


The Pigeons of London.

By HARRY HOW.

“F all the sights in London, give me the pigeons!” So remarked an old cabman whom I discovered in one of the open spaces in the vicinity of the Temple, who, while waiting for his fare, was generously giving a gratuitous meal out of his horse’s nose-bag to a score of pigeons which had a few moments before gathered round him.

It is very probable that there are many more who would heartily shake hands with the cabby and exclaim, “And you’re not a bad judge, my boy!”—but only those who know where to find these particular members of the feathered world. There are pigeons in the great Metropolis, thousands of them, which the public regard as their own—birds they keep and feed, watching their plumage grow finer and smoother. The children play with them, the hard-worked clerk in the City splits up his dinner-hour and gives part of this time to the birds; policemen, beadles, cathedral vergers, and many more have all a kindly thought for the pigeons of London.

I have recently been making a round of the principal places where the pigeons of the public most do congregate: The Temple, St. Paul’s Cathedral, the Guildhall, Custom House, British Museum, and Palace Yard, Westminster. It has been a delightful experience—the tour, for those who care to undertake it, is exceptionally cheap, and the amount of pleasure to be derived from it incalculably great.

My first visit was to the Temple, and here the birds

have as pretty a rendezvous as the most fastidious pigeon could desire. They know the cosiest nooks, the most picturesque corners—they know where their kindest friends are to be found. Hence, if you walk in the direction of King’s Bench Walk, you will always find scores of them gathered outside a certain house at the corner of the passage—No. 6. You cannot mistake the place—great boxes of scarlet geraniums and lobelia are over the door, and half-a-dozen sweet-voiced canaries are outside the portico. Here lives Mr. Horton, the beadle, who, previous to becoming the highly-respected beadle of this part of Lawyers’ Land, was in the fire brigade for twenty-one years. He has fed the birds for nine years. Every pigeon in King’s Bench Walk knows him. They know Tiddles, too. Tiddles? Tiddles is the Temple cat, and although the famous tabby has killed many a too venturesome sparrow, she has never been known to lay a single claw on a blue rock. Tiddles! Why, she will sit on a chair in the sunshine whilst her feathered neighbours play round the legs and perch on the back of the seat. Would

that there were more Tiddles in the world!

Could all the dead and gone King’s Bench Walk pigeons of twenty-five years ago come back to their old haunt again, they would not find one of the most faithful of friends they ever possessed. Mr. Leggat has left the neighbourhood. Mr. Leggat kept a coffee-shop in Tudor Street—a thoroughfare not many yards away. He and his customers fed them for five-and-twenty years. For a quarter of



THE TEMPLE PIGEONS.

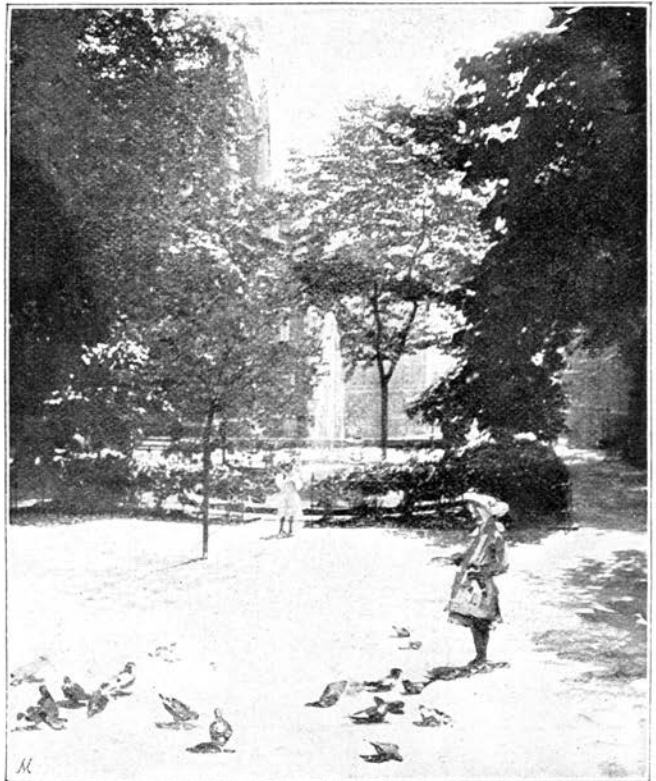


a century the coffee-shop proprietor collected all the scraps which his patrons left over from their early breakfasts, and carried them to "his birds," who, in response to his whistle, would fly to him, fighting for the privilege of perching on his head, arms, and hands. A new generation of pigeons has arisen, however, and Mr. Horton has, so to speak, taken them under his wing.

