Pigeon project off to a flying start

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The Birmingham Pigeon Archive project has been made possible by a £43,500 grant from the Heritage Lottery Fund (HLF).

City-based Project Pigeon will be working with volunteers of all ages to recall the times when, following the birds' role as message carriers in the First World War, competitive pigeon racing began in earnest. It will look at the time when there were pigeon lofts in many residential streets and thousands of the birds were transported by train around the country to be released to race back home. Today there are still hundreds of fanciers in Birmingham keeping thousands of birds between them.

Anne Jenkins, Head of the Heritage Lottery Fund West Midlands, said: "This project will chronicle a major aspect of local working class history and will also span generations by giving young people the chance to learn media skills while interviewing their elders."

The project will also cover such local claims to international fame as the breeding of the uniquely acrobatic Birmingham Roller, a type that originated in 1920 in Bordesley Green after local fancier William Penson noticed one of his birds perform a backflip while in flight.

Today there are hundreds of Birmingham Roller clubs around the world and fiercely fought competitions to pick the birds that perform the most dramatic tumbling.

But with pigeon fancying in decline the project sets out to document this fascinating part of West Midlands' social history. Interviews with 30 fanciers – including generations from the same families - video footage, photographs, documents and memorabilia will be gathered by volunteers of all ages.

Once completed the archive will be deposited at the Birmingham Library Archive and also at Bletchley Park Museum which houses an Animals in War exhibit featuring the work of carrier pigeons during two world wars.

The two-year project will also use the information gathered to create a radio play about pigeon fancying which, it is hoped will be broadcast in the region, if not farther afield.

For Project Pigeon, Director Alexandra Lockett, said: ''Project Pigeon is excited about working with different communities and generations to document and celebrate the rich culture and heritage of pigeon fancying in the West Midlands. This unique and important archive has been made possible through the support of the Heritage Lottery Fund.''

Further information

Interviews or photography requests:
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