“Handsome is what handsome does”
Alan Atkinson of Sandycroft

Described by many as the most complete all round fancier in his locality, and referred to by many scribes as the “Sandycroft Slayer” not least by the his local former scribe (and good friend) Jeff Reynolds. This former amateur footballer and professional welder excelled at three things in his life, welding, football and pigeon racing and has worked at to improve and loved all three.

Having now retired, this family man has been married to Heather for forty three years has two children Stephen and Joanne and five grandchildren. His relationship with pigeon racing commenced in 1963 with his father Joe coming home from work as a painter after finding a pair of youngsters in the Belfry of the Blue Coat School in Northgate Street Chester, these youngsters would be the catalyst required to start in this sport. Two to three years later the father and son partnership of J Atkinson and Son would join the Chester Social M.S. Alan recalls “we flew with moderate success” although they did manage to top their federation in the first old bird race they ever raced in. He would leave the sport in his late teens until he married and commenced racing again only this time it would be in the Sandycroft H.S. Today the Sandycroft H.S is now defunct and Alan has to ply his experience at the Saltney Social Club in nearby Saltney. But he recalls some great Fanciers from yesteryear, some names he shared with me were the partnership of Wimbush and Corbett of Sandycroft H.S. fame, the competition in those days was “quite fierce” he recalls, “if you didn’t trap your pigeons you lost the race”. 
Alan admits to being old fashioned when it comes to the ETs systems in use today, but also admits it is great for young birds, he don’t see any advantage with old birds especially from the channel. He has actually won a system but sold it, he remains a purist at heart.

He openly speaks of good or great pigeons. “You have to find the best racers or the best breeders” he states. “You have to have the pigeons to do the job, you want both breeding and racing”. Alan admits to being extremely lucky with regard to some of the pigeons he has had in his care, he recalled a storey from when he first commenced racing having only recently been married.

Alan spoke to his then new bride and now wife for over forty years Heather about procuring some pigeons. He had seen some birds for sale by the late and great S.G. Biss. “We had £400 in our joint account and these six pigeons would cost £300” he recalls. Heather told him to buy them, which he did. Two of these were to prove great breeders and help Alan to commence the first of many club and federation channel average wins.

Two years after purchasing these birds and clearing their bank account Alan was to finish second in the local but prestigious Chester 2 Bird Specialist club race from Cherbourg, with the winner not pooled Alan was to win £500 which repaid his initial investment and some profit, a tactic he has managed to maintain ever since. He would in later years win this event. Alan is renowned locally for his Busschaert pigeons. These were initially introduced to Alan in 1982 by his close friend Brian Arathoon whom he is still in close contact today. These birds were to originate from Brian’s close friend’s T. Larkin and J.N. Palmer.
It was from these pigeons that the well-known broken keel cock was bred. An ace breeder he was to sire some of Alan’s best racers and future breeders. These were from the well-known “Musketeer Lines”. Although renowned for his performances both local and at National level, Alan is also renowned for the breeding and racing of one special pigeon in particular. “We dream of champions” says Alan and this pigeon was a supreme specimen he was none other than Champion “Tele Savalas”

A winner of no less than 17 x 1st club. 3 x 1st federation and twice winner of the Deeside combine beating 7400 and 7700 birds. He takes his name from the TV series Kojac which Alan liked to watch and as this pigeon won 3 televisions he was named Tele.

A huge pigeon in the hand he was balanced in every way and was the father of four different individual federation winners for Alan. This fine pigeon was awarded three RPRA awards in three consecutive years and would see out his days at Louella World after being procured 1993.

When you meet Alan Atkinson, you become aware of how infectious and sense the keenness he expresses with his pigeons. “Good Birds and Common Sense” he once wrote in an article published by the BHW in their 1994 stud book, which remained the same consensus in 2009 when interviewed by the MNFC’s Mike Lakin for his superb article which featured in the Racing Pigeon Pictorial International – No 474.