Fountain Court is not a stone's throw from King's Bench Walk. It is a charming spot, so perfectly illegal. At all times in the day you will find the birds clustered around the edge of the fountain, standing gracefully on the circle of stone-work and admiring themselves in Nature's mirror. The pigeons of Fountain Court are not without their own particular friend. If you just stand with your back to the fountain and look up at the building immediately in front of you, you will observe that the window-sills of the rooms on the top floor provide a resting-place for a series of long,

green boxes filled with flowers. To see the sight you should not be later than nine o'clock in the morning. Suddenly, as though by magic, one of the windows opens. You hear a ting-ting! The court is immediately filled with birds. They seem to come from everywhere—from the houses at the back of Essex Court, the Library, the Old Hall—and they all take wing to the window-sills where the flowers are blooming.

Then a figure appears. He has a plate in his hand evidently filled with food, and for a long time he feeds the birds to their hearts' content. It is a big battle for grub. One cannot help being struck by the antics of a large cock bird—his plumage is darker than the others, so he is easily singled out. He appears to be a terrible bully; doesn't seem as though he wants to eat much himself, but apparently takes a delight in interfering with those who do. A pigeon who is a bully is really a most objectionable bird. At last the pigeons have had their fill; away they go to the fountain below, and a few minutes afterwards, as if from nowhere, a little flock of starlings and sparrows make for the window with the floral boxes. These, too, are fed by



FOUNTAIN COURT—TEMPLE.

the same kindly hand, and when the figure disappears a plate of food is thoughtfully left on the window-sill.

The stairs are steep which lead to the top floor of a certain set of chambers in Devereux Court.

I knock. The pigeons' friend appears. We go to the window together. He rings the bell, and a fine young couple of blue rocks are fed again. The bell is worth noticing. It is a white china sugar-basin with a gold rim, and the clapper is a spoon. This same bell has been rung for the last eleven years by the same ringer, and has never been cracked! The bellringer has much to tell you regarding the pigeons and starlings at Fountain Court.

"There are some two or three hundred pigeons about here," he says, "principally blue rocks of various strains. I fancy that most of them breed in the clock tower of the Law Courts, though quite a number use the Temple. This is the first year I have had flowers in the boxes outside. I generally empty the boxes and turn them round so that they can come and nest in them. I have known them build on the rain-water head of the house on the left, there. Come down, madam, come down!"

This latter remark was addressed to a fine Persian cat, who had just hopped on to a chair and was about to hide herself behind one of the green boxes.

"Madame Louise," he continued; "she hides amongst the flowers and is on the lookout for a bird. She has never caught one yet, I am glad to say. What do I feed my birds with? Oh! bread and soaked toast, and a little hemp-seed in winter. There is a colony of starlings here, too."

We were standing by the window.

"You see that extreme corner of cornice on the left overlooking the fountain? Starlings have built there for years, and lived there all the year round. This is very unusual, as they generally go away in flocks about August."

I pointed meaningly

to the plate of food on the window-sill, and Mr. Birch acquiesced in my explanation.

Mr. Birch told me a capital little bird anecdote — by-the-bye, he has never seen a dead pigeon during the eleven years he has been here. It is great fun to throw a piece of white wadding out of the window, which is immediately pounced upon by a dozen sparrows and torn into as many pieces. It appears that two pairs of sparrows were building in the rain-water head of a house in the court. One day Mr. Birch threw out a piece of wadding, when a cock sparrow quickly flew down, seized it, and carried it to its nest. The wool was so big that the sparrow could not get it into the nest. This evidently annoyed the wife, and presumably she told him so. Some starlings had been on the watch, and, taking advantage of this domestic quarrel, popped across and stole the wool! They rammed it in a wedge where the sparrows could not get it! There it remained for weeks, much to the joy of the jealous starlings and much to the grief of the sorrowful sparrows. This true little anecdote tends to show that the starlings and sparrows at the Temple are not the best of friends.

