

Stowlangtoft, Suffolk

Traditional partridge shooting is on the menu at this family-run estate where a true community spirit prevails, as **Alex Flint** reports.

Photography: **Bob Atkins**

John Beach picks a sporting bird from a covey on Park Clumps.



It is often noted by those of us lucky enough to take part that few activities can match the pleasure of shooting. Whatever walk of life you come from, there is a place for you on the shooting field. Indeed, one of the greatest pleasures of shooting is in its ability to bring people together in a common cause, and you will not see a clearer example of this than on the Stowlangtoft estate.

It is managed by the Catchpole family, who pride themselves on running an inclusive shoot. This pride is not misplaced, as was clearly demonstrated by the presence of several old hands and a few new faces on the day of my visit in mid October.

The estate is run by John and Roger Catchpole, an ambitious father and son team with a passion for shooting and conservation. Covering around 1,000 acres of Suffolk countryside, all of which is shot over, the Stowlangtoft estate offers driven shooting, duck fighting

and deer stalking. There are 12 driven days offered each season, teams of nine guns taking on some beautifully presented traditional partridges and pheasants in bags of either 150 or 250. An estate syndicate takes seven shoot days each season, and it was on one of these days I visited.

The estate is somewhat blessed by its location, sharing borders with a number of other shoots, including Little Haugh Hall which featured in the September 2010 issue of *Shooting Gazette*. The sharing arrangement organised with Little Haugh Hall's owner, Stephen Partridge-Hicks, even extends to his headkeeper, Robert Frost, taking on responsibilities for Stowlangtoft. Working with Robert are; Michael Middleditch, who manages a flank of beaters on shoot days and maintains the estate year-round; Malcolm Cooper who runs a second flank of beaters; and former gamekeeper Wally Sykes. This name should be a familiar one to those with an interest

“The shoot borders several other estates, and their cooperation even extends to sharing the services of headkeeper Robert Frost.”

A history of sport

THE CATCHPOLE family has owned Stowlangtoft for more than 80 years and each successive generation has borne keen sportsmen intent on enjoying the potential of the estate to its fullest. Shooting has taken place on the estate since the 1800s, when it enjoyed regular visits from the Prince of Wales, later King Edward VII. Indeed, the estate gained some notoriety during this period, featuring in publications as diverse as *Country Life* (pictured here) in October 1899, detailing one of the Prince's visits, and *The New York Times* on September 1, 1901, where it is described as “having some of the best partridge shooting in the United Kingdom” in the ‘Society at Home and Abroad’ section.

The current hall at Stowlangtoft was built for the Maitland Wilson Family in 1859, though there are records of a hall existing on the site since the 1700s. The estate was bought by A. J. Edwards in 1929, and has stayed in his family ever since, up to today's current owners, John and Cath Catchpole. The hall has seen many uses throughout its relatively brief history, being a residence, let to London County

Council and even used as an evacuation centre for mothers and babies from London during the Second World War.

The hall has been used as a nursing home since 1969 and has many pictures of shooting

parties from the turn of the 20th century hanging on its walls. With the management of the hall having recently been taken back in hand, the Catchpoles hope to add to its sporting heritage in the coming years, using the dramatic building to host extra special shoot days. ■



John Catchpole has marshalled the estate's affairs for almost 50 years.



An experienced team of beaters and pickers-up can be relied upon to produce exciting sport.

in shooting: Wally won a silver medal with Jim Sheffield in the skeet pairs and a bronze medal in skeet singles at the Commonwealth Games in Brisbane, Australia, in 1982. He also competed at the Olympic Games in Los Angeles in 1984, where he placed 11th in the mixed skeet, just five points behind gold medallist Matthew Dryke.

A former headkeeper on the Stowlangtoft estate, Wally hosts every shoot day as well as working with Robert, whom he assists with vermin control duties. A record of Wally's exploits hangs on the wall in the shoot

lodge, recounting a year when he won three cars in a year in clay shooting competitions. He shares John and Roger Catchpole's passion for shooting and conservation and makes superb company throughout the day, recounting numerous tales of a lifetime in shooting.

The beaters at Stowlangtoft come from nearby Bury St. Edmunds and Stowmarket, returning each season thanks to a truly welcoming and inclusive atmosphere. It is one thing to be welcomed with genuine smiles and handshakes at the beginning of the day before any work has been done, but

Left: A good feeling suffuses every aspect of the Stowlangtoft shoot.

Estate diversity

AS WITH any country estate in the 21st century, Stowlangtoft is open to a diverse array of businesses and activities. The hall at Stowlangtoft is currently run as a care home and has recently come back into the management of the Catchpole family. There are also a number of properties and holiday lets, extensive farming and even a restaurant.



Three generations of the Catchpole family, each of whom have shaped the development of Stowlangtoft estate.

