

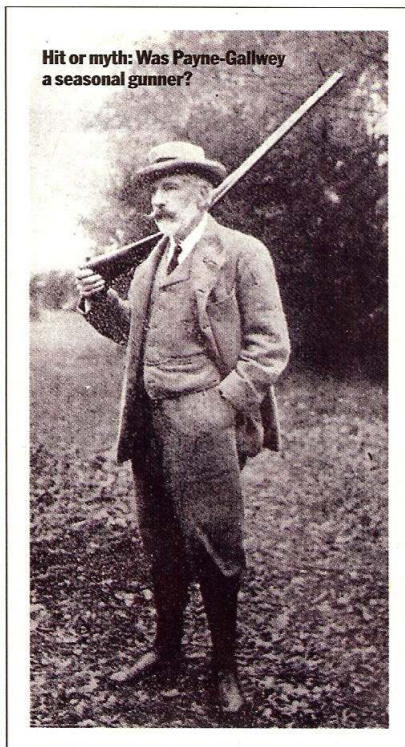
Friend or fraud?

Was Sir Ralph Payne-Gallwey really one of the greatest wildfowlers that ever lived... or was he intensely jealous of other leading wildfowlers of the time and resentful of their ideas? **Nick Horton** investigates

FIRED WITH enthusiasm by the writings of that most prolific author on the sport of wildfowling, Sir Ralph Frankland Payne-Gallwey, two friends of mine decided to try their hand at punt-gunning. Well known to gameshooters and wildfowlers alike, Payne-Gallwey needs little introduction. His literary outpourings on sport with the gun must run to tens of thousands of words, written in a concise and authoritative style that almost commands the reader to do exactly as he instructs.

So it was natural that my two companions, having eventually managed to buy a punt and gun, should turn to Payne-Gallwey's magnum opus, *Letters To Young Shooters*, to discover how to get the best from their newly acquired outfit. As far as they were concerned, they had simply bought an old but well-made punt and a muzzleloading gun at a very reasonable price from the widow of an old Portsmouth Harbour punt-gunner who, frankly, couldn't tell them very much about how to go about using it.

In fact, what they had unwittingly bought was a superb example of a south-coast punt. It was a craft whose design had been honed to perfection in the unforgiving school of the professional punt-gunner, a craft in which many of its unique features served a dual or even triple purpose. An iron band on the foredeck served as an ice breaker and recoil dissipater, while the



Hit or myth: Was Payne-Gallwey a seasonal gunner?

loop in which it ended kept the breeching rope out of the salt water. The muzzle end of the punt-gun rested on an upright fixed to the iron deck band, while the breech end rested in a wheeled elevating crutch. The breeching rope was secured to the gun by an under-barrel loop and fastened to it with a simple knot.

Outriggers meant that the punt could be rowed effortlessly and fast, while pins at their

extremity meant the oars could be released with no fear of them being lost overboard. The sculling crutch fitted to the aft quarter had fixed jaws and was offset 3in-4in from the side.

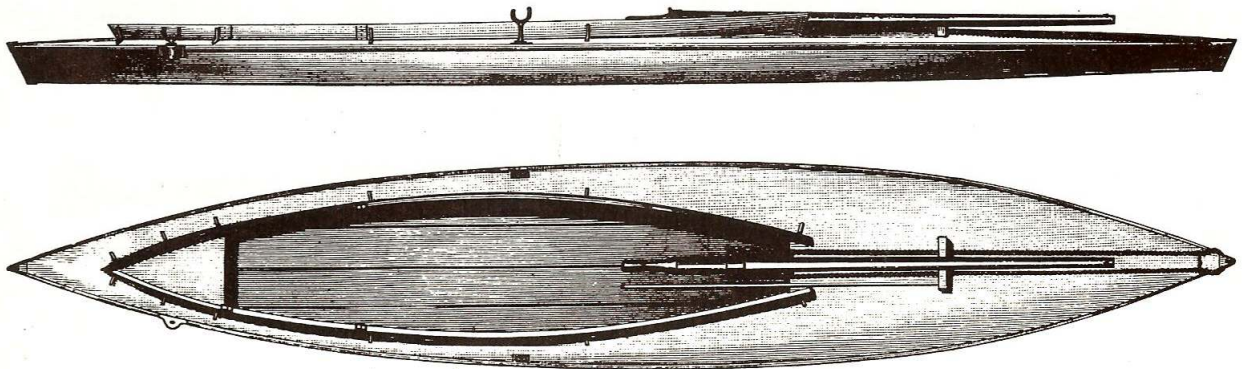
My two friends dug deep into the pages penned by Payne-Gallwey and came to a horrifying conclusion. Since he mentioned very few of the fixtures and fittings found on their new punt – and when he did, it was only to criticise them – they decided they should be removed. Surely, they reasoned, Payne-Gallwey knew everything there was to know about punt-gunning. He wrote so forcefully about it that he could not be wrong.

