

# Narbonne International Open Race 2009

## ... breaking new ground

### Race Report

They say, don't they, that most people can remember where they were and what they were doing on **22nd November 1963** when **US President John Fitzgerald Kennedy** was shot dead in Dallas. Perhaps some of our older readers will have their memory instantly jogged by this reminder? Well, I was only 1yo then so I sadly have no recollection of that piece of history. Nor, unfortunately, was I cognisant of England's sole glorious World Cup win in 1966 when football was all about athleticism and passion rather than money and diving.



But I do have a distinct and glorious memory of the events of Dax International flown on 5th July 2003 when, shortly after 7pm, whilst browsing on [www.pipa.be](http://www.pipa.be) to see how many pigeons had been making it up to Northern France and Belgium, news flashed up on the National Flying Club's own website that

*"Will the UK ever win an International race again?"*

**Brian Sheppard** had clocked a pigeon (later to be named "**Legend**") that was quite clearly beating the early timers on the Continent ... against all my expectations. A tingle of excitement shot right through my body as the reality of a UK fancier finally winning an International race hit home! Just 42 minutes later, and flying 7 miles further, **Richard Green & Anna Crowley** timed in their ace pigeon "**Brimstone**" to take 2nd International 2nd UK in the race. It's worth remembering that a further five fabulous pigeons were timed on the winning day to the lofts of **Barry Corbin, Alan Holdaway, Graham Buck, James & Smith, and R Owers.**



Now I had previously sent to one or two Internationals, without any success, but the 2003 Dax International completely fired my imagination for it clearly set the new Gold Standard against which all future wins in any club or competition would be measured. No longer would it be considered good enough simply to be 1<sup>st</sup> UK Section when it was plain to see that a realistic aspiration was 1<sup>st</sup> International beating all the best fanciers across Europe.

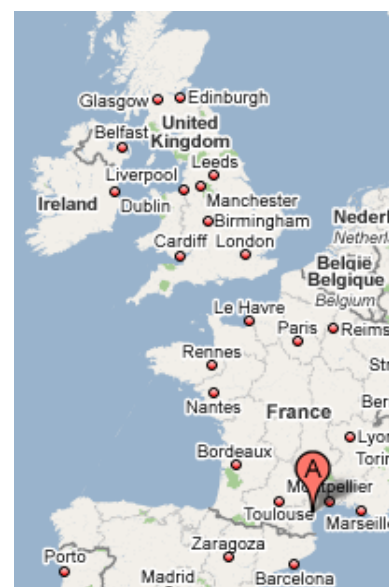


Of course this could have been a flash-in-the-pan result for the

UK and the only way to test that theory would be to keep sending to see whether or not the result could be replicated. Well we didn't have to wait too long to find further evidence that British fanciers were up to the International mark as just one year later **Mark Gilbert** repeated the feat for the UK with his "**Southfield Supreme**", Brian Sheppard this time taking 2nd International 2nd UK. Those two Dax races remain the only two **outright** wins in International races ever recorded by British fanciers though **Dave Posey** did incredibly well to win the Hens International in 2004 with "**Dave's Girl**". Since then, perhaps coinciding with the withdrawal of the National Flying Club from the International scene and the abandonment of Dax as an International race point, the UK has not been close to a win and the big question must be "**Will the UK ever win an International race again?**"

Well, to further facilitate the participation and endeavours of UK fanciers in the International race arena, three fanciers (Paul O'Leary, John Clements, and Russell Bradford) set up an OPEN RACE for the **Narbonne International** to be flown on 25th July 2009. The Narbonne International, organised by the Cureghem Centre and flown by 12220 pigeons last year, is a full Old Bird International with a separate Hens result also being produced.

