

Prescombe

WILTSHIRE

A small section of one of the country's largest shooting syndicates pit their wits against dazzling partridges.

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Max Conze with
George Lockwood
on Rosemary's.

All right, I'll come clean with you, I have finally become a grumpy old man. When you've been on the planet for 50-odd years and public transport, the NHS, pollution, the Far East, the Middle East and Lord knows what else are an even bigger problem than they were when you were first aware of them then it is no surprise one becomes just a little tetchy. In order to feel calmer and brighter about the future, I like to grab on to the little things that make life feel sunnier.

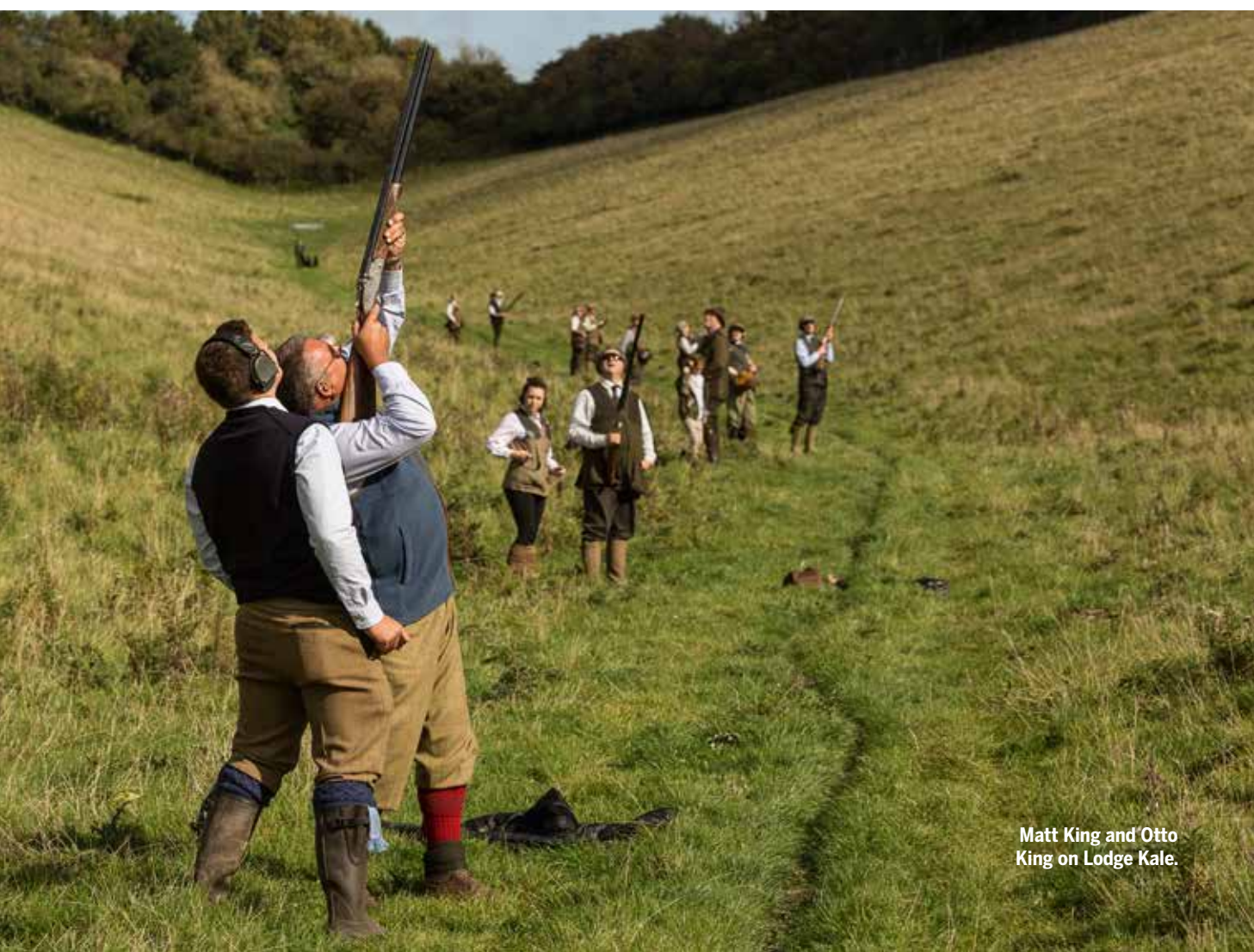
One thing that has undoubtedly changed for the better and helps to make me feel more optimistic: early season partridge shooting. Especially in shirt sleeves, especially while there is still some warmth in the sun. I remember my colleague Giles Catchpole once writing a piece the