A firm belief in conservation runs through the shoot and the estate as a whole, driven by Roger Catchpole and his father, John. As well as planting conservation headlands on their fields, over 1,500 trees and hedging plants are planted on the estate every year. A variety of soil types found throughout the estate and a recently-completed 20 million gallon reservoir for irrigation allows all manner of crops to be grown, including wheat, barley and sugar beet and vegetables including potatoes and onions.

Alongside the holiday lets, visitors can enjoy walking or cycling across the estate and, with dedicated stabling and paddocks, can even bring their own horses. At the end of a hard day's riding, guests can visit the Dark Horse Restaurant which is resident in part of the revitalised stable block adjacent to the hall. The shoot provides oven-ready game to the restaurant to serve to diners, and also to be sold through the restaurant's shop, encouraging local residents to eat fresh local produce. ■



Guns at Stowlangtoft can expect large coveys of challenging partridge on every drive.



Headkeeper Robert Frost is kept busy throughout the season, working on a number of local shoots.



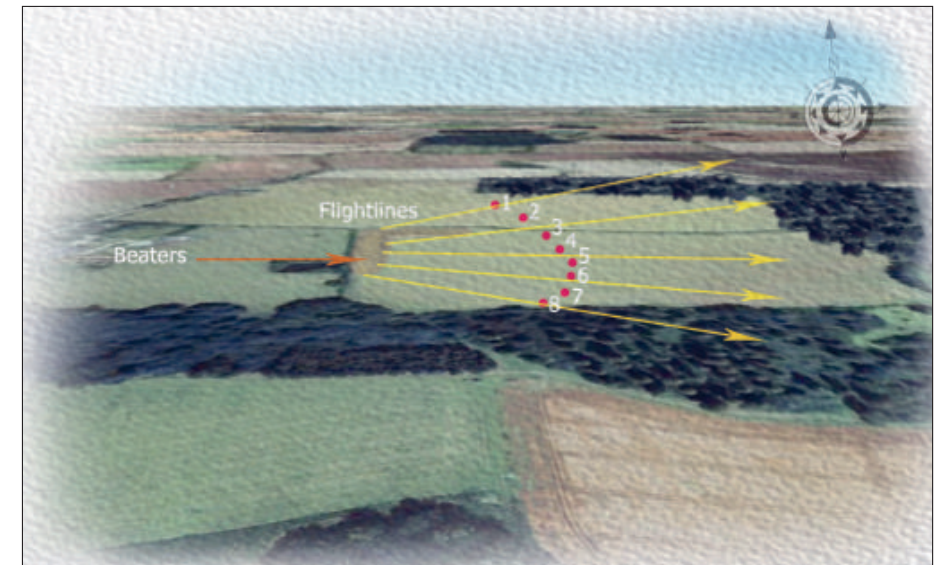
An eager resident is ready for the off.

Top Drive: Simpners

A FIRM favourite amongst all Stowlangtoft regulars with a reputation for providing a lot of challenging birds, Simpners is often used to start the day and sets a high benchmark. Being based in Suffolk the shooting on offer is of the traditional sort, and Simpners is a great introduction for those who are unfamiliar with blistering partridge exploding over hedgerows. It is also, estate partner Roger Catchpole tells me, “a good way of sorting the men from the boys”.

The guns are lined out in a gentle curve in two fields to the east of a meadow behind the Catchpole family farm, which slope gently down to several large patches of woodland behind. A cover crop of maize in an inverted ‘L’ shape runs parallel with the gun line alongside a track dividing the fields. Large square straw bales are laid out to provide a solid boundary and encourage the birds into the air.

With the local water tower looming in the distance, the beaters bring in the meadow and a section of the woodland to the south, at the far left of the line, towards the cover crop.



After a quiet start, the birds fly over the guns in consistently large flurries over the centre of the line, with expert flag work required to keep the birds from breaking south back towards the nearby woodland.

Those birds escaping from the ends of the cover crop ensure guns at either end of the line

see some shooting, but those in the centre of the line will be kept busiest.

Wind is not essential here, but a good stiff breeze will help to keep the birds flying hard and true. The shooting provided here is fast and spectacular, and is as good a start to a shoot day as one could wish for. ■

“We pride ourselves on high standards, but it is really important the shoot retains its relaxed and welcoming atmosphere.”

another to get the same as you leave. It’s to the Catchpole’s credit this is the case.

The estate is centred along a small river, a tributary of the River Blackbourne, either side of which is found traditional pasture and parkland. North and south of the hall at the centre of the estate you find rolling hills, heavier arable land and large blocks of woodland, including a spectacular redwood plantation laid by the hall’s owners in the 1800s. To take full advantage of the natural variety on offer over 20 acres of cover crops are planted, with maize and sorghum favoured to provide a variety in cover height and food source.