Narbonne has been part of the International race program for some time but, curiously, hasn't been flown by UK fanciers for many years. To give you an idea about your flying distance for Narbonne, it is approximately 550 miles to parts of the South Coast of England and is roughly on a line that would take you through Toulouse/Perpignan and then on to Barcelona. Now we never suggested for a moment that a UK fancier would win the Narbonne International in this first year ... that would be the stuff of dreams. **But what we were certain of was that we had no chance of winning if the UK was not even competing!**



The UK does perhaps have better potential for winning an International where the race point lies in the SW of France e.g. Dax, Pau, and Tarbes. The 2003 and 2004 Dax Internationals are historic proof of that fact. Some of the other International race points, such as Narbonne, are much more Easterly in location and the challenge for the Narbonne pigeons is to find their way out of the Bay of Lions hemmed in by the Pyrenees, the Alps and the Massive Central. But you know there have been some very good pigeons timed from Perpignan in the past so there was advance hope that Narbonne would yield a similar dividend.

I was extremely fortunate to enlist the assistance and support from **John Clements** and **Russell Bradford**, and their input to the structure and administration of the race has already proved invaluable. The balance of International knowledge, administrative experience, and raw enthusiasm seemed to work. However as with all things in life,

*"... we have no chance of winning if the UK is not even competing!"*

it's money rather than goodwill or enthusiasm that actually makes things happen and cash had to be found pretty quickly to

finance and guarantee the Narbonne International Open Race. It was John Clements who conceived the idea of a phone-in auction of pigeons donated by ten of the leading

International and National lofts in UK and Belgium. This auction was held over the weekend of 4<sup>th</sup>/5<sup>th</sup> April and raised an average of £157/pigeon with the total amount of £1570 matching the requirements and expectations of the race organisers. **We really are greatly indebted to each of the ten benefactors, without whose generosity and support this Open Race could not have been staged.**

The race itself was broken into 13 Sections conforming exactly to RPRA regions. What this did was to provide absolute clarity for the race organisers and competing fanciers alike. Another break-from-the-norm for this race was that there would be just **Section** pools. This means that anything you invested on your pigeons would only be competed for by other fanciers and pigeons within your RPRA Region giving you a better chance of a return for your outlay. The Pools were £2, £5, £10, and £20 with a £5 single bird nomination. In addition there will be two £5 two-bird average pools. The first 2-bird pool will take each fancier's first two timed pigeons whereas the second 2-bird pool will require the fancier to nominate two of his entries from their list. Both two-bird Pools will be winner-take-all.

Special prizes were gratefully received in support of the race as follow:-

- £100 to the fancier with the best 2-Bird average (any distance) ... kindly sponsored by Ted Bennett
- £100 to the fancier with the best 2-Bird average flying over 725 miles ... kindly sponsored by Brian Noon
- £100 plus a Trophy for best velocity over 700 miles ... kindly sponsored by Derek Partridge
- £100 for best velocity achieved by competitors marked at Basildon ... kindly sponsored by The Estuary



It's worth re-iterating that what was being organised here was an OPEN race in the truest sense of the words. **No boundaries, no affiliations, no payments in advance, and especially no politics!** Just turn up at your preferred marking station with all the correct forms completed and take your chances in one of the biggest races staged in Europe this year.

The Narbonne International was last competed from the UK way back in 1979, I'm led to believe, when it was won by Dave Delea. The main inspiration behind staging this race was to provide the whole of the UK with an opportunity to compete in an International race. The OPEN environment would facilitate this. For, barring a small minority of dedicated and hardened distance fanciers in the BICC there is no opportunity to compete in the Internationals and one thought was that those who enjoyed this 'taster' may go on to consider joining the BICC as it has within its program five other International races including the crown jewels of Barcelona and Pau.

Well after a full day of marking across the UK at six marking stations (Stockport, Ringstead, Basildon, Salisbury, Horndean, and Whitstable) we eventually loaded just 148 pigeons sent by 56 fanciers onto Diane Bonney's ex-Catteralls transporter. There's no hiding place from the fact the this entry of 148 was very disappointing but as always there are mitigating factors behind fanciers' ability to send pigeons to long distance races not least the fact that this race comes very late in the old bird season and follows on the back of some very hard racing (NFC Tarbes being a prime example of this). However I think what the printed result proves is that what we lacked in quantity we made up fully in quality with some of the UK's top lofts competing and sending birds dripping with previous long distance race experience.

The convoy was held over on Saturday 25<sup>th</sup> July as it was considered that the strong Northerly winds would provide for a very bad race and what a good decision this proved as the next day we had sun and a WSW wind at the liberation point. Normally I'd say that any west in the wind is not good when you are starting from a South Easterly race point such as Narbonne but I'll take light WSW ahead of strong North any day!

