

Liberation site report by Keith Mott.

I've had eight very enjoyable years as chief convoyer for the London & South East Classic Club and in this article we are going to have another look at some of the liberation sites I have visited. It looks like the National Flying Club has seen the light, pulling out of Pau several seasons ago, and is flying the Grand National from Tarbes, with outstanding success every season. One of my main concerns is that there should be four clear weeks between Tours and Tarbes in the L&SECC, for the natural fanciers, which most of our premier clubs don't seem to bother about. I suppose that why the L&SECC is one of the premier clubs in the U.K., it looks after all its membership and will be putting this right for the 2013 season!

TARBES (CODE 5055).

I made my first trip conveying to the south of France twelve years ago, when Doug Went and I took the L&SECC birds to Pau for the longest old bird race. Doug had a very bad opinion of the site at that time and I must say on my first visit I was shocked how bad this famous liberation site was. I came back and wrote how bad it was at the Camping Municipal and even with back up photographs and video, no one seemed to take any notice or be bothered. I had a good feeling about the Tarbes site, with the excellent results achieved by the National Flying Club out of there in recent seasons and Geoff Allan, the NFC convoyer, had always said he likes the site very much. We, the London & South East Classic Club committee, gave Tarbes a try this season on my recommendation that the Pau site was a very poor liberation site and it proved to be a good move, as it was one of the best sites in France that I've visited. The liberation site is the very big car park of Geant Casino Super Market in Laldbere, Tarbes and it is quiet there, being mostly empty as it is the over flow parking at the rear of the complex. The liberation area is vast, with a few light stanches in it, but they are not too close to the transporters and do not impede the safe release of the pigeons. The site has the supermarket, toilets for the convoyers, a limited water supply and no shower facilities. One of the best sites in France, I think! Tarbes is a lot closer to the Pyrenees Mountains than Pau and with the wonderful clear condition, the snow covered peaks made a brilliant back drop to the liberation site. This was my seventh trip to the South of France with the L&SECC pigeons and I have only seen the Pyrenees Mountains once before, as they are normally clouded out and this was about eleven years ago, on a trip to Pau with Doug Went. I hope we go back to Tarbes next season, it would be very disappointing to see the L&SECC and CSCFC go back to the Camping Municipal at Pau, which I think is nowhere near as good as the Supermarket car park at Tarbes. The Tarbes site is approximately 5 miles further than Pau, with the London fanciers flying about 560 miles.

PAU (CODE 1621).

The 2007 season saw me visit Pau with the L.& S.E.C.C. pigeons for the sixth time and I think it's common knowledge that I don't like the site. The car park site, in my opinion, is far too small and it is sited next to playing fields which have large light stanching, with thick wires strewn between them. On my first visit to Pau, I pointed out how bad the site was and was told that I could liberate on the playing field, which I did in the 2000 season, but this was far from perfect, with birds flying near the stanching and wires. Big liberations, including the National Flying Club liberated on the playing field and not in the car park area. This site must rate as one of the most important liberation sites on the Continent as many National and International races are liberated there. I don't know how they liberate more than a thousand pigeons in comfort, as the site is far too small and has all those obstacles. In every other aspect, the site is first class, with full watering for the birds and facilities for the convoyer, although in recent seasons there has been a few problems with gypsies. About 300 yards down the road there is a massive car park, which serves the local sports stadium and this would be a brilliant new liberation site, in fact it is now used for releasing the International birds at Pau instead of the now deleted railway site. London fanciers fly about 560 miles from Pau.

BORDEAUX (CODE 1844).

This site must rate as one of the best I've visited. It is very spacious and has full facilities for the pigeons and convoyers. This site is the main lorry driver's stopover car park in Bordeaux and has a truckers hotel and petrol station, so it's easy to water the birds and for the convoyers to get a meal and shower. This site is very near to a river and, like Pau, is prone to early morning mist. There were reports that the site was getting overcrowded as it is the main trucker stop, but on the four occasions I have been there, there were only ourselves and the British Barcelona Club on site. We always went to Bordeaux in July, which is usually the start of the holiday season in France and lorries are not allowed on the road at weekends, so that might be the reason why the car park was nearly empty when we were there. When we went to Bordeaux in the 2002 season we were attacked by Spanish gypsies, but nevertheless I think this is one of the best sites that we visited. Bordeaux on the west coast of France is a good 450 miles fly for the fanciers in the south east corner of

England. The L&SECC and CSCFC now use Bergerac for their July race, which I'm told is also a first class liberation site.

ALENCON (CODE 5001).