It is generally admitted by students of the public pigeons that the tamest are to be found at the Guildhall, whilst the wildest are located at the Custom House Quay. In the courtyard of the former place as many as one hundred and thirty-eight have been counted, and very few of them will refuse to gather at



MR. GEORGE H. BIRCH, P.S.A., FEEDING THE PIGEONS IN FOUNTAIN COURT.



CITY CLERK FEEDING PIGEONS AT THE GUILDHALL.

your feet—especially should you happen to have a handful of corn—although it may be a first introduction. I have seen many a young City clerk come here between twelve and two o'clock and feed the birds. Their wants, however, are not forgotten in a semi-official way. One of the officials at the Guildhall Police Court gives them numerous "handfuls," and the memory of old Rowe is still treasured as a friend of the birds. Old Rowe—who used to swear the witnesses in the justice-room—had small water-troughs placed in the yard, at his own expense, in order that his flock might drink. It was a kindly act, though the birds could drink to their fill at the fountain by the side of the Church of St. Lawrence, Jewry. The birds build in the old parts of Guildhall and on the outside of many of the City churches. In the breeding season the young pigeons flutter to the ground and are stolen before they obtain strength enough to fly back again. One gratifying fact came to my knowledge whilst watching the Guildhall pigeons. Although all these birds at this and other places are "strays," and practically belong to the people, who for the most part feed them and care for them, yet when some of these birds were maimed by catapult shooting and such-like, the Corporation stepped in, claimed the pigeons, and prosecuted the offenders for cruelly treating their property.

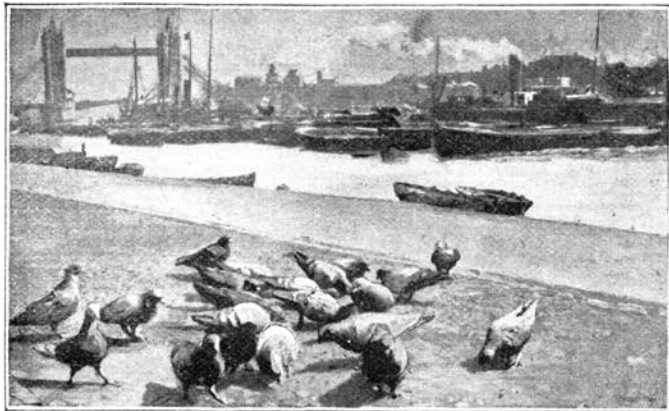
Whilst the pigeons are perfectly domesticated at the Guildhall, a visit to the Custom House will soon convince one that in most cases they are not so there. Of course there are many birds here which trip quite contentedly about the gravel quay by the side of the river, but the constant shocks from the whistles of the steam tugs tend to make them wild. They appear to delight in perching on the barges and the rigging of the vessels; indeed, the three hundred and odd birds to be found here obtain most of their food from the barges which carry corn. No provision is made for them by the Custom

House authorities—though it should be mentioned that Police-constable Edward Winder is kind to them—the public are liberal, the pigeons practical, for they are well aware of the fact that on the Surrey side of the river is a big corn wharf, and to this haven of plenty many of them will migrate during the day, returning to roost under the sheltering ledges of the Custom House at night.

Seafaring folk are generally credited with being able to out-do all comers in the spinning of a yarn; and it is to be hoped that a jolly-looking lighterman was telling the truth when he assured me, without moving a muscle, that he had frequently



DRINKING AT THE FOUNTAIN OF THE CHURCH OF ST. LAWRENCE.



THE CUSTOM HOUSE PIGEONS.

taken a dozen pigeons for a trip up the river whilst they picked up the stray corn from the bottom of his barge, quietly unconscious that they were being carried away from home. He put it down to the steadiness with which he handled the great oars.