Onto the provisional result details! Well having watched the late afternoon arrivals in Northern France being posted at [www.pipa.be](http://www.pipa.be) I became pretty hopeful of day pigeons into the UK even though the short flyers were still having in excess of 550 miles to fly! This aspiration was of course dependant on the English Channel being clear! Time however marched on and just when all hope was lost I took a phone call at 21:30pm and I thought this would be yet another person from up country enquiring as to whether we'd had any day birds.



But no ... the quiet almost shocked tones of John Ayling came through saying he'd just clocked a pigeon in near pitch-dark conditions at 21:28:52 flying 567 miles and with just 8 minutes and



8 seconds until the onset of the official hours of darkness. John tells me he had already given up on seeing a pigeon back on the day as it had got so dark and had in fact put his clock back in the house! But on a final 'just-in-case' walk towards the loft he saw something flutter down to the loft and complete panic ensued as, realising it was a race bird, he rushed back to the house for his clock and a torch as with no lights in his lofts the pigeon would be difficult to find! He duly found a 6yo Chequer Hen

and clocked it in double-quick time! This hen was this year 328<sup>th</sup> Open 54<sup>th</sup> Section B NFC Tarbes (a very hard race indeed) and last year took 5<sup>th</sup> Open UK Section Perpignan International so this is another outstanding performance from this hen. John Ayling himself is

no stranger to long distance successes having won the NFC Grand National from Pau in 2002 timing the only pigeon on the day of liberation aptly named thereafter as "Home Alone". He has also won the CSCFC's blue riband race from Pau. Doubtless a nervous night and day followed for John as, mathematically at least, the further flying competitors could beat him the next day. In the event his hen remained clear of the field! John timed his second entry of two at 12:26:53 the next day for 13<sup>th</sup> Open and his son Paul also clocked shortly afterwards for 18<sup>th</sup> Open.

Unfortunately the next day (Monday 27<sup>th</sup>) saw a thick band of rain crossing the UK and English Channel making for very tough conditions for the rest of the convoy to make it home but in all there were 24 verified pigeons into the UK by the close of the second day.

Here follows a chronological history of all the other verified pigeons:-

- Monday 27th July 07:20am
  - 07:37:47am ... Edward 'Bomber' Mellis in Southsea has timed a 6yo blue Cock flying 562+ miles for a velocity of 812.915mpm (889.015ypm) ... this pigeon has previously scored 45th Open 10th Section B NFC Angers 2008, 252nd Open 20th Section B NFC Saintes 2006, and 19th UK Barcelona International (BBC) three weeks ago! 'Bomber' has a happy habit of pulling a good pigeon out of a distance race and proves to one and all that a big team isn't essential to be a very competitive loft in National and International racing. In recent years this loft has won 8<sup>th</sup>, 9<sup>th</sup>, and 11<sup>th</sup> Open plus 2\*1<sup>st</sup>, 1 \*2<sup>nd</sup>, and 5 \* 3<sup>rd</sup> Section B in the NFC.
  - 07:57:55am ... Fred Emberson & Son in Canterbury has timed a 6yo chequer Hen flying 565+ miles for a velocity of 803.842mpm (879.092ypm) ... this pigeon has previously scored 13th UK Section of the Pau International this year. Fred tells me that wherever she's gone she's scored including 3 times clocked from Bergerac on the day of liberation (incl 25<sup>th</sup> Open) and 31<sup>st</sup> Open East of England Bourges. Fred told me before liberation that he couldn't understand why more fanciers hadn't sent?
  - 08:10:00am ... J Hemmings in Rochford clocking a 4yo blue Cock flying 593+ miles for a velocity of 833.584mpm (911.619ypm). John wins 1<sup>st</sup> LN Section plus a £100 'special' for the best velocity of fanciers marked at Basildon.
  - 08:23:00am ... AJ Hadlow in Whitstable timed a 2yo chequer Hen flying 573+ miles for a velocity of 796.367mpm (870.918ypm). Arthur had saved his two entries specifically for the Narbonne race and timed his second pigeon later in the day ... a terrific performance to get 2 from 2! However fate was to take a cruel twist for Arthur as his recorded delivery clock envelope arrived to me opened and completely empty except for the rubbers he'd taken off the two pigeons. I immediately telephoned Arthur to inform him that there was no documentation to support his two arrivals but, in spite of his first pigeon verification being full

