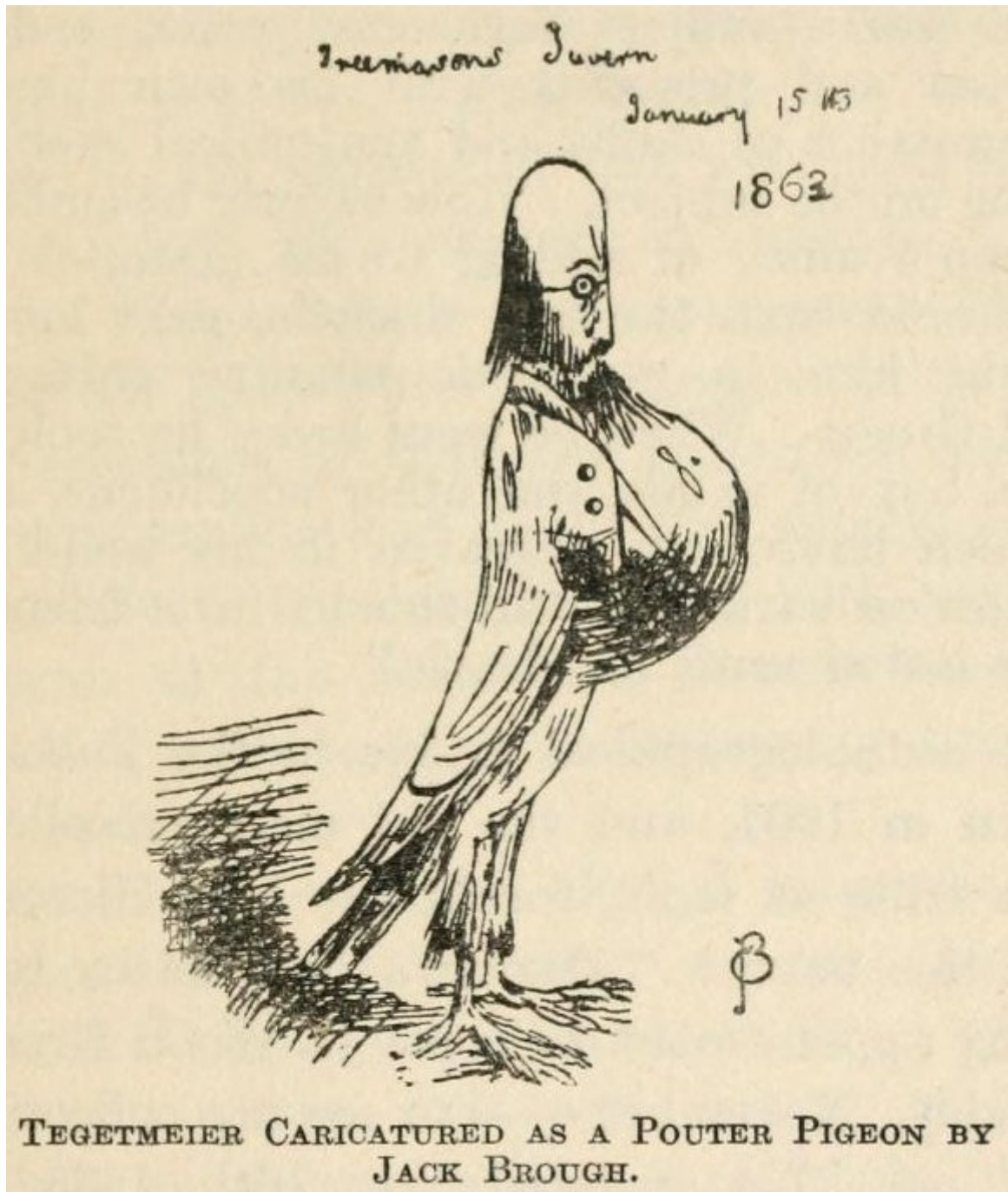
With the easing of restrictions each week more things are now coming out of lockdown. This week sees the start of pigeon racing again. For sports fans craving sport - at last, perhaps something to watch! And guess what - today's post will feature a very special connection or two with pigeons and the heritage of this borough (sadly no connections though with the late 1960s classic TV cartoon and catchy tune [*Catch or / Stop the Pigeon - Dastardly and Muttley and the Flying Machines*](#)).