In the words of Mr. John T. Taylor, the Assistant Secretary of the British Museum: "Everybody feeds the pigeons at the British Museum—the visitors and readers particularly." The resident servants also find a few spare crumbs from the table, but there is certainly no official feeding. It seems that pigeons have colonized the neighbourhood of the British Museum for a great number of years, possibly longer than at any other public building in the Metropolis. They have been increasing yearly till they now comprise some two hundred and fifty, and, unlike any other feathered colony, number amongst them many pure and thorough-bred wood-pigeons. The presence of wood-pigeons here is regarded as quite an unusual thing.

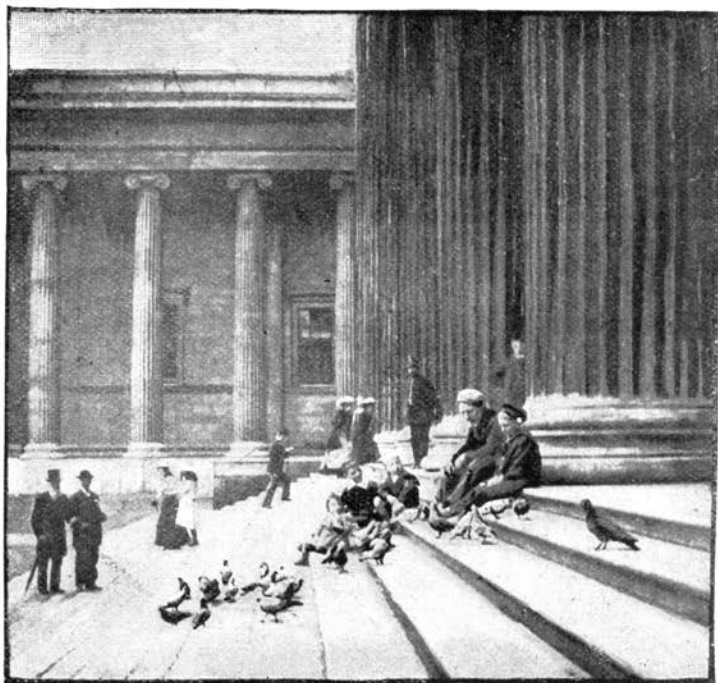
Mr. Taylor said that, although he had been at the Museum for thirty years, yet he never remembered the time when pigeons were not there, whilst an official of forty years'

standing stated the same thing. Furthermore, it was stated by a man, who as a boy knew the Museum before the collections were housed in the present building, that very few, if any, pigeons frequented Montagu House, but that pigeons established themselves at the Museum very soon indeed after the erection of the present building—that is to say, shortly after 1844-5. It may interest pigeon-fanciers to know that the birds at the British Museum this year are

considered somewhat rougher than those of previous years.

The favourite haunt of the pigeons at Bloomsbury is apparently the steps of the main entrance, and many a youngster is to be found there at all hours of the day provided with anything and everything in the way of food, from a Bath bun to a brandy-ball.

The great spot, however, to find the children is in the gardens which surround St. Paul's Cathedral. If you can find a seat—for they are generally fully occupied at mid-day—sit for an hour and watch the pigeons near the



THE BRITISH MUSEUM PIGEONS.



ST. PAUL'S PIGEONS.

fountain, or perched on the ledges of the sacred edifice, or clustered together in batches of fifty on the grass. Persuade one of their many friends to whistle, and you will see a hundred form themselves into a little cloud of wing and feather and fly down. They are the children's playthings: little mites of six and seven seat themselves on the asphalt pavement whilst the birds feed from their hands. As an instance of how great is the love of many of these children for their feathered friends, the story is told of a little girl, who had daily given them food, being very ill in



ST. PAUL'S PIGEONS—ON THE SITE OF ST. PAUL'S CROSS.



ST. PAUL'S—BEFORE THE NORTH DOOR.

the hospital. She was constantly turning to the nurse and asking:—
“When shall I be able to see the pigeons, nurse?”

She lay in her cot for some weeks, and when her mother took her home again, nothing would satisfy the child until they had taken her to the gardens. She screamed with delight—for when

she held out her hand with a biscuit, the pigeons came flocking round, and she cried out:—

“They know me again, mammy; they know me again!”