Today when speaking with this modest fancier he engages your thoughts and asks you questions, he is a willing participant in any conversation but it is a two way street, he will listen to your views and is never confrontational, but you do get a feeling that he hankers after the passed and the extreme competition. The sport will never be the same as it was in the seventies and eighties but surely it must get more competitive, local federations must give more amalgamated races. Good open honest competition hones you as a fancier.

In the early nineties it was Alan Atkinson who wrote “It’s a shame that our sport is being ruined by the hawks and the falcons. They have certainly ruined the song bird and other small birds” So even some twenty years ago he was experiencing difficulty with hawks in his area, that is so prevalent today across the whole country.

Alan flies into a neat area of North Wales. Sandycroft is located four miles West of Chester in Deeside, Flintshire. The area has been a hot bed for pigeon fanciers for many years and although numbers have declined over the last twenty years, there is still a hard core nucleus of fliers within the surrounding areas. The Sandycroft H.S. has since closed due to lack of numbers which has seen Alan move clubs to the Saltney Social H.S. although small
in member numbers it is a friendly club and with some good new members will become a competitive but inclusive club.

Alan also plies his fancier ability in the previously mentioned Chester 2 Bird Specialist club and is also a member of the Midland National Flying Club in which he competes in the West Section. Although the nationals and the 2B club can supply some great racing with even better rewards both financially and with regards to some kudos he still enjoys racing his pigeons weekly in his local club.

This profile is not result based or motivated for the author. But I have an opportunity to share some results with the reader to give a flavour of what this fancier achieves through the normal seasons. It has been reported that over the last ten years Alan has won over 250 x 1st prizes. Result orientated profiles can sometimes bore fellow fanciers (the author included), needless to say I have included some of Alan’s 2013 results:

Which include 3rd & 18th Federation Hereford 1,407 birds. 7th, 11th, & 23rd Federation Monmouth 1,589 birds. 1st, 2nd, & 3rd Federation Frome 1,387 birds. 1st, 2nd & 3rd Federation West bay(1) 1,383. 2nd & 5th Federation West bay(2) 1,147 birds. 1st, 4th & 11th Federation Carentan 501 birds. 11th & 12th Federation Hereford 945 birds. 9th Federation Carentan 458 birds. 1st, 2nd & 5th Federation Fougeres 362 birds. 1st Fougeres 2 Bird 28 members sent 56 birds. 1st, 2nd & 3rd Federation Fougeres 267 birds. 2nd Fougeres 2 Bird 22 members sent 44 birds. 2nd & 4th Federation Messac, only 6 birds clocked in the Federation on the winning day.

Alan Atkinson is also known around the area for his loft location, and not as you would initially think, not because he is the furthest Easterly loft in his federation, far from it but because of the pylon that resides near to Alan’s garden and the wires that straddle across the top of his lofts. He is the first to admit that although the garden he inhabits is by far superior to most the amount of pigeons lost or injured to these wires are a casualty that he has to endure to reside where he is and race his pigeons.

He actually says that Heather thinks he is going to do himself damage or injury when the youngsters are just starting to leave the loft a bunch up as all the locality can hear him shouting at his youngsters not to be so stupid.
When asking Alan about breeding he replies with “Pigeons are like your family” there are plenty of sayings that are used daily such as “the apple never falls far from the tree” and “Like breed like”. Alan is an avid breeder of pigeons, he insists you have to have breeders, you need to find good breeders and then find some more to replace those as pigeons are only around and at their best fertility wise for a short number of years.

The racing team (in his experience) never last more than four years of age on his regime “never past three or four years of age he reiterates”. The families that are housed in the Atkinson lofts today are a line bred family which has been blended over years of trying to find the perfect blend. The first cross vigour is also another avenue Alan likes go down when breeding but as he states when reminiscing about some of his great reference pigeons such as Tele Savalas he reminds himself that this cock was produced with a father daughter pairing.