“The shoot covers 3,500 acres of the Chalke Valley belonging to four principle landowners.”

gist of which was that a gentleman didn't shoot grouse until September, partridge from October and that November was the earliest possible month for pheasants. As you would expect it was rib-ticklingly funny and had some truth to it, but at least as far as partridge are concerned it is not a view that I would share today. Modern game farmers can now produce excellent partridge that are mature and strong from September 1 and keepers have no difficulties in presenting these birds to appreciative guns. And while I personally love traditional partridge shooting and the variety of shots it offers there is no doubt that the trend to present high birds pushed



Stephen Thomas watches the action unfold from a sedentary position.



Matt King and Otto King on Lodge Kale.



Dr Richard Taylor and Jill Haydon on Lodge Kale.

from hill top cover crops produces superb and demanding shooting.

Nowhere is this better demonstrated than in the Chalke Valley as a visit to Prescombe last September illustrated. Stephen Thomas knows a thing or two about showing good partridges. When he took on Prescombe back in 1998 it was a pheasant shoot but what Steve saw was perfect ground for partridge. He took advice from Nick Boniface, who was then headkeeper at Charget, who confirmed Stephen's vision. And so it has proved, though these days the ground has been made more pheasant friendly and Prescombe is one of the best mixed shoots in the country.

The shoot covers over 3,500 acres of the Chalke Valley belonging to four principle landowners. “Ultimately it's their land,” Stephen told me, “and I am here on sufferance but they are all so keen to make sure the shoot succeeds whether it is because they shoot themselves or because of the income generated.” The steepness of the valleys precludes anything but grazing for sheep, and diversification, as the whole farming community understands, is the name of the game.

The shooting team on this occasion were members of Ian Coley's rovers, the Bugatti Syndicate. I was rather hoping all the guns might turn up in Veyrons, Chirons or one of the more vintage models, a Type 41 Royale perhaps or a Type 57S Atlantic but, alas, it was not to be. The name comes from the pub where the syndicate started, the Bugatti Inn in Winchcombe and you do not have to own one of that famous marque to be part of it. As both the ➤

Ed Darbshire loading
for the instantly
recognisable
Paul Snook.



On the shoot



Max Conze with George Lockwood on Church Bottom.

Veyron and Chiron cost the best part of £2m each that is perhaps just as well. And I don't think they would be particularly good off-road.

The Bugatti Syndicate has been going for a few years now and has something like 150 members. This year Ian Coley has taken about 40 days at shoots all round the country, taking in grouse, partridge and pheasant as well as some days abroad in Spain and Argentina. Roving syndicates have long been part of our world but have traditionally been relatively small with most members familiar with the others, but what we have seen over the last eight to 10 years has been the growth of much larger more commercial syndicates where you could quite easily shoot in a team where you know no one else.

Easier when you know who

These types of syndicates are becoming popular with all sorts of shooting people who perhaps don't have time to organise a

complete team of guns or prefer to shoot at many different venues and meet new, like-minded people. Certainly the group of guns that met at Prescombe's lodge were a diverse bunch. Two brothers who don't shoot many days a year but buy each other the odd day here and there, a pair of guns that shoot quite a lot and quite often together, a CEO of a multi-national and another gun who shoots every week

and likes variety. For them and many others the Bugatti Syndicate and its ilk are the ideal way to organise their shooting, offering as they do lots of dates for that crowded diary and a wide variety of the country's top venues.

The vast majority of teams that visit Prescombe are repeat customers so Stephen and his right-hand man for many years, Nigel Brown, know their abilities and preferences and ►



There was always plenty of work for the gundogs to do.

can tailor the day to fit. Not so with guns drawn from a big syndicate. After the day was done Stephen told me: “The problem for me today was not knowing the guns, how well they would shoot and their likes and dislikes. You have an agreement with a team of guns and have to fulfil that in as uncontrived a way as possible. It is much easier when you know the team and they know you”.