The pigeons of St. Paul's are altogether unlike any others. They number some four or five hundred. There are two or three distinct companies. There is a colony in the north-east

garden and a second at the west front. The "west-enders" never associate with the "north-easters," but keep themselves quite distinct and apart. Then Mr. Green, the Dean's verger—I believe Mr. Green has seen no fewer than four Deans out—has quite a little lot of his own, which he feeds on the south side of the Cathedral at about four o'clock every afternoon. When I was visiting the pigeons here,



ST. PAUL'S — "THE PUBLIC ARE REQUESTED NOT TO FEED THE PIGEONS ON THE GRASS," BUT THE PUBLIC DO.

not found wanting with a handful during the winter months, when few of the public are here; and the policemen join him in the task.

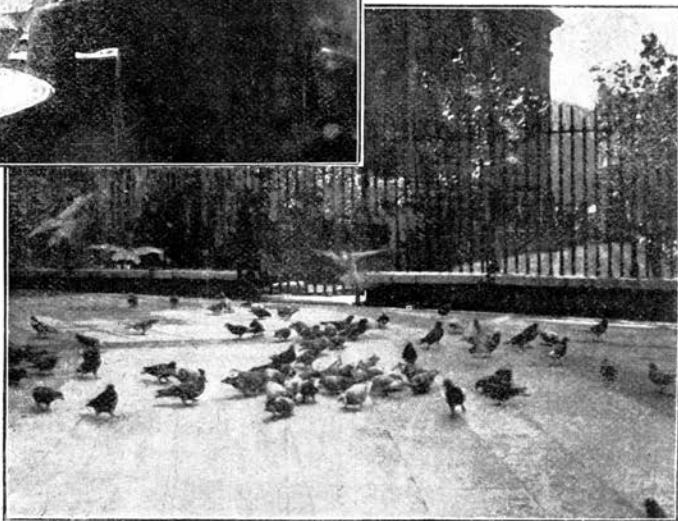
Perhaps, however, the best friend from a feeding point of view which the pigeons have is Mr. Pounceford, the housekeeper at the offices of the Religious Tract Society.



MR. POUNCEFORD.

Mr. Green was away on his holiday. But he had not forgotten his birds. He had commissioned Mr. Brown, another verger, to look after their wants whilst he was away.

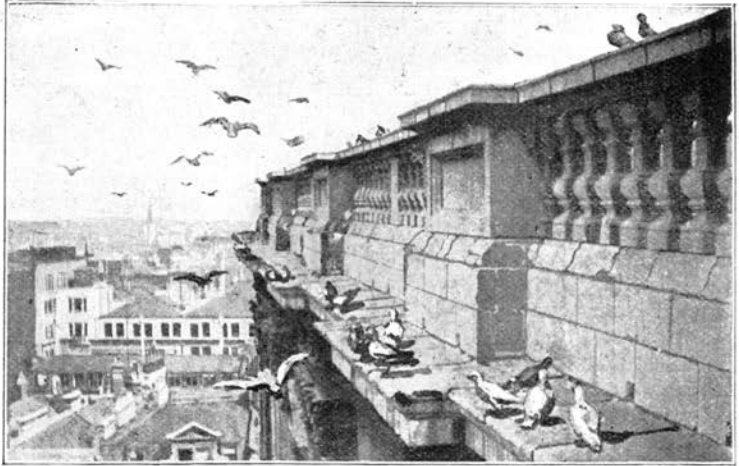
The gardener here, although he is rather inclined not to say anything in favour of them, for they do much to spoil his admirable floral work, is nevertheless



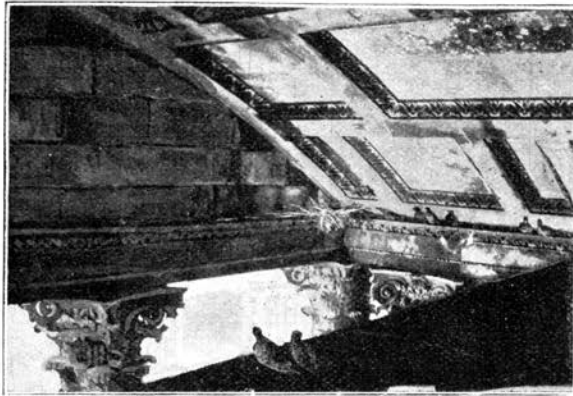
ST. PAUL'S—COURTYARD OF NORTH GATEWAY.