and correct and in time without a clock dial we would be unable to verify the arrival times of his pigeons in accordance with common practice unless the documentation miraculously appeared. I also spoke with John Lane who set and read Arthur's clock and he confirmed that a full envelope was taken across the post office counter. After a few telephone discussions it was Arthur himself who asked for his pigeons to be excluded from the result, understanding that there was really no other option in the absence of a clock dial. Please, everyone, let there be no doubt in your mind that Arthur clocked these two pigeons, and his first pigeon would have taken 5<sup>th</sup> Open 2<sup>nd</sup> Section. I feel desperately sorry for Arthur for enduring such a misfortune, as I know that I would be beside myself if the same thing happened to me. Those two pigeons flew their little hearts out for Arthur and because of the intervention of an inquisitive toe-rag in the postal supply chain they will not get full credit for the fabulous efforts.

- 09:46:43am ... Mark Gilbert in Winkfield has timed a 3yo chequer Cock flying 598+ miles for a velocity of 776.102mpm (848.755yppm). This Cock was this year 104th Open 22nd Section E NFC Tarbes (a very hard race indeed). Mark needs little introduction to National and International racing having won 1<sup>st</sup> NFC Saintes 2003 with "Night Flight" and 1<sup>st</sup> International Dax 2004 with "Southfield Supreme". Mark was behind the Narbonne venture from the outset, kindly donating a YB to our sale, so it's good to see him timing a goodun.
- 09:45:57am ... David Hales in Hockley has timed a 6yo grizzle Cock flying 595+ miles for a velocity of 772.348mpm (844.65yppm). David has had great success in recent years including winning 1<sup>st</sup> BICC Dax International 2004 and 1<sup>st</sup> BICC Perpignan International 2008 and just this week has timed two more gooduns from Perpignan.
- 10:31:42am ... David Hales clocks a second arrival for a velocity of 744.886mpm (814.617yppm).
- 11:18:52am ... Keith Thomas in Bedhampton has timed a 5yo grizzle Hen flying 565+ miles for a velocity of 682.193mpm (746.055yppm). This hen was recently 24th Open CSCFC Tarbes. I know from speaking to Keith many times before the race that he had earmarked Narbonne for his loft from the moment it was announced and true to his word he sent six and had a marvellous race timing four into the clock.
- 11:27:19am ... Crammond & Langstaff in Fontwell clocking a 7yo mealy Cock flying 559+ miles for a velocity of 671.328mpm (734.173yppm). This cock was recently 10th UK Barcelona International (BBC), and last year flew Tarbes twice in consecutive weeks including 40th Open LSECC plus winning 27th UK Section Perpignan International. Clearly a pigeon that stands his racing very well! I know some wise old sages had told Ian that this would be one race too far and/or too

soon for this Cock but they knew this pigeon was in great condition and now have the reward of a great position within an International race.