Love them or hate them, pigeons are around us every day. We may have very polarised standpoints on this one breed of bird for many reasons, but they have had a lot of important uses over the centuries. Take a look at this [round-up here](#) of how pigeons have helped us in the past.

This little painting (below) by Inga Bystram shows her love of pigeons. She has captured their characters in her artwork, as they nestle on the balconies near her home on the Broadwater Farm estate:



From the collections of Bruce Castle Museum & Archive. © The artist: Inga Bystram
Here's someone else who loved pigeons. He has been characterised in the cartoon drawing below – as a pigeon!



This is [William Bernhardt Tegetmeier F.Z.S.](#) (1816 – 1912) who lived with his family at [101 St James' Lane in Muswell Hill](#), between 1858 and 1868. His house still stands today (as seen in the photograph below): a delightful weather-boarded house and an unusual survival in north London. It would appear that the Tegetmeier family had also earlier associations in the Haringey area, having lived in Tottenham in 1852 where their son was born.

In 5 September 2008, a [Haringey Historical Green Plaque](#) was unveiled in his honour at his former home in Muswell Hill.



The suggestion to commemorate Tegetmeier with a plaque within the scheme was the initiative of local historians [Ken Gay](#) and Keith Fawkes-Underwood of [Hornsey Historical Society](#) (HHS). We learn in the HHS Bulletin 34 (1993) that despite the best efforts of the society, they had not been able to secure an English Heritage Blue Plaque for him on this site. But who was Tegetmeier and what had he done?

Tegetmeier was a writer and journalist of domestic science and a naturalist. His love and study of pigeons also extended to studying poultry and bees. He was a published authority on poultry and, as a beekeeper, he discovered how bees created the hexagon shaped cells in their hives. He was also a racing pigeon pioneer. But it was his correspondence and friendship with Charles Darwin about his work and research on poultry and bees that was influential and valuable in developing Darwin's ideas on evolution, for his seminal work "[On the Origin of Species](#)".



Whilst someone like Darwin may be a colossus in the field of science, through our Haringey plaque scheme we were able to bring public attention to one of the many other 'heroes of science' whose contribution is sometimes overlooked, hidden or forgotten (and we have a few of these in Haringey). Members of the Tegetmeier family travelled from far and wide to attend, as well as representatives of the [Zoological Society](#) (as Tegetmeier was a Fellow) and members of the [North London Beekeepers](#) group (Tegetmeier was the Founder and President of the Apiarian Society – all about bee-keeping). Sadly, David Attenborough was not able to attend as he was filming in the Antarctic – but we had a wonderful letter from him which was read out on the day of the plaque unveiling.

Tegetmeier himself had been (justifiably) proud of the research assistance he had given to Darwin.

But if it hadn't been for his love of pigeons, then Tegetmeier might not ever have met Darwin. In 1855, he was introduced at a meeting of the [Philoperisteron Society](#) to someone who had begun an interest in pigeons. Tegetmeier described the encounter in an article:

“Continuing my love for pigeons, I became the secretary of the most exclusive pigeon association, the Philoperisteron Society, which held its annual meetings in the great hall of the Freemasons’ Tavern. At one of these exhibitions I heard a voice which said, ‘Oh, here’s Tegetmeier; he will tell you all about these birds better than I can’. I turned round, and saw [my friend William] Yarrell with a stranger, whom he introduced as Mr. Darwin.”

Despite his admiration for Darwin it appears that Tegetmeier had actually misremembered where he first encountered his new friend. Their letters and diaries suggest they met elsewhere, at the Anerley Show in August 1855. Nonetheless, however they met, it sparked a friendship which lasted 27 years until Darwin's death. You can see many of the letters they wrote to one another whilst Tegetmeier lived in Muswell Hill in the online [Darwin Correspondence Project](#) at Cambridge University. [Here is one letter](#) from Darwin written in 1865, and an example of [another letter](#) from Tegetmeier written in 1866. The letter (transcribed below) from Darwin about the publication of his new work, was kept by Tegetmeier inside his presentation copy of the first edition of *On the Origin of Species*. [Darwin wrote to Tegetmeier on 9th April 1859](#):

“ I shall go next month to press with an abstract of my general views on the origin of species, & it will make a volume of about 500 pages, & I shall have much pleasure in sending you a copy when it is published. — I shall give abstract of conclusions at which I have arrived on Bees cells. —

