

Never let the bag get in the way of a good story. Through the carefully recorded diaries of Edward Mudge, Nick Horten discovers that punt gunning was never a one-sided massacre. Part two.

I was a small boy when Edward Mudge passed away at the age of 83 in 1964. Sadly I never met him and yet, having read his diaries in detail over the last few months I feel that I almost knew him personally. Adventurous without being rash, modest yet confident in his own ability. Physically he was no superman yet he was resilient enough to keep on fowling at an age when most men would have preferred their pipe and slippers in front of an open fire, rather than the frozen boards of a gunning punt in January. Full of restless energy he was forever looking forward to his next fowling expedition.

Today's dedicated wildfowler might feel with some justification that his sport is under siege and envy the young Edward's freedom with which he shot what, where and when he pleased. But this illusory freedom was bought at a price, whilst none cared about what he shot, neither did anyone care about the environment in which he shot. Mud flat and marsh were regarded as wasteland to be filled in and developed as quickly as possible. Between 1920 and 1965 an incredible 60% of Southampton Water simply vanished under a tidal wave of concrete. Now the wheel has turned full circle, legislation has slowed the rape of our estuarine heritage to a snail's pace but the microscope is firmly focused on punt gunning.

As a sport it is much misunderstood by many fellow shooters. Worse, it is wilfully misunderstood by those opposed to any form of sport with a gun who seem only too happy to wallow in a sort of wildfowling false memory syndrome. It goes something like this: 'Col Peter Hawker', for instance, 'was a tremendously successful punt gunner who wrought havoc amongst the wildfowl of the Solent.' Wrong. Hawkers' average yearly bag of fowl throughout his lifetime was 97 birds. Hardly a massacre, but that's exactly the point.

Opponents of punting should not judge present day practitioners against the few surviving records of an unrepresentative minority - which includes the likes of Sir

## *Diaries of a south coast fowler*



Afternoon tea aboard the Tiger, Edward Mudge's yacht... the venue for refreshment was Taylor's Creek on August 16 1920.



◁ Ralph Payne-Gallwey. Quite why Edward Mudge kept such a detailed diary we will never know. Perhaps he realised early on that, in the twilight of life, re-reading a few paragraphs written years before would trigger a cascade of pleasant memories. Whatever the reason, he wrought better than he knew for he has bequeathed us an important tool in the defence of the sport.

Obligingly, Mudge kept running totals of his bags which makes extracting the information relatively easy. Sixty-five percent of his total lifetime bag consisted of, presently protected waders. Of the remaining duck and geese, two species of which, shelduck and brent, are now protected, his average yearly bag was less than 130 birds.

He lived on-site and rarely went afloat less than 30 times a season, frequently 50, while during his busiest year over 75 days were spent on the marsh. A present day punter would consider himself fortunate to get eight trips under his belt, although Mudge's latter full-time employment as a photographer allowed greater daily flexibility than most. Despite having attained a degree of skill in the complex art of propelling the punt and working the gun which is probably unmatched by any gunner shooting today, his best ever shots were extremely modest and serve to portray the realities of this unique branch of shooting.

On January 28, 1933, he floored 28 brent geese which he subsequently sold for £4. 0. 6d, the equivalent of a week's wages, with a shot that he was never to repeat or even come close to again. His average shot at brent being seven birds. A shot at teal ran a close second and put 25 in the punt, against an average of 11: heaviest shots at wigeon, mallard and pintail were 11, 7 and 3 respectively!

*1926 it was, January, when I landed at Calshot and loaded up my swivel with 14 ounces of the best. However the charge was destined not to remain long in the barrel. The tide went fairly low, but as I turned into Ower creek, the flood was making fast. Feeling pretty certain there were birds about I exercised considerable caution on arriving at the point.*

*Taking the curve of the creek a bit later, I observed a nice lot of about 20 teal within a fair shot on the opposite side. Seeing they were not alarmed I chose to get nearer and saw, immediately on my right, huddled together against the mud quite 45 teal at, roughly, 40 yards.*

*The gun was pointing directly at the other knob and the punt was practically on the mud as I had been hugging the curve pretty tightly. Just then a redshank a few yards away, rose, and set up the most ear piercing yell I have ever heard made, actually fluttering just over the newly awakened fowl. With my setting pole I made strenuous efforts*

*to push the stern off and bring the punt in line, but before this could be done, both lots of birds had risen and made off downwind.*

*Feeling very annoyed I elected this moment to try a flying shot, bagging six. This, of course, was not bad, but just imagine what one could have done at that easy range, supposing the 'shank had been where he ought to have been, comfortably reposing in Hades!*

Whilst the redshank is now protected it still performs its appointed task of spoiling the punt gunner's chances. Some things never change! On the subject of weaponry, Mudge believed in being equipped for every eventuality, for in addition to his 14 ounce punt gun and 12 bore 'cripple stopper', he sometimes carried his long chambered 8 bore made by Patstone of Southampton. Occasionally he put it to good use...