His room, which is high up on the fourth or fifth floor, overlooks the courtyard of the north gateway, and he has but to whistle and wave his hand, when every feathered resident of this corner of the Cathedral flies down and partakes of the liberal fare strewn on the stones below.

As at other buildings, the pigeons rest on the great



ST. PAUL'S—ON THE CORNICE, NORTH-EAST SIDE.



ST. PAUL'S—WEST PORCH, WHERE THE PIGEONS BREED.

cornices, where they have ample room to take their forty winks—if they indulge in them—whilst a very popular breeding place is inside the west porch, a picture of which is shown here. At the time this photo was taken a well-made nest was in the corner, containing a couple of young birds.

One of the pleasantest hours I passed with the pigeons and their friends was at Palace Yard, Westminster. No wonder the birds come to this spot—everybody takes an interest in them. The sparrows have an inkling of the kindly treatment to be found here, and join in the banquet which is set forth on the stones of Palace Yard. And who are the pigeons' friends? Every cabman that drives into the yard—always a handful out of the bag, and

the horse never misses it; the attendant at the very spick and span cabman's shelter, who distributes the oddments left over, particularly the potatoes, of which the pigeons are particularly fond; the policemen—A301 has only to whistle, and down they come; Chief Inspector Horsley, who has kept a kindly eye on them for the last ten years; Mr. Samuel Smith, M.P.; Lord Henry Bruce, who used to send down a sack of maize for winter use every year; and Sir Reginald Palgrave, the Clerk of the House of Commons. Sir

Thomas Erskine May would send oats, too. The birds principally breed and build at the Abbey and the Victoria Tower, though a few are to be found behind the statues of the kings and queens alongside the residential



THE PIGEONS OF PALACE YARD.

portion of the yard. I had just learnt from A301 that a couple of jackdaws had ere now stolen the pigeons' eggs—he had seen the jackdaws perched on the very summit of the Clock Tower—and peeped in at the Inner Court, where Sir Reginald Palgrave has placed a drinking-trough for the birds, thirty of which he regularly feeds every day at one o'clock, when in crossing the yard I met Sir Reginald, and we were joined by Chief Inspector Horsley.

There was no misinterpreting Sir Reginald's happy expression at the mention of the word "pigeons." As the birds fluttered about the yard, giving unmistakable tokens of a knowledge of who was close at hand, we talked together. Sir Reginald remembers when first they came. It must be a score of years ago, for that is the length of time he has fed them. Sometimes they walk into his bedroom, and he mentions as a curious fact that, notwithstanding the clear-sightedness with which pigeons are generally credited, on foggy days, should he come out and whistle, they won't come down, though at other times they follow him about most assiduously. Twenty-five years ago he remembers



PALACE YARD—FEEDING THE PIGEONS.

swallows building here, whilst last year a couple of starlings settled in the vicinity of Palace Yard, but they went away in May.

The inspector talks most enthusiastically. He has known a pigeon remain at this spot for five years, and he, too, remembers a swallow here as recently as ten or eleven years ago. The bird made a nest in one of the square places leading up to the Committees' corridor. He has a very generous word to say for

the cabbies. He seems to know every bird, for he points them out one after the other, and tells me the length of time they have been at Westminster. Amongst the crowd are three or four without any tails—possibly from shooting-matches. Yes, the pigeons know where to find their firmest friends—to many of them Palace Yard is a haven of refuge. If you doubt it, seek out from the congregation a poor

CHIEF INSPECTOR
HORSLEY.

little bird with only one leg and no foot to that. It may often be seen in the middle of the yard picking up the corn in perfect contentment, for it is very well aware that the cabmen know it is there and always drive with greater care when they approach the unfortunate little fellow.



PALACE YARD—THE POLICE AND THE PIGEONS.