Believe me with many thanks

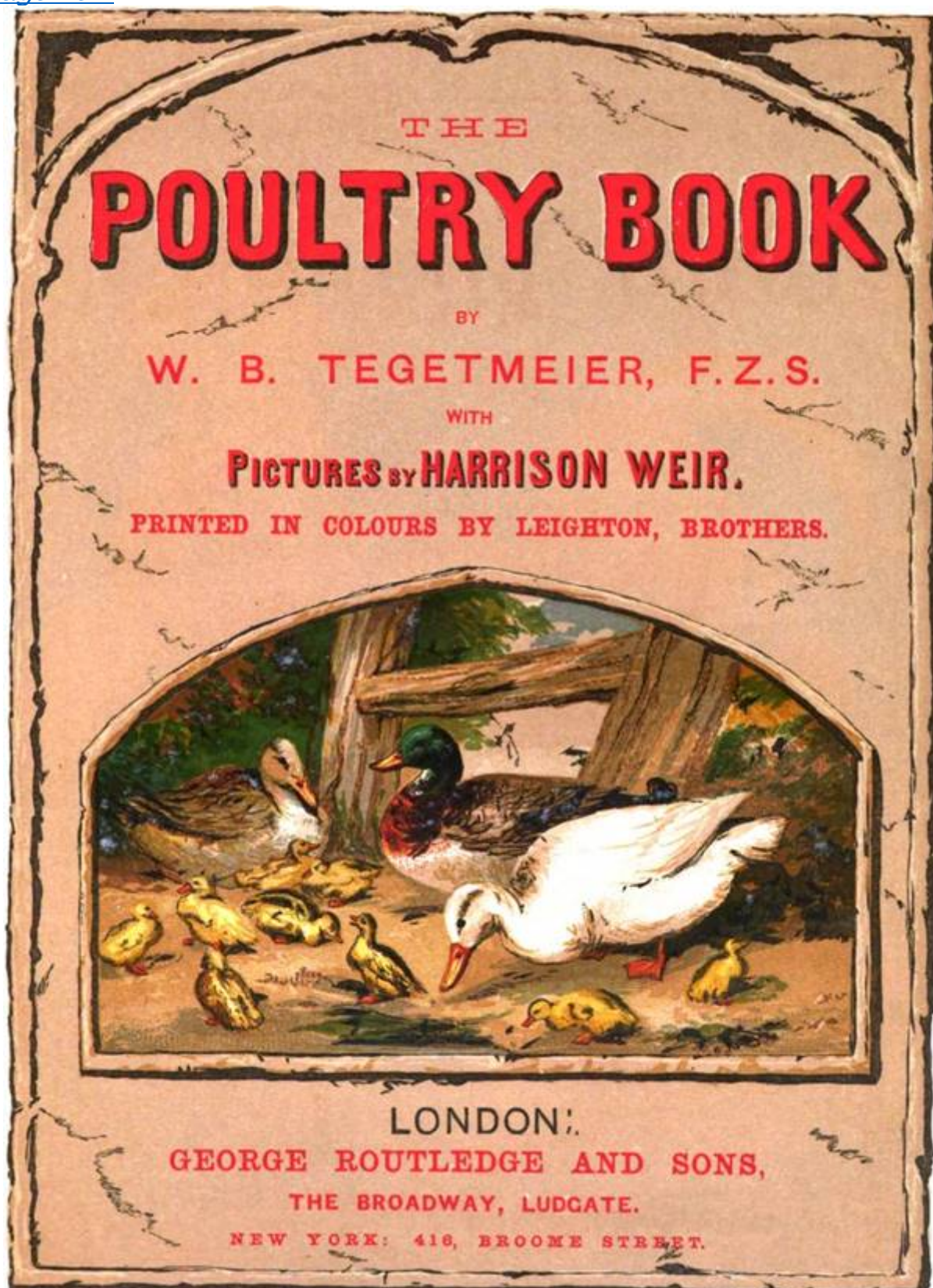
Yours very sincerely

C. Darwin



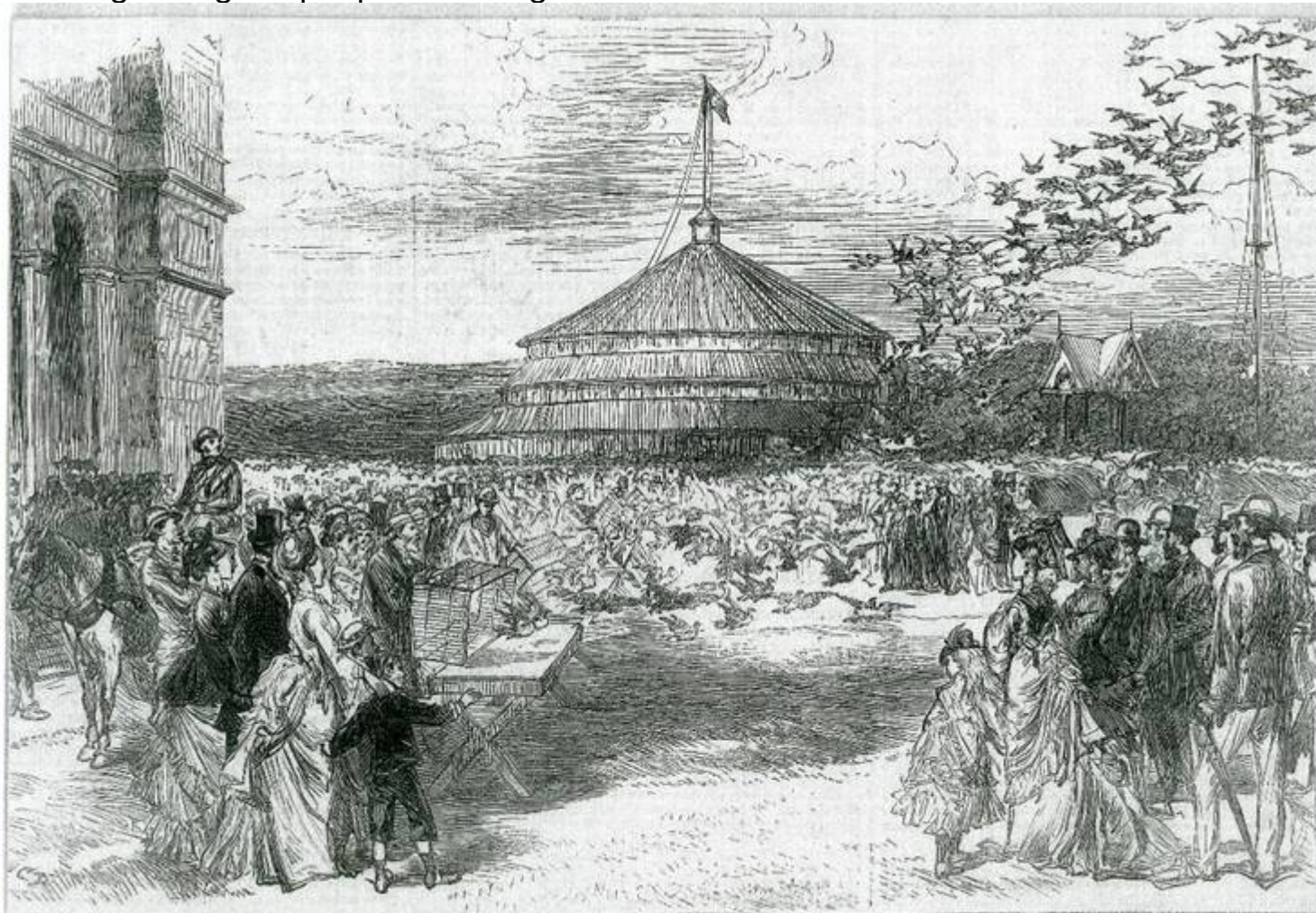
Tegetmeier inspecting a pigeon

Tegetmeier had a long writing career, with many of his most notable publications published whilst he lived in St James' Lane. In 1858 he had success with *A Manual of Domestic Economy*, which ran into 14 editions. Other subsequent books were [*Bees, Hives and Honey*](#) (1865), [*The Poultry Book*](#) (1867) (its book cover seen below), and [*Pigeons: Their Structure, Varieties, Habits, and Management*](#).