There are 22 drives on the estate, many of which can be driven in different ways depending on prevailing weather conditions to allow for flexibility on shoot day

and to produce consistently sporting birds. “We try to focus on quality, above all else,” Roger told me. “We only run a limited number of days each season, but we aim to provide high class sport



Olympic and Commonwealth shooter Wally Sykes makes a great host for a day’s shooting.

for our guests. The Stowlangtoft shoot has a reputation for being accepting and friendly, and we do our best to tailor each day to meet the wishes and skills of any visiting team. A member of my family is always on hand to host each day personally alongside Wally, and though we pride ourselves on high standards it is really important the shoot has a relaxed and welcoming atmosphere.”

The Catchpoles have been very successful in this respect, as is borne out by the members of their syndicate, some of whom travel regularly from the home counties and north Yorkshire to shoot at Stowlangtoft. A better illustration could not be found than in regular gun and long time syndicate member Nigel Marston. A dedicated sportsman, Nigel suffered a stroke which left the right side of his body badly weakened. However, once he had regained mobility he was determined to get back to shooting, and now takes his peg in a Kawasaki ATV. He shoots from the vehicle one-handed with some skill, and Roger drives and shoots with him throughout the day. ➤

The Vittles

THE HEART of the Stowlangtoft estate is in fact not the grand 150-year-old hall, but a small collection of traditional farm buildings over the road from the Catchpole family home. Traditional black weatherboarding covers the buildings, the beaters making themselves at home in an old grain store complete with the expected battered sofas.

The guns, meanwhile, meet in the shoot lodge, a recently renovated barn which is complete with a kitchen, large dining table and a porch where the guns can leave their muddy boots and wet coats.

The day starts with tea and coffee in front of a roaring fire, before the guns head out into the



The shoot lodge is a warm and welcoming venue ideal for deconstructing the day's performance.

field to shoot through the day. Both Roger and John feel it is better to shoot through and eat at the end of the day, as a large meal can have an adverse effect on the guns' ability to shoot. Sitting down to enjoy a meal with friends also brings the

shoot day to a suitably climactic end.

Elevenes are taken in the field, the guns enjoying fresh sausage rolls and a variety of drinks to keep the spirits up and appetites satisfied. After seven drives the

guns retire to the shoot lodge to take in a superb three-course meal cooked by a local catering company called Baker's Best.

On the day of my visit we were treated to chicken soup, shepherd's pie and a platter of cheeses, a hearty and delicious way to end the day.

At the end of the day the guns are invited to take away a brace of birds, either in the feather or oven-ready. By taking away much of the labour involved in properly preparing a bird for the table, the Catchpoles hope to encourage their guests to enjoy more game - and the empty tray outside the shoot lodge seems to prove their efforts are having an effect. ■

There were also two new faces on the day, brothers David and John Beach who had secured two pegs through GunsOnPegs. John was full of praise for Stowlangtoft: "David and I thoroughly enjoyed the hospitality of the Catchpoles. We were made to feel most welcome by everyone, and David was looked after brilliantly all day by Wally. The partridges did not disappoint and flew well all day.

"A bit more breeze may have helped, but the subtle contours and mature woodland around the estate certainly makes this a very effective shoot. Living in the Cotswolds, I was a bit reticent to travel all the way to Suffolk to shoot, but Stowlangtoft did not disappoint."

The shoot's success is down to the Catchpoles' meticulous planning, as Roger explained: "Robert Frost, our headkeeper, meets with my father and I the day before each shoot to walk the estate and pick the drives.

"We then meet again early on the day of the shoot to make any necessary changes to the schedule. But we have to leave enough flexibility to change if necessary. Any changes usually relate to the weather rather than the performance of the guns.

"I have been involved in running the shoot for the past eight years, my father for 45 years. The shoot hasn't changed significantly in this time, however Stowlangtoft has always been a shooting estate and we are always looking at ways to improve it, whether by creating new drives, planting hedges, or improving the estate infrastructure.

"We have not really been affected



The variety in terrain at Stowlangtoft will present a real challenge for dogs.

by the recession, but I believe guns are considering their shooting purchases more carefully. With people choosing to buy shooting only on estates they really enjoy visiting, it is important we keep our unique charm and focus on quality."

Alongside a belief in the inclusive nature of shooting, Roger and his father are passionate about conservation. The estate is involved in Natural England's Entry Level Stewardship scheme and is working with the GWCT to encourage the return of the grey partridge. "We invest heavily in the estate and are trying our best to preserve this beautiful piece of Suffolk for future generations," said Roger.

The Catchpole family are the perfect example of the modern sporting family. They recognise and exploit their unique skills and resources for the benefit of all their visitors and the local community, all the while with an eye on the future of their estate and future generations. Any gun with a gap in the diary for next season will not regret a visit to this superb shoot. 🦌

For more information on the Stowlangtoft estate visit www.stowlangtoftestate.co.uk or tetelephone 01359 230210.