If my memory serves me correct, I've been to Alencon four times with the L&SECC birds and every time I return I've stated my unfavourable opinion about this liberation site. The site at Alencon is 220 miles from my loft in Surrey and has a good area for liberating the birds, but the car park site has no toilet facilities for the convoyers, and no water to top up the transporter tanks in the case of a holdover. What a good site this would be if it had these much needed facilities! It's a shame we lost Le Ferte Bernard that was a brilliant liberation site! Having stated that, the NFC went to Alencon in the 2008 season and after a successful race, Geoff Allan rang me and told me the care taker on site had opened his house and allowed the convoyers to use his WC and shower. I think it must be because the Queen had her birds on the transporter! I have known the site agent, Andre Gerard, for about 12 years now and he told me he had been the agent for near 40 years, but had to pack up his own pigeons in the late 1990's. Andre is a very nice man and will try and help when ever he can.

In past years because of winter Ferry time tables and the Friday marking, the L&SECC have had to take the Dover / Calais route over the English Channel to get to the Alencon liberation site in time to release on the Saturday morning. This meant a 240 mile drive through France after the Ferry crossing and the pigeons and convoyers were getting no rest, arriving at the site at about 04.00hrs. It seems the Ferry time tables stay the same all the year around these days and our normal crossing from Portsmouth to Caen can get us to the Alencon site before 09.00hrs now. On our run down to Tours we have go very near to Alencon and in 2007 I note that we were on the outskirts of Alencon well before 09.00hrs, and on reporting this to our Committee, they decided to give the Portsmouth / Caen rout a try out in the 2008 season. The convoy of 2,466 birds had a good few hours rest on the dock and we sailed at 00.30hrs, with the convoy having a restful channel crossing, and we docked in Caen at 06.30hrs. We arrived at the Alencon liberation site at 08.45hrs and the birds were watered on arrival. Although I held over, the 2,466 birds were on site before 09.00hrs and if the weather had been good, they could have been watered, rested and liberated a couple of hours later. I think it was a complete success and is the rout we should use in the future for our first Classic race. This is a good pointer for all South of England organizations, that you can have a Friday marking and race from Alencon on the Saturday, with no stress on the birds.

LE FERTE BERNARD (CODE 1810).

This site is off the R.P.R.A. list of liberation site at the moment, I believe, but not for long I hope! I really rate this liberation site and was the London & South East Classic Club committee member who proposed that the Classic went there. Back in the summer of 2000 I was asked to be assistant convoyer to Peter Wilcox for the Alliance of Specialist Club's Millennium Le Ferte Bernard race and was very impressed with the site. Both, Peter and I thought this site was the one of the best that we have visited in France, with a brilliant area for liberating and full facilities for watering the birds and for the convoying crew. There was a water problem on the site the last time we visited, but was soon sorted out by Monsieur Pierre Boutall, who was the site agent. Le Ferte Bernard is more easterly than Alencon and the London lads fly about 230 miles from this race point.

TOURS (CODE 1652).

The London & South East Classic Club came out of Nantes and flew the Yearling Derby from Tours for the first time in the 2000 season. The Nantes site is now also off the R.P.R.A. list and that was a good site. It was a big grassed area, adjoining the Nantes horse racing course and had full facilities for the pigeons and convoyers, but had big problems with the gipsies. The original liberation area at the Tours park complex was brilliant, with full facilities for the convoying crews and watering for the pigeons. The original liberation site at Tours looks like a massive military parade ground, with no obstructions, but when we arrived there the first time, we were turned away. The manager of the site spoke good English and told me that the area normally used for pigeon liberations was being used for a special exhibition and the liberations were to take place at the back of the parks site, between the lakes. I was not happy with the new arrangement as the birds seemed frightened on liberation, having been forced to fly straight out over the vast area of water, having been liberated on the road between the two lakes. The site is in the middle of nowhere and, in the case of a holdover, there is no facilities for watering the birds or for the convoyers. The new arrangement, with the liberations on the road between the lakes, is now permanent. I liked the site at Nantes, but going by recent reports, there was a big gipsy problem there, with them stealing pigeons out of the visiting transporters. Tours is a lot more central in France than Nantes, which is on the west coast and the London fanciers fly 280 miles out of Tours. In the 2000 season we

witnessed a brilliant spectacle, when the Dutch Southern Combine liberated 30,000 birds at Tours whilst we were there.

GUERNSEY (CODE 1611).

Many Federations and Classics race their young birds from Guernsey each season and, in my opinion, this race is a great education for the birds in later life in channel racing. The only draw back with going to Guernsey is it's very expensive on the Ferries and much cheaper to take the birds in to France. I've been to Guernsey thirteen times with the Classic youngsters and it's not the easiest place to race from as mist and rain can cover the island in just a few minutes, with no warning, but on a good day it is second to none for racing young birds across the channel. The liberation site is a big sports field and has full facilities for watering the pigeons and convoyers. On race days the site has a good atmosphere, as the local fanciers come to watch the liberations and many yarns are exchanged. The site agent was my good mate, Albert Harley, and he was always ready to oblige and help in any way he can. Once again, I think this is one of the best sites we went to, as it is spacious and the birds can clear easily. The London lads fly 170 miles out of this Channel Isles racepoint.