As some of you may have spotted on the Haringey Green Plaque, Tegetmeier was also a pioneer of pigeon racing. He organised the first international pigeon

race in 1871, and carried on organising pigeon races from Alexandra Palace, beginning in 1875. Below is an illustration which shows one of those events at Alexandra Palace – clearly extremely popular judging by the crowds, and attracting a range of people including families.



INTERNATIONAL AND ALL-ENGLAND PIGEON-RACES AT THE ALEXANDRA PALACE.

From the collections of Bruce Castle Museum (Haringey Archive & Museum Service)

Although Tegetmeier moved from his home in St James' Lane, he still lived locally in Fortis Green and finally Finchley. He lived a full life and died at 96 in November 1912. He is buried in Marylebone cemetery in Finchley. You can read more about Tegetmeier online with the article ['WB Tegetmeier Honoured'](#), *Bee Craft*, November 2008 or [E.W. Richardson, 'A Veteran Naturalist : being the life and work of W.B. Tegetmeier'](#), (1916).

Nor did pigeon racing from Alexandra Palace end with Tegetmeier. Later in the 20th century, other pigeon racing experts from the borough were organising such races.

PIGEON FANCYING

Caring, Breeding,
Racing & Exhibiting



Ron Bissett

From the collections of Bruce Castle Museum (Haringey Archive & Museum Service)

The author of the book above – Ron Bissett – lived in Harringay Road in West Green. According to notes left to us by our friend Ray Swain, Ron had once been the Secretary as well as ‘clock-setter’ for the races of his local West Green Homing Society and had also become the Life Vice-President of the Alexandra Palace Homing Society, one of the oldest established pigeon racing clubs in London. A pigeon fancier of over 50 years, he was also for 35 years (when he wrote the book above in 1985) the Assistant Editor of the [Racing Pigeon Weekly](#), a specialist newspaper that had been founded in 1898. From 1965 – 1979, Ron was Team Manager of the Royal Pigeon Racing Association, caring for the Great Britain team of birds entered into the International Pigeon Olympiad. The 1965 Olympiad and Congress was staged at Alexandra Palace, working with his colleague on the *Racing Pigeon Weekly*, Colin Osman.

I feel I have now learnt a lot more about pigeons and racing in Haringey than I ever knew was possible. And oddly, I also recognised the name Osman, the man who worked with Ron Bissett, as someone who had been interested in our Tudor Tower at Bruce Castle. In 1957 he had been given permission to investigate the Tower, in trying to prove that it could have been built as a dovecot. He didn’t publish his results, so we assume that his findings did not come to any firm conclusion (we plan to come back to give you more details of this and the Tower generally in a later post).

Although the scene from Alexandra Palace may indicate otherwise, pigeon racing and pigeon fancying does seem to be a male dominated sport and interest (we are sure though there are women who might also keep and race pigeons). The name of Ron Bissett’s book ‘*Pigeon Fancying*’ is intriguing and makes us wonder how it all started. It would appear it all began during the Industrial Revolution. It was described by Dickens as a sport of “release and escape” among factory workers who didn’t have the freedom to travel. Despite the international aspects of the sport racing of pigeons mentioned above, even nowadays some fanciers do admit to not travelling much still. Although pigeon fancying is also on the decline in this country, it is heartening to hear it has an avid following in Morocco and Poland in recent times.

In a new literary memoir about pigeon fancying published last year (and reviewed here – just follow the link) [Homing: On Pigeons, Dwellings and Why We Return, by Jon Day](#), one character says to Day: “*You never really own a pigeon ... whenever you let them loose to exercise or race, they are free to leave. The challenge is creating a home they want to return to.*” And with us all having spent a lot of our time at home recently, like the author Day, maybe we can all ask ourselves the question - what can we learn from a pigeon about our idea of home?

And on that note, we will leave you until the next post. With thanks to our late friend and volunteer Ray Swain for sharing his knowledge about pigeon racing locally, and to Hornsey Historical Society.

Just one more thing – as it is the end of [Volunteers' Week](#) – let us think of all those wonderful people who have been volunteering their time helping our communities during this crisis. Perhaps you might like to consider nominating someone who could be recognised as a Haringey Hero - a thank you and acknowledgement for all they have done? Details on how to nominate your Haringey Hero can be found in the attached PDF above.

Take care, keep well, and observe those social distances
Best wishes from us all at Bruce Castle

Deborah Hedgecock
Curator

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