



# HISTORIC HAPPENINGS AT HIMLEY

Chris Aston looks back at the World Crossbow Archery Championships held at Himley Hall in 1984

**T**he UK has just had the wettest July on record – which was bad luck for outdoor event organisers. I had better luck with the weather 25 years ago, when I organised the second World Crossbow Archery Championships at Himley Hall. The West Midlands venue was blessed with warm sunshine for the week-long event. As well as the fine weather we could not have had a more attractive venue for the occasion.

Himley Hall in Dudley began life in the 18th century, when a medieval manor house on the site belonging to the Earl of Dudley was demolished to make way for a great Palladian mansion. The World Championships were set in the beautiful

**Above:** Himley Hall, West Midlands, was the venue for the World Crossbow Archery Championships in July 1984

**Close competition at Himley:** The two leading Finnish archers (nearest camera) were tied on 1718 points after two days of shooting. Veikko Poyry (second from right) was declared World Champion on count-back



The Barnett 'Spirit' field crossbow, designed by Chris Aston, was the first volume-produced field crossbow. It is still in use around the world in 2009



parkland surrounding the Hall, the grounds of which were the work of Lancelot 'Capability' Brown, the 18th-century landscape architect known as England's greatest gardener.

The Himley World Championships were a historic event for the sport of crossbow archery. It was the first such event to be held in the UK – and the first World Championships to be run to the International Crossbow Shooting Union's newly-adopted field crossbow rule book. Archers from 10 countries – including Australia, New Zealand, Japan, Korea and America – took part in the event, which was a celebration of the crossbow as well as a sporting event.

The Himley World Championships started with a jolt on 19 July, when the UK's biggest recorded earth tremor struck the Llyn Peninsula in north-west Wales. The quake, at 8am in the morning, measured 5.4 on the Richter scale, and the effects were felt throughout Wales and most of England including at Himley Hall. So if some of the archers felt that their Champs



Finland's World Champion Veikko Poyry signs his score sheet at Himley Hall. Dozens of volunteers from local rifle shooting and archery clubs acted as scorers for the event

had got off to a shaky start there was a good reason for it!

Himley Hall saw the competition debut of the Barnett Spirit crossbow. Barnett produced 10 pre-production samples which were used with great success by my son Nick Aston to win the Junior World Championships, and by Germany's Sieglinde Wagner, who was silver medallist in the women's event. Three out of five members of the bronze medal-winning GB Men's team were also shooting Barnett Spirits. The Spirit design went into production in 1985 and became the first volume-produced crossbow for the target archery market.

In 1985, the company's success in the international archery equipment market was rewarded when Barnett International UK received the nation's highest honour to be bestowed on the manufacturing segment, the coveted Queen's Award for Export Achievement. Black Country businessman Bernard Barnett used a car spring to make his first crossbow – and it shot him to



The West Midlands Police Pipe Band played at the Himley World Championships' closing ceremony



## There were displays of medieval and Tudor court dances, madrigal singing, morris dancing and croquet

success. By mid-1980 the Barnett factory in Wolverhampton was producing 50,000 bows a year, 85% of which went for export. Not bad for a business that began in a garden shed measuring 8ft by 10ft, and which had grown to occupy 90,000 sq ft of modern factory space by 1985.

The Himley World Championships were a celebration of the crossbow and English local history. As well as the competitions there was an exhibition of historic crossbows on loan from the Manchester Museums' Simon Archery Foundation, displays of medieval and Tudor court dances, madrigal singing, morris dancing and croquet on the lawns of the main house. Local brewers Simpkins Ales had even produced a celebratory beer – named 'Bolt Ale' – for the event. Needless to say it all went down very well (especially the beer). The Championships' awards ceremony was attended by the mayors of Wolverhampton and Dudley and the directors of sponsors Barnett International. A marching display by the West Midlands Police Pipe Band brought it to a close.

**Above: The GB Team were placed third at the Himley World Championships. Chris Aston, Don Hancox and Ken Dendle are pictured on the podium alongside the victorious Finnish team. The US team took the silver medal**

**Right: This publicity photo, taken in 1985, shows Bernard Barnett (right) and his MD Tony Collins (left) with the actor Lewis Collins, who is best known for his tough-guy role as Bodie in the TV series *The Professionals***



It was only possible to organise the World Championships at Himley thanks to sponsorship from Barnett International Limited and the strong support of the local authorities of Wolverhampton and Dudley. And to run the competitions, volunteers from local archery and rifle shooting clubs joined forces to assist the members of the host club to conduct a truly world-class event.

The World Championship was filmed and a 20-minute video programme was produced, narrated by actor and archery historian Robert Hardy, who wrote about

the origins of the crossbow in his acclaimed book *Longbow*. Robert spoke with great enthusiasm about the evolution of crossbow shooting to a modern-day target sport.

In the 25 years since the event at Himley Hall, IAU World Championships have visited more than fifteen countries across four continents. The European Championships in the Czech Republic in August this year will be the IAU's 31st major Crossbow Archery Championships since these events began. But Himley Hall in 1984 is still remembered as a high-point in the development of the sport.