- 11:56:33am ... 14-year-old Luke Cross in Gosport in his first season's racing and having his first taste of International racing has clocked a 4yo blue pied Hen flying 566+ miles for a velocity of 664.363mpm (726.556yppm). This Hen has flown Tarbes three times before. You know, however much you think you know or have achieved in pigeon racing there's always room for surprises and a heart-warming story. Here we have a young kid showing us all up by 'having-a-go' and getting a fantastic result out of it. Well done, young man!
- 12:10:35pm ... Mr & Mrs Hume in Rochford clocking a 3yo blue pied Hen flying 590+ miles for a velocity of 689.963mpm (754.553yppm).
- 13:33:00pm ... Paul Ayling in Gosport clocking a 3yo blue Hen flying 565+ miles for a velocity of 619.604mpm (677.607yppm). With the holdover on Saturday Paul was one of those inconvenienced with having to go to work but his Wife did a good job of seeing, clocking, and verifying the pigeon for him. Paul won 1<sup>st</sup> BICC UK Section Pau International in 2008.
- 13:41:34pm ... Wearn Bros in Ramsdean clocking a 4yo blue Cock flying 573+ miles for a velocity of 625.192mpm (683.718yppm). This pigeon took good positions from Dax and Tarbes with the NFC as far back as 2005! This is another loft, like Mark Gilbert, with outstanding National NFC credentials having won their Section SIX times and winning 1<sup>st</sup> Open Messac 2009. Jimmy was another who was behind the Narbonne venture from the outset, kindly donating a YB to our sale, so it's good to see him timing a goodun. Jimmy timed four further pigeons on the Monday.
- 13:41:55pm ... Fred Cornwell in Southend clocking a 3yo blue Cock flying 590+ miles for a velocity of 643.496mpm (703.736yppm).
- 14:46:16pm ... Joey Raeburn in Melksham clocking a 2yo chequer Cock flying 617+ miles for a velocity of 644.316mpm (704.632yppm). This is another pigeon that was timed in the recent hard NFC Grand National race from Tarbes.
- 15:06:21pm ... Keith Thomas times another!
- 15:18:07pm ... Fred Cornwell times another!
- 17:40:08pm ... Tony Leggatt in Havant clocking a 6yo chequer Hen known as "Calum's Eye" flying 564+ miles for a velocity of 529.694mpm (579.28yppm). This hen has already flown the Pau International this year, finishing 48th UK Section. She has in previous years taken 10th, 30th and 121st Open BBC Bordeaux, 48th Open NFC Tarbes, 55th Open CSCFC Pau.
- 18:56:02pm ... Keith Thomas times another!
- 19:46:14pm ... Tony Leggatt clocks his second pigeon.
- 20:17:30pm ... John Clements in Stockport clocking a 3yo light chequer Hen flying 745+ miles for a velocity of 641.123mpm (701.141yppm). This is a pigeon

presented to John by Geoff Cooper from '21' lines and she has previously been 17th Section L NFC Saintes 2008. John has been banging the International drum for many years and he is well deserving of this great position, winning 1<sup>st</sup> WE Section and is the furthest flying member in the result and also wins a 'special' of £100 for the best velocity over 700 miles.

- 20:23:37pm ... Paul Delea in Rainham clocking a 2yo black grizzle Cock flying 592+ miles for a velocity of 507.940mpm (555.490ypm). Speaking with Paul an interesting fact came about that his brother won the Narbonne race the last time it was competed in the UK way back in 1979! Paul himself won 1<sup>st</sup> BICC UK Section Barcelona International 2008.

- Tuesday 28th July

- 08:42:14am ... Tom O'Leary in Denmead clocking a 5yo blue Cock called "Parky" flying 568+ miles for a velocity of 416.135mpm (455.091ypm). This pigeon was 2nd in a 'One-Loft' race my Father and I ran at our lofts back in 2004 and was bred by Les Parkinson.
- 09:20:26am ... Mark Gilbert in Winkfield clocking his second arrival, a 3yo chequer Cock that has twice been timed from NFC Tarbes in recent years.
- 11:45:08am ... Russell Bradford in Farndish clocking a 4yo chequer Cock known as "Mr H" flying 652+ miles for a velocity of 440.584mpm (481.828ypm). This pigeon won 1st Section H NFC St Malo as a yearling, 4th Section H NFC Angers in 2008, and 2nd North Section BICC Tarbes in 2008 and now adds 1<sup>st</sup> EM Section Narbonne to its credits.
- 12:57:39am ... Keith Thomas in Bedhampton clocking his fourth arrival, a 6yo dark Cock.

- Wednesday 29th July

- 20:56:04am ... Davenport & Roberts in Chirk timing a 6yo chequer Hen flying 731 miles. This hen has this year been 154th Open 5th Section J NFC Alencon and is a winner of 12\*1st no less in sprint type races.

- Thursday 30th July

- 10:30:00am ... Davenport & Roberts in Chirk timing a 4yo chequer w/f Cock that was 2nd North Section BICC Pau in 2008. Well done to Darren Roberts who spent endless hours at his allotment loft waiting for these pigeons and he is rewarded by picking up a special two-bird prize of £100 for the best average flying more than 725 miles.