Frustration afloat

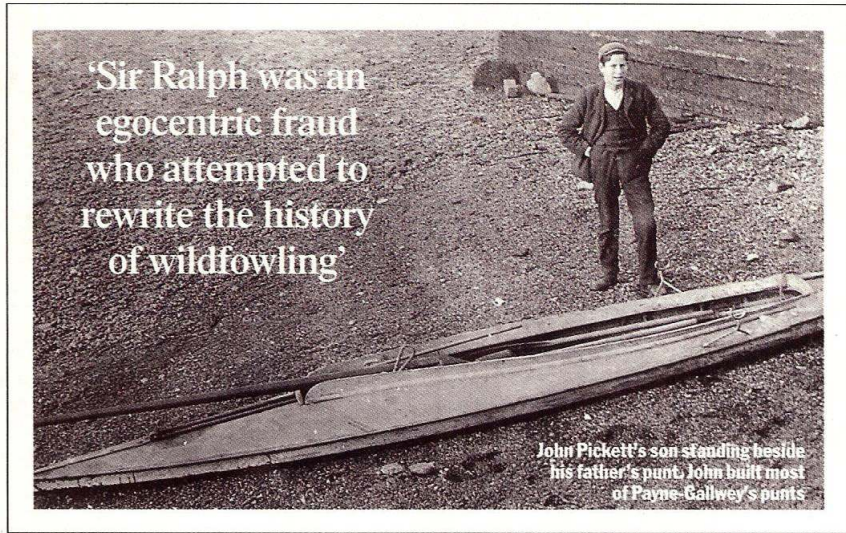
MANY HOURS of hard work went into converting the punt into one that Payne-Gallwey would have been proud of. However, two seasons later and after many hours of frustration afloat, the punt was restored to its original condition. So, what had happened?

Removing the iron deck band had meant the breeching rope had to be passed through a hole in the bow and the rope was now more than twice its original length. The under-barrel loop on the gun had been cut off and replaced with trunnions, which led to all sorts of problems when controlling the recoil. Removing the outriggers destroyed the punt's rowing qualities and made it handle like a heavy, obstinate log. My friends had even replaced the offset sculling crutch with Payne-Gallwey's near flush-fitting loose crutch and then wondered why the punt was more difficult to scull.

Having watched my friends' trials and tribulations from a distance, I began to wonder just how much of an expert Payne-Gallwey really was at the sport that now bears the indelible stamp of his personality. I know Payne-Gallwey is held in high esteem by many fowlers who



The gunning punt according to Sir Ralph Payne-Gallwey. Note the movable front gun rest, long breeching rope attached to trunnions on the gun, narrow rowing 'spurs' instead of outriggers and the flush-fitted loose sculling crutch on the aft starboard quarter



'Sir Ralph was an egocentric fraud who attempted to rewrite the history of wildfowling'

John Pickett's son standing beside his father's punt. John built most of Payne-Gallwey's punts

would regard what I am about to say as little short of sacrilege – but it has to be said. As a punt-gunner, Payne-Gallwey was an egocentric fraud who not only attempted to rewrite the history of wildfowling, but also deliberately tried to supplant tried-and-tested methods with his own inferior ideas.