Alan’s current group of reference breeders include pigeons such as Young Salto sire to 18 x 1st Federation winners. He is also sire of the 72 Cock 16 x 1st & Mathew 8 x 1st including 3 x 1st Fed and 1st Chester 2b Littlehampton. Champ 391 a winner of 11 x 1st. Super Blue sire of 11 x 1st & 12th Open Midlands National F.C. Not forgetting Dark Dream another Western region RPRA award winner for her MNFC 1st section performance in 2009, the National Hen and finally Heather named after his wife. The old reference birds were of course the great Tele Savalas but also The Puffin, and The Bouncy Castle Cock, to name but a few.

Alan is a believer that the 1/8 cross is what is required when line breeding and proves the point with his consistent performances. 7/8 mine and a 1/8 cross gives me what I want which is either good or great pigeons. Mind you (he states) they are not all good pigeons you have to produce the majority to find the minority, the minority being the good pigeons. Good breeders help cut the majority down somewhat. You need good pigeons and be very lucky!

Great pigeons were in this area years ago Alan remembers, with the likes of the Doran Brothers (Frank and Percy). Tremendous flyers who (at one stage in their career) couldn’t time in from the channel says Alan. The brothers were removal men and had a removal business in Chester. These brothers were to be employed to move a certain Captain
Macpherson who in those days had a bit of a reputation for channel pigeons. When they removed everything from the house the brothers asked the Captain “what about your pigeons?” they asked. “Help yourself” was the captain’s reply and history was about to commence in the making. Lucky, right time right place states Alan.

The Doran’s pigeons were to catapult a number of fanciers into the lime light in the area around Chester not least the Millington Brothers Harold and his younger brother Ronnie in Ellesmere Port. Another name from yesteryear is Billy Woodworth who’s nephew Dave is the current secretary to Alan’s club the Saltney Social. Dave was also instrumental in getting Alan to join their club when the Sandycroft club closed its doors last year.

There is also a story regarding the Doran pigeons that was relayed to me recently by Tom Harris of Knutsford that one pigeon was sold at their dispersal sale for £400 in 1956 even if this story is not exact fact it will only be distorted by time and memory but the price stated tells the value even in those days how these pigeons were revered.

The birds that are housed today at the Atkinson household are a blend of Jean-Pierre Gevaert and Carine Van Schoorisse pigeons known as Gevaert Van Schoorisse they are known nationally in Europe as the hidden gold from Flanders and are keeping Alan competitive as ever as we see our season approach the young bird season.

Alan’s thoughts on feeding are very much the same as they were some twenty years ago when he wrote himself stating “why do the same pigeons keep beating my other pigeons? Because they are better pigeons regardless of what they were fed” Alan also recalls how his father met the then British Boxing Champion Freddie Tilston and Freddie telling his dad “There has been many a night when I have gone and fought on a jam butty and won” an example this fancier no doubt uses when stating it’s all about good pigeons and ability.

This amenable character, former pipe welder who roles his own cigarettes, takes a puff on his fag and reminisces of times gone by, tells of how he grows all his own vegetables in a garden that he cherishes, he tells of the enjoyment of the hard work it takes to maintain his garden, a man who believes he has been extremely lucky to have owned and raced such great pigeons in the past and looks forward again trying to emulate and breed the like those he no longer has to race.

A man who misses his friends and comradeship of those who are no longer with us or who are no longer in the sport, a man who is modest about his achievements within a sport he still enjoys and calls all his success Luck. This is a man who still today remembers the voices of past fanciers and close friends, and still today uses their sayings or anecdotes.

Has he any regrets? Only that he misses his friends and fellow fanciers from the past and that his dad Joe didn’t get to see his increasing success and never got to share the highs that he has encountered over his racing career.

The final word should be from this ace fancier (the Sandycroft Slayer) when I asked him to describe his ideal or perfect type of pigeon just simply said “Handsome is what handsome does”
The racing lofts of Alan Atkinson. Old bird loft at the rear and the young bid loft on the right with the aviary.