

STANDING ON one leg with heads reversed and blue bills tucked under their scapulars, six of the wigeon were asleep. The other seven splashed and preened and chased each other in the shallow water at the end of the narrow shingle spit. Late on a steel-grey December afternoon, when leaden sea and sky seemed to merge into one, none of the duck appeared to notice the distant mudge of grey that had detached itself from their low horizon and crept stealthily closer.

Viewed from the double-handed punt it was 700 yards out from the spit, the wigeon looked like horizontally elongated black dots – it required binoculars to give form to their shapes. The gunner and the puntsman conferred quickly as to the best angle of approach for a raking shot “down the line” of the duck, then squeezed themselves flat onto the floor of the punt.

As the puntsman squirmed into a comfortable position, he selected a 6ft setting pole. In water barely 2ft deep he chose a pole that was much longer than necessary, since this was an unfamiliar part of the estuary and he recalled that a deep channel cut across the mud in front of the spit.

With the long gun cocked well in advance, the stalk was going well until the punt was a bare 200 yards from the birds. At this point, to his horror, the puntsman felt the bed of the creek begin to fall away underneath him. With each shove of the setting pole, he was forced to reach further over the side until, finally, he lost the bottom altogether. With the “engine” gone the punt slowly lost its way until, caught by the slight breeze, it drifted aimlessly and broadside on to the wigeon, who departed with much noise to a safer loafing spot.

Sizeable bunch

IN THE January of the following season, the same two punters found themselves spying a sizeable bunch of almost 50 wigeon sporting in the shallows off the end of the shingle spit. Starting the stalk as before, they skilfully shoved the punt along until the puntsmen felt the sea bed slope away beyond setting-stick depth. However, much had happened since last season and, at the point where it had all gone wrong last year, he gently and slowly laid the setting stick on the side decking and slid the pre-positioned sculling oar out through the sculling crutch.

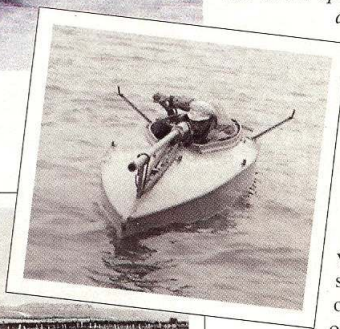
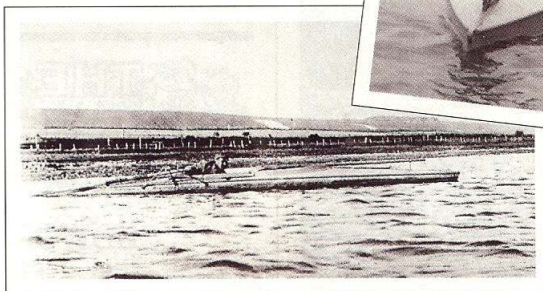
Five months of summer practice had brought him to the point where he was prepared to try his luck at the real thing. Even so, he realised that it would take a very long time before he became really proficient at it.

Sculling does not require a great strength, and his shoulder and wrist muscles had already taken on the “muscle memory” that meant the stroke came almost without conscious effort. Nevertheless, much of the advice he had been

Skills of sculling



► The ability to scull proficiently sets the true puntsman apart from the lubber
▼ Good technique rather than strength is the key to propulsion and manoeuvrability



proficient at the most difficult part of a difficult sport, mastering an art that is practiced by only a few punt-gunners.

In many areas, there is simply no need for a punter to be able to scull, but the soft mud, intersected by deep creeks, found on the south coast have meant that here there are, perhaps, more retired punters adept with the sculling oar than along any other part of Britain's coast. This made finding a tutor relatively easy and, once shown, “the knack” was easy enough to acquire – if not to perfect!

Classic literature

ARMED WITH his new-found skill, a fowler might re-read some of the classic literature on punt-gunning from a new perspective – and very revealing it is too. Probably the only author to attempt a description is Stanley Duncan in *The Complete Wildfowler*, where he explains that “the blade [of the oar] is brought at an angle of about 45° to the water level, this angle at the side from which the last stroke proceeded, and moved in a direction opposite to the apex of the angle in rather a downward course”.

This is perfectly true when you understand the mechanics of sculling, but is totally incomprehensible otherwise. This is doubtless the reason why few people have learnt to scull from a book.

Colonel Peter Hawker is very matter-of-fact about sculling. As he was shooting on the south coast he, or rather his puntsman, resorted to it frequently, and he seems to have taken the view that it was such a basic requirement that it needed no further description. There is even evidence to suggest that he, almost alone among the ranks of “classic” fowling authorities, could actually scull himself.

Conversely, Sir Ralph Payne Gallwey strongly advocated the employment of “a good sculler” – advice that he himself took with a vengeance. From his estate in Yorkshire, he employed a succession of puntmen – not from the nearby Humber or The Wash, but from Lymington and Keyhaven on the Solent, the heart of sculling country.

The punt-gunners' apprenticeship is, of necessity, long and arduous. There is much heartbreak and failure to be endured along the path to proficiency.

However, there are few moments more rewarding to the novice as when, after hours of splashing around with an unco-operative oar that seemingly possesses a will of its own and keeps on jumping out of the sculling crutch, he suddenly feels the blade bite into the water and the punt begins to move slowly and steadily forward as if by magic. From that moment on he knows that, with practice, his ability can only improve. In four or five years, he might actually get to be quite good at it. ■

Sculling a punt on the tideway is not something that is easily mastered. **Nick Horten** explains the satisfaction to be found in this sporting skill

given rattled around in his head. “Don't try and go too fast or the momentum of the punt will overtake the speed of the oar”, “It's like walking down stairs in the dark – don't think about what you're doing or it will all go to pieces”, and, “There is always the tendency for a right-handed sculler to go round in a left-handed circle, so you must learn to balance the stroke”.

None of this advice appears in any book on wildfowling and the puntsman simply tried to apply it as he went. The punt's progress was a trifle erratic, but it was making good headway. At 60 yards the gunner tugged the trigger lanyard, only to have the percussion cap snick on the nipple. The gun had misfired, and the birds didn't wait around while the gunner changed percussion caps. Nonetheless, the puntsman was ecstatic. He was well on the way to becoming