4. How Guinness Created the Book of World Records

The Guinness Book of Records did not begin as a grand publishing plan. It began with an argument, a missed bird and a question that proved surprisingly difficult to answer.

In November 1951, Sir Hugh Beaver, managing director of the Guinness brewery, was attending a shooting party at Slob Hill near the River Slaney in County Wexford, Ireland. After the party failed to shoot some golden plovers, the conversation turned into a dispute over which game bird was the fastest in Europe. The group searched available reference books, but none could settle the matter.

For Beaver, the unanswered question suggested a business opportunity. Britain and Ireland had tens of thousands of pubs, where customers regularly debated sport, nature, history and all kinds of curious facts. A single book containing reliable records could settle those arguments. At the same time, it could act as a promotional item for Guinness. Instead of advertising the beer directly, the brewery could put something entertaining and useful into pubs with its name clearly attached.

The idea became a real project in 1954. Chris Chataway, a British Olympic runner who worked at Guinness's Park Royal Brewery, recommended identical twins Norris and Ross McWhirter. The brothers ran a fact-finding agency in Fleet Street, London, and impressed the Guinness board with their ability to research unusual questions. They were commissioned to compile the new book.

Creating it required much more than collecting entertaining claims. The McWhirters contacted experts across a remarkable range of fields, including scientists, doctors, zoologists and sports authorities. They compared evidence, questioned doubtful claims and tried to record information accurately. According to Guinness World Records, they completed the writing in thirteen and a half weeks of roughly 90 hours each.

The project also had to balance authority with entertainment. A dry list of statistics would not necessarily attract pub customers, but dramatic claims without evidence would fail to settle arguments. The twins therefore organised the material so readers could move quickly between subjects while still seeing figures they could compare.

The first Guinness Book of Records appeared in 1955. It had 198 pages and twelve broad sections covering topics such as the universe, animals, human achievements, science, structures, machines, disasters and sport. The cover was dark green with gold lettering and the Guinness harp. Some copies had a waterproof, "beer-proof" binding designed for life in a busy bar.

The first print run was 50,000 copies, and many were distributed as marketing gifts. Yet the book did not remain simply a free promotional object. Its mixture of useful information and astonishing extremes attracted ordinary readers, and it became a British bestseller by Christmas. The first edition went through several impressions, and the concept soon expanded internationally.

The book's physical design reinforced its original purpose. It was meant to be handled, discussed and passed around rather than treated as a precious academic volume. That practical approach helped the Guinness name become part of the social experience surrounding the facts.

The success changed the relationship between Guinness and the project. What had begun as a clever way to promote a brewery became an independent cultural phenomenon. Readers were fascinated by questions such as who was tallest, what animal was fastest and which human achievement had gone furthest. The annual updates also gave the book a built-in reason to return: records could be broken, measurements could improve and new categories could appear.

By 1964, sales across editions and languages had passed one million. Ten years later, the Guinness Book of Records was recognised as the biggest-selling copyright book in history. The name later evolved into Guinness World Records, covering far more than a printed annual.

Its origin is a reminder that successful ideas do not always begin with a complicated strategy. Beaver noticed a simple human habit: people love to compare, argue and ask who or what is number one. By turning that habit into a carefully researched book, Guinness transformed a pub conversation into a global institution.