Please take a good look through the official published result. You'll notice an additional calculation for every pigeon headed up as "B/By" which represents how much earlier in hh:mm:ss each pigeon needed to have been timed to have equalled the winner's velocity. So we can see, for example, that John Hemmings was beaten by 03:04:16.

I'd like to congratulate EVERYONE who managed to time a bird from Narbonne this year ... and also thank everyone who has supported the race this year:- competitors, well-wishers, marking station I/C's and markers, clocksetters, Diane Bonney and Keith Iddon (B&I Transport) who were absolute stars for us, our four kind cash sponsors, Linda Smith at the RPRA for getting our distances, and not forgetting the ten lofts from the UK and Belgium who supported our squeaker sale earlier in the year without which the race could not have been staged. Without all of this support and encouragement Russell, John and I simply couldn't have got through this experience!

To those already asking about next year's race all I can say is watch this space ... we clearly need to review our strategy and funding in the light of the low entry this year as, financially at least, the race cannot be supported at low entry levels without significant cash injections from sponsors or benefactors.

However this race is judged by the Fancy, John Ayling produced a pigeon that will surely compete in any poll for "Pigeon of 2009"?

No report on an International race should pass without reference to the International result as a whole, in my opinion. Yes, we rightly and report on the UK section of the race but how did we fare in the race as a whole? Here is the top ten from the provisional result:-

NARBONNE INTERNATIONAAL VOORLOPIGE RANGSCHIKKING  
CLASSEMENT PROVISOIRE

OUDE		NARBONNE	26-07-09		LOSTIJD : 7.10	
NR	NAAM	GEMEENTE	AFSTAND	DG	BESTAT	SNELHEID
1	VANDEWALLE DANIEL	KOOLSKAMP	874885	1	18.0741	1330.25
2	KNETSCH J. J.	N-KATWIJK A	1012421	1	19.5107	1330.18
3	DEBUSSCHERE LIONEL	HULSTE	861030	1	18.02	1320.60
4	VANDENBERGHE A-L	RONQUIERES	836133	1	17.45	1316.74
5	VERSTICHEL O+D	NAZARETH	868056	1	18.10	1315.24
6	RONSIJN JO EN STEVEN	APPELTERRE	857248	1	18.02	1314.80
7	BOLLE GEORGES	KORTEMARK	879071	1	18.20	1312.05
8	LEFEBRE YVONNE	ZULTE	864453	1	18.09	1311.76
9	MEIRLAEN ETIENNE	DEURLE	873923	1	18.18	1308.27
10	D'HOKER ALFONS	HAALTERT	866332	1	18.13	1306.68

Congratulations to all those listed! So you can see the winner of the race is doing 1330mpm compared to John Ayling's UK winner doing 993mpm. What does this mean? Well it's all about context isn't it ... you see the UK sent 148 pigeons from a total of 14500 and we are the most Westerly section within the International. Therefore it's not rocket science to understand that with such a small contingent we would need some significant assistance from the wind to compete at the top end of the result. Naturally enough with the West in the wind we weren't able to do this yet it's still remarkable, I think, that we got a pigeon on the day and one that must have crossed the Channel on its own in spite of the weather not forgetting fatigue. To be competitive in the Internationals we need two things:- 1) The wind not to be against us 2) We must get a day pigeon! Now I've talked about the wind already but really it's a complete folly

to think that, in this case, our pigeons got and started flying at 04:32am the following morning what's not certain is how much time elapsed from 04:32am till when our pigeons got up to face the rain on Monday morning! Whilst none of the second-day pigeons were a match for the winner I think the gap between them is exaggerated by the hours-of-darkness and the less than favourable weather on the second day.

In terms of prizes and prize-giving the Narbonne International Open Race will make its presentation to John Ayling and all others at the House of Commons in November! This is a prestigious annual dinner connected with the fundraising for the Animals in War statue in London's Park Lane, and includes a tour of the Palace of Westminster and hosted by Lady Stratford and sponsored by Lyn Brown (MP). More details about this event and the potential attendance for any fancier who competed in the Narbonne race will follow in due course. Rest assured that everyone timing in a pigeon will get a special race diploma.

*Paul O'Leary*  
*Race Secretary*