

Shirt Race starter pistol confiscated by police

By Tom Jennings »

A HISTORIC race in Bampton will go off with less of a bang this year after police confiscated the starting pistol.

The Original Great Shirt Race is run between the village's pubs and is believed to date back centuries.

Traditionally, it was always started by firing a 12-bore shotgun into the air, but police stopped that practice in 2000.

The shotgun was replaced with a starting pistol but now Government legislation means this year's event will start with an air horn.

The pistol was confiscated from race starter John Buckingham over concerns it could be converted into a lethal weapon.

Mr Buckingham, 49, of Weald Street, said: "It's taking away from the race. It's always been started with a gun. And I think it's going to be bad because people aren't going to be able to hear it."

Master of ceremonies Don Rouse said: "It's health and safety gone mad. When I was told we couldn't use the starting pistol any more I couldn't believe it. We are village people, we aren't criminals.

"It wasn't worth going down the route of getting another starting pistol. The law is forever changing.

"These events are getting harder and harder to organise, with health and safety."

Police spokesman Adam Fisher said the pistol, an Olympic .380 BBM, was classified as a prohibited weapon because forensic tests showed it was "readily convertible" for criminal use.

He said the same model had been converted into a lethal weapon and used in a series of shootings, primarily in London.

In March 2010, a 17-year-old from Islington was convicted of the attempted murders of two people using a converted Olympic pistol.

Mr Fisher said: "It's illegal for anyone to be in possession of one of these weapons without an appropriate licence.

"Following the reclassification, a programme of activity aimed to remove the Olympic .380 from circulation in the UK and an amnesty began in April last year.

"Mr Buckingham surrendered his gun in accordance with this amnesty and it was sent for destruction. " The Original Great Shirt Race will take place this Saturday from 7pm. The race, which was revived in 1953, involves teams of two people racing around the village, one pushing the other in a 'chariot'.

The pair have to visit all the village's pubs and drink half a pint of ale at each.