

A YEAR IN THE LIFE ...

the journal of a slingshot rookie

My interest in slingshots is understated, perhaps to some even mundane, but it has impacted upon my imagination as much as the next man. Or woman. The evolution of my foray into this delightfully arcane world of forks, bands and projectiles - in which, no surprise, www.simple-shot.com plays a major role - represents the culmination of a 'slow burn' enthusiasm involving in a potent combination of a truly lovely friend who left us before his time, a nasty little virus and a goodly helping of serendipity. This is my tale ...

Back in the 1950s I was born and raised in a heavily industrialised area in the West Midlands of England. It's all gone now, and the foreboding scarred moonscape of coal outcrops, limestone caverns and fireclay pits that created the workshop of the world, whilst ironically contributing towards the destruction of that world, are long gone. Today those same few square miles have been landscaped, rebuilt and repurposed such that little other than its legacy remains.

They bred 'em tough in those days; working hard and playing equally hard. Flick knives, knuckle dusters, coshes and other 'safeguards' were common currency so it was perhaps no surprise that slingshots in the hands of youngsters were suggestive of delinquency. Certainly the concept of slingshots (or catapults, as they are generally known in the UK) for use in sporting or leisure pursuits was a hard one to spot.

This is a perception that is deeply ingrained and even now, as a businessman in his late 60s taking up with slingshots, I had to quell my wife's vague unease that I may be popping at anything other than paper targets and tin cans. To be fair she didn't take much persuading and is very supportive (indeed it was she who suggested I write this) but I can imagine there are those who are not so readily convinced. Perhaps it's a generational thing and I suspect there could be a PhD out there for someone seeking the definitive answer. But let me not digress ...

So, back to my childhood and a combination of strict schooling plus strong parenting that closed off many avenues for youthful rebellion. Hence no slingshots for me. But on the positive side I emerged from my formative years minus a gang culture, criminal convictions or too tainted a reputation. Holding tight on to my modest clutch of academic qualifications; time to enter the real world.

Thus it was that in the 1980s I moved home to a small town called Stourbridge where my new neighbour was the delightful Paul Malpass. Several years older than me but possessing an infectious *persona* that transcended the definition of 'juvenile' he was one of life's nice guys who lived that same life to the full with not a care for the ageing process or any of the tiresome constraints that come with simply 'growing up'. I suspect he inherited these traits from his eccentric father who, well into his 9th decade, still carted his wife around in a battered old sidecar bolted onto the side of an ancient Triumph motorcycle.

Paul Malpass is a name that will ring on no-one's lips other than those who knew him but his effect on me was quite profound. Long after our traditional heavy industries had succumbed, one that did survive was high-quality hand-made Stourbridge Glass. You good folk across the pond still can't get enough of the stuff.

Many Stateside homes have prized collections and the Corning Museum in NY, NY houses vast amounts, much from Stourbridge. Paul was one of those hugely talented artisans who expertly engraved intricate patterns onto a blank. With a skill like this it is hardly surprising that he could turn his hand to other forms of expression, which included slingshots. To cut to the chase, he presented me with one, fashioned in wood with a handle that I later bound in string. Nothing special, I never fired it in anger but it's provenance soared when shortly afterwards, and years before his allotted time, Paul tragically died. To this day I keep that slingshot as a *memento* and feel nostalgic every time I take it out of the drawer.

Fast forward to early 2021 and the height of the worldwide Coronavirus pandemic that left us locked down within our own homes. I now live in a rural location on the England - Wales border and as a writer and broadcaster all I need is a healthy broadband to carry on almost as normal. All the same, by around February I was feeling a bit stir crazy, so when a junk email unexpectedly popped into my inbox advertising cheap Chinese slingshots I thought 'why not?'

I sent off my 10 quid (about 14 bucks US) expecting not much but was pleasantly surprised by what arrived at my door just a few days later. Metal frame, wooden handle, spare bands; hardly World Championship stuff but more than sufficient to kindle the embers of a flame that, unbeknown to me, had been gently smouldering for some considerable time. The computer duly switched to 'sleep' I stepped out back on a mission, lined up a few tin cans 10 paces away and let rip. I missed every single one. But I was hooked.

Over the next few months I studied hard, read much, practised long and made my own 'naturals'. When I felt I was competent enough to justify the outlay I looked to up my game. I searched high and low making notes, reading reviews, sampling different styles and types until I came across an outfit called – you've guessed it – SimpleShot. I somehow knew this was the right way to go so started off straightaway with a Hammer Master Collection. Fabulous! I have since acquired a couple of Limited Editions (ocularis and flip-clip - superb pieces of kit), a Pickle Fork, a Scout LT, a Sparrow (my wife's nickname, so I just had to have it), a Bean Flip and a selection of miscellaneous spares, upgrades and goodies. With more to follow; I doubt I will look anywhere else.

By August 2021 my expertise had developed to the point I felt competent to relate my progress on my blog. It's all there at www.grahamfisher.co.uk (entry dated 24.8.21 *What did you do during lockdown?*) but the one paragraph says it all: 'Plus there is the seriously-smug-self-satisfaction factor. Just six months ago I couldn't hit a cow's backside with a banjo; not only can I now hit aforementioned bovine buttocks with said instrument I can hit aforementioned food-item container (*a bean can - author*) at least 6 times out of 10 at the competition distance of 10 metres. Now that's smug with a capital S. And I am getting better; smug-factor exponential'.

So there you have it. Hardly a tale to rock the world but one that is immensely significant to me.

It is highly unlikely that anyone reading this will ever encounter another word about my late friend Paul Malpass. But that is hardly the point. From beyond the grave and decades after his demise this beautiful man has been singlehandedly instrumental in latterly fuelling my addiction for the wonderful world of slingshots.

It also just goes to show that not only can you teach an old dog new tricks, the dog can in return derive a lot of pleasure from performing them. Now *there's* a lesson for us all.

With sincere best wishes ...

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