

PIGEON DERBY:

For the racing-pigeon enthusiasts of Holland - and there are thousands of them - the big event of the year is the Pigeon Derby. Two thousand four hundred baskets are prepared for the long journey from the various clubhouses to the starting point - Orleans in France, over 300 miles, away. Every pigeon has to be ringed - for the rings serve both as identification and as proof that a bird has reached home.

From Roosendaal, the collecting centre, the baskets are lined up beside the special train that will carry them across the frontier into France. It's an express goods train, but the journey will still be slower than the return trip under the pigeons' own power!

Keeping the pigeons fed and watered on the way, with fair shares for everybody is a whole-time job. It's worse than being a restaurant-car attendant.

Back at headquarters, the automatic timing boxes are synchronised; there will be one at each pigeon loft. Meanwhile, at Orleans, the precious train has arrived and the consignment unloaded.

And there's the starting signal! Two thousand four hundred doors are opened as quickly as possible - and with a great rush of wings, 60,000 pigeons are on their way!

The strange but unerring instinct which no one fully understands drives each bird straight towards his home loft, four and a half hours away - where the anxious owners have one eye on the clock and the other in the sky.

The end of the road - and he has no idea how important his journey was. All he wanted to do was to get home. Now he's done it - and his owner collects the vital ring.

The ring's put in the timing box - a turn of the key and the exact time can be read by the officials at headquarters.

Ladies and gentlemen - the winner. Average time 68 miles an hour. But my dear, you should have seen the traffic!