*It was later that year, February 8, '26, when, rising about 3.45, I breakfasted, packed up the gear and left home about 5.39. It was raining lightly but seemed to be clearing to windward but when the quay was reached about 6, the rain had increased and I kept my mac on whilst bailing out the punt. Day was breaking over Spithead as I hurriedly made my way down the creek. The usual curlew rose at the entrance and gave the alarm to all whom it might concern. Crossing the river I had just gained the sedge when I heard some geese calling ahead and after a few minutes could make them out. There were six of them and even in the dim uncertain light they looked fine, huge great birds.*

*At that moment I began to cross the small cut, through which a smart tide was making its way to the Solent. It partly spun me round and unfortunately took my attention from the birds for half a minute or so. Regaining command of the punt I peeped over the coaming to find the bunch fan shaped and within 25 yards! Obviously the swivel was useless so I picked up the 8 bore. It was a thrilling moment, for never before have I been so close to a bunch of geese. Two crossed - I pulled, killing both. There was a terrific splashing and floundering as the unhurt ones took off downwind - again I pulled and goose number three came heavily down. I picked up the 12, but nothing else came along looking for trouble, so I sculled across to pick up the slain. Then it was that I received a shock. Up to now I imagined that the six were the remaining brent I had fired at on the 2nd, when I bagged three out of the nine. But I found out my error as soon as I picked up the first bird. A brent roughly weighs three pounds, each of these went over ten pounds. My very first Canadian geese, and the first of these magnificent birds I have seen.*

When sporting afloat Edward usually got things right but, just occasionally he got it painfully wrong.

*I was about ten years old in 1891 when we were out cruising in the Solent in our yacht somewhere off Lee-on-Solent when a great northern diver was sighted. Dad with his 12 bore and Tom Sturdy with his pinfire 10, got into position for a shot. Charley Tibot was at the helm, and great was the excitement as we slowly gained on our quarry. When within shot there was quite a fusillade and the diver with a broken wing, commenced to dive. The excitement grew - guns were discharged at frequent intervals but the bird, as a rule, was beneath the waves when the shot got there. He, like all the diving tribe, was an expert at the art of lead dodging. Up to now I had kept, like a good boy should, strictly in the background. But as the chase got hotter and excitement reached fever heat, I forgot the instructions my father had given me to stop with my Uncle Charley, as I called him. To me it seemed that the bird would never be caught - what more natural than that I should lend a hand. So out came my trusted catapult, made of the very best fourpenny elastic, and into the leather pouch I slipped one of my few, and greatly prized, moulded bullets. Just then the diver appeared right ahead within an easy shot. "Here he is!" I called out, and stretched my 'catty' back. Allowing a goodly margin for trajectory I loosed the leather exactly at the moment when Tom Sturdy's head bobbed up in front to give the bird his coup de grace. Shall I ever forget his face, as with hand clapped to the back of his neck he roared out that he was shot. Upon the subsequent painful proceedings I had better draw a veil. Needless to say, my trusted and best catty promptly went overboard and, if my father had not been there, I really believe his son would have followed."*



In 1915 Edward enlisted in the 2/7th Hampshire's under Col. Lord Montague. Posted to India, he was hospitalised in Secunderabad with a knee injury, whereupon he contracted diphtheria and dysentery in quick succession.

Delirious with fever he pulled what faint shreds of will he could muster together, saying to himself over and over again, "Stick it Ted, my lad, and you will live to hear the old punt gun go off once more and see the duck and mallard drop out just as you've done before. Only stick it." And stick it he did, eventually recovering his health, borne through the most desperate time of his life by the sport he loved. Departed this life he may have, but his indomitable spirit lives on in a set of quite remarkable diaries. □