FALAISE (CODE 1387).

I stopped off at the Falaise liberation site three times to charge the transporter water tank, while on my convoying travels in France. I think National and Classic racing should be a test for our pigeons and Falaise is a perfect race point for the young bird National races. The site is a one hour drive from Caen and I must say, I think it is first class. It is situated on a grassed area between the castle and the hospital at Falaise, and is very spacious for the liberation, with a specially installed water stand pipe for the pigeons. Being near the hospital, it is nice and quiet at night and is about the same flying distance as Guernsey. This one gets my vote for a good French racepoint for the young birds.

ANGERS (CODE).

I went to Angers once and once was enough! It was in my first season as a convoyer for the L&SECC and we went there for the yearling derby in 1997. In that season Doug Went was the chief convoyer for the L&SECC and I was his assistant. The week before the Angers trip, Doug, broke his arm and couldn't go to France, so the club asked me to be chief convoyer for the 260 miles race, which I was very happy to accept. The Classic President, John Tyerman, came along as my assistant and on our arrival in Angers we were amazed that the liberation site was a supermarket car park. The Super Monoprix supermarket in Angers is very much like one of our big Sainsbury's and has a constant stream of cars coming and going out of the big car park. I have criticised some liberation sites on the Continent, but Angers took the cake! They expect you to liberate with countless cars driving close to the transporter. I managed to liberate early, beating the rush of shoppers and enjoyed a good race. If I had left the liberation for another hour, I would have had to hold over, because the car park was too full with shoppers cars. This site is rubbish!

SENNEN COVE (CODE 4100).

The Classic went to this liberation site in the wonderful county of Cornwall, in 2001, when the foot and mouth problem stopped us racing from France, and we had to hold over until the Tuesday, because of heavy sea mist. From the time we arrived on site, we were fogged out with dense sea mist coming in off the Atlantic. Sennen Cove is three miles along the coast from Lands End, at the southerly most tip of England and is a 250 mile fly to London. The liberation site a massive grassed car park on the cliffs above Sennen Cove and has water for the birds, but the convoyers have to go down into the Cove for what they might need. A wonderful place to go, with rugged coast line and wonderful views. This site has it all, including many pairs of Peregrine Falcons and will produce good racing, with the right weather conditions.

PERTH (CODE 4084).

Perth was another liberation site we used in 2001, with the foot and mouth problem, and it was nice to go north into Scotland, for a change. The liberation site at Perth is a car park next to the wonderful River Tay and I must say the town was a smashing setting, with it's old church steeple and building next to the river. The car park is ideal for releasing the pigeons, although it gets busy with shoppers later in the day, but had no facilities for the convoyer crews. In fact, at Perth if you need to answer the call of nature, it will cost you 30p in the public W.C. down the road, which closes at 6pm. That's not bad, as some of sites in France have nowhere to go! The liberation site is next to a night club and we were bothered most of the night by noisy drunks, with one trying to get in the back of the transporter, in the early hours. Before I went to Perth, I was told that the town was situated in a deep valley and the birds have problems getting out and clear the site, but our convoy formed two

batches and cleared very nicely. The flying distance to London is about 375 miles and enjoyed a good hard race out of Perth.

Catteralls Pigeon Transport.

In my eight year as a convoyer I worked with a Catteralls transporter for four years, with Doug Went and I driving the Classic's own transporter for the first two years and I must say they were the very best. I was very sad that Catteralls stopped their pigeon transport service at the end of the 2005 season. I think this was a major set back for our sport, as they had given pigeon racing in the U.K. a wonderful service for nearly 50 years. The National Flying Club and many other major organisations have enjoyed many years of Catteralls' service, with their pigeons being transported in baskets. Baskets are the best form of transporting racing pigeons to the race points and now with the demise of Chris Catteralls pigeon transporters, we are on the slippery slope, to our pigeons being transported to the Nationals in those terrible metal crates. I don't like to see pigeons in metal containers, but having said that, I think the design of the new N.F.C. transporters are the best I've seen, in the metal crate design. The National have put a lot of thought into their new transporters and I think they have learnt from the mistakes others have made on their metal transporters. Catteralls offered the very best in pigeon transport and will defiantly be greatly missed!

I first wrote this article several years ago and have up dated it for ever ones information. I hope my readers have enjoyed this insight into some of the liberation sites I visited in my capacity as the London & South East Classic Club chief convoyer. It might even be helpful too some! (Please see photos in the website 'Album')

TEXT & PHOTOS BY KEITH MOTT.