For transport to the first two drives the guns climbed onto a trailer because both Church Bottom and Lodge Kale are in Prescombe Down National Nature Reserve, an SSSI and home to the adonis blue, marsh fritillary and grizzled skipper butterflies and many rare grassland plants. This means access is limited so no string of 4x4s just the one Defender pulling the trailer. This worked out well and gave everyone

a chance to introduce themselves to the guns they hadn’t met before and become reacquainted with those with whom they had previously shot. Both Edward Darbishire and George Lockwood from Ian Coley were on hand and helped to glue the team together. In fact it was quite a crowded trailer, besides the nine guns there were loaders, significant others and one or two progeny. It wasn’t many minutes before it sounded like a group of old friends that had known each other for years.

There are no pegs at Prescombe, Stephen always puts the guns out himself and it certainly has its advantages. Not only can you fine tune the gun line depending on the conditions but the grassland remains pristine both for subsequent guns and any walkers that may use the public footpaths. Prescombe is not

a shoot where the mechanics of the keepers and beating team can be admired, the transition from steep slope to the flat tops is far too abrupt for that. It is not a them-and-us shoot, it is just that the beaters are way up there and the guns are way down there.

The first two drives seemed to go without a hitch with a succession of high, fast partridge up and down the line. Ed Darbishire was loading for Paul Snook who was accompanied by his wife Vicky. Paul was double gunning with a pretty pair of Caesar Guerini 28 bores that he had just taken delivery of after years of shooting 20 bores. Even for a very experienced shooter like Paul switching guns can be fraught and I am sure it helped having Ed’s encouragement. At any rate he started killing a goodly proportion of the birds he took on. There were

no duffers in the line; Colin French was a very elegant shot and his friend Dr Richard Taylor certainly knew where to point his gun.

We trundled back to where the cars had been left and enjoyed a very acceptable elevenses in the warm sunshine before heading off in convoy for the second half of the day. Brabazon and Rosemary’s both rely on what is probably the steepest and narrowest chalk valley I have ever seen and the birds presented were higher and more difficult than on the previous two drives. Interestingly enough for Rosemary’s the breeze was coming from the left of the line and the sun was too so of course the birds favoured the right-hand side. Except they didn’t. While everyone got shooting it was the left hand end that got the lion’s share.

All too soon, it seemed, the shooting was over for the day and it was back to the farm for roast lamb, excellent wine and the best cheese selection I have experienced. A commercial shoot like Prescombe has to be efficient and it certainly seems a very tight ship but it is never going to be impersonal when Stephen is at the helm. Stephen and Nigel have a very relaxed style, the day never seemed rushed and there was no chivvyng of the guns to



Dr Richard Taylor swaps places with Jill Haydon during a thoroughly enjoyable day's sport.

finish their coffee and go.

My own shooting tends to be quite modest and usually with friends so I must admit I was a little dubious about the whole large roving syndicate experience but have to say it appeared to work well. Everyone seemed to have fun and get along and conversation flowed. I am sure there must be occasions when Ed Darbishire or one of his colleagues may have to

use smooth feathers but, of course, that can happen with most teams of guns. For many it must be the perfect way to organise a season’s shooting, simple and stress free. 🦌

For more information about the shooting opportunities available through Ian Coley Sporting, email: edward@iancoley.co.uk

The birds on Church Bottom underlined the overall quality of the sport on offer at Prescombe.



The area guide

How to get there, where to stay and what you’ll eat.



TRAVEL

Prescombe is simple to find and lies about 12 miles south west of Salisbury on the eastern edge of the small village of Ebbesbourne Wake. As usual it is the last three quarters of a mile that is the most difficult so go prepared. By road the shoot is two-and-a-half hours from London, and one-and-three-quarters from Bristol, while Southampton airport is 30 miles away.

STAY

The closest hotel is Howard’s House (howardshousehotel.co.uk) which offers comfort and seclusion in the charming village of Teffont Evias. Also nearby at Fonthill Gifford is the splendid Beckford Arms (beckfordarms.com). A few miles to the south at Farnham is The Museum Inn (museuminn.co.uk), justifiably famous in shooting circles for providing excellent accommodation and superb cuisine.

CATERING

The day began with generously filled bacon baps at the lodge. Elevenses, bullshot, sausages et al, was eaten al fresco and after the last drive the team returned to the lodge for roast lamb, followed by a heavenly selection of cheeses, coffee and chocolates. Stephen is very well known for being something of a wine connoisseur so there is a good cellar and all you oenophiles out there will not be disappointed.