I know these are strong words, but let me explain further. In 1893 Payne-Gallwey was commissioned to edit the diaries of Colonel Peter Hawker. I suspect Payne-Gallwey was intensely jealous of Hawker, since Hawker was still widely regarded as the leading authority on punt-gunning – a position Payne-Gallwey was anxious to occupy himself. The result of that editing is well known and consisted of altering the original manuscript so as to make Hawker appear to be a boastful hypochondriac, which he most certainly was not. Indeed, Payne-Gallwey seems to have wasted no opportunity to portray Hawker in a poor light.

When he subsequently acquired Hawker's great double-barrelled punt-gun, Payne-Gallwey had an engraved plate fixed to it. This is still there today and you can see it for yourself at the British Association for Shooting and Conservation's headquarters. The plate states that the gun, "has killed at least 20,000 wild-fowl". This outrageous lie simply perpetuates the myth that Hawker was a callous butcher. His lifetime bag, mostly of partridge, may have approached this number, but he shot only some 4,000 fowl – an average of fewer than 90 a year.

Further proof of Payne-Gallwey's lack of technical accuracy is shown on the same engraved plate, where he states that Hawker shot on Southampton Water. Hawker was based at Keyhaven on the Solent, a completely separate waterway some 10 miles from Southampton Water.

So much for Payne-Gallwey's tampering with history – but what about his ability as a punt-gunner? In this context it is important to remember that Payne-Gallwey was a gentleman wildfowler who used a professional puntsman to carry out the arduous and skilful task of propelling the punt, while he had to do no more than pull the trigger lanyard at the appropriate

moment. There is even evidence to suggest that when his puntsman was not available, he simply did not go afloat. Strange to think that a man with so little practical experience of the handling qualities of a punt should still be regarded as an authority on their design...

Different solution

SO WHAT about punt design? You might argue that Payne-Gallwey, hailing as he did latterly from Yorkshire, well removed from the established centres of the sport, simply relied on his own ingenuity to solve a particular problem and came up with a different solution. That would be a fair argument were it not for the fact

that at least three of his puntsmen hailed from the Solent and would have cut their teeth, so to speak, on punts that contained all the features Payne-Gallwey subsequently dismissed. I wonder if his puntsmen ever pointed out potential improvements or whether they simply kept their mouths shut and struggled on.

That argument might be spurious, but for the incontrovertible fact that almost all of Payne-Gallwey's punts were built by one John Pickett of West Quay in Southampton, who was described as a, "zealous and experienced stanchion-gun shooter", by Payne-Gallwey. What sort of punt did Pickett use? Yes, you've guessed it, one fitted with an iron kicking strap on the bow, a short breeching rope, elevating gear, outriggers and an offset sculling crutch.

Of course, it is possible that Payne-Gallwey simply sent Pickett a set of plans to build from and declined to enter into any correspondence about the design features. This would be a rather arrogant way to approach the complex business of punt construction, but one that seems to typify his approach.

Payne-Gallwey visited the south of England, the cradle of punt-gunning, just once. In February 1891 he went punt-gunning with the Hon John Montague on the Beaulieu River. The punt had an iron kicking strap, a short breeching rope attached to a 1½in gun made by Patstone of Southampton, fitted with an under-barrel loop rather than trunnions. The punt also had outriggers and an offset sculling crutch. Perhaps that is why Payne-Gallwey described Montague as, "the finest sculler of a punt I ever saw". I wonder if Payne-Gallwey tried to point out the "deficiencies" in Montague's punt and, if he did, what sort of response he got? ■

Tried-and-tested ideas that were abandoned

Sir Ralph advocated abandoning many of the design ideas developed by the professional punt-gunners of the south-coast harbours, such as the iron kicking strap and fixed forward rest (right), the wheeled elevating rest for the breech end of the punt-gun (bottom right) and the offset sculling crutch. Could a genuine expert really think that these tried-and-tested features should be abandoned? Nick Horton says not

