

Four hundred years of fowling

How much do you know about the history of your wildfowling club? **Nick Horten** shares his findings and encourages you to scrape away the past....

Although I'm not normally prone to flights of fancy, there have been odd occasions whilst tramping shorewards across a remote and desolate part of the marsh, long after dusk on a windy, moonless winters' night, when I've experienced the strangest feeling. The curious sensation that I'm not alone.

So strong has the scalp crawling desire been to turn and look behind me, that finally I couldn't resist. Lord knows what I expected to see but I have never sensed anything but benevolence from my imagined invisible companion. Perhaps it was nothing more than the ghost of some long departed fowler making sure I found my way safely back to dry land, for we are not the first men to walk these lonely places with dog and gun in search of wildfowl.

When I started fowling, my club contained a handful of ancient longshoremen who had begun their wildfowling careers in the early twentieth century. Men who would happily relate the tales told to them by their fathers of coastal gunning years before.

It was impossible to escape the sense of history that surrounded the sport and the almost tangible links with the past. But as time slips by these links become more fractured until, eventually, they break.

Most wildfowlers have a fair idea of the recent history of their own club if only because it is one of the first things drummed into them when they join. But what went before? Just how old is the tradition of fowling on the marsh you know and love? The answer might surprise you.

So journey backwards with me through time as I point out some of the milestones in the history of wildfowling in the south coast harbours of Portsmouth, Langstone and Chichester. Although this may not be the history of your favourite fowling ground, it probably follows a parallel course and who knows, it might inspire you to carry out some research into your own area.

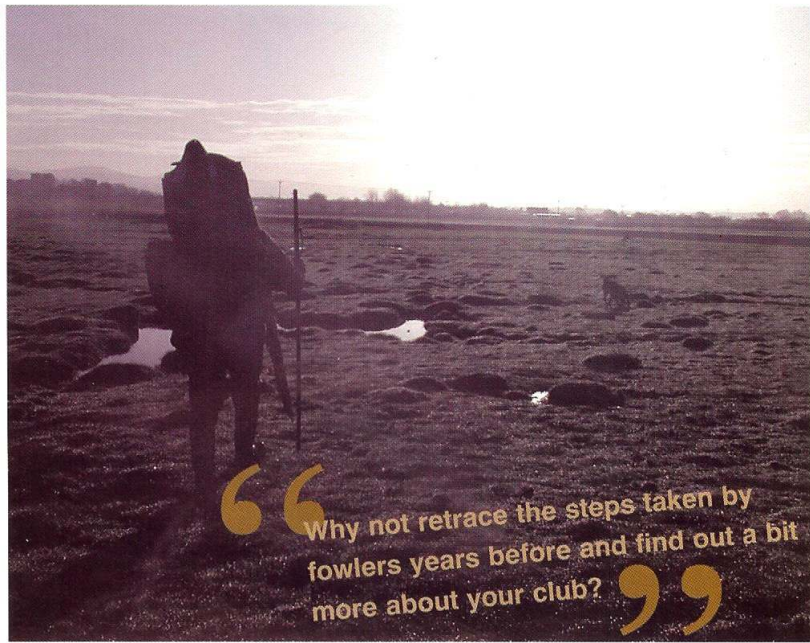
Much like tracing your family tree, it pays to start by speaking to older gunners and recording their tales. I was fortunate in that my puntgunning mentor's father and grandfather were both professional fowlers – granddad having started shooting in the 1850s. It has been truly fascinating to pick the

“Do you ever have the feeling that you're not alone on the marsh?”

brains of an old chap, a superlative puntgunner and the guardian of many a fowling secret handed down from father to son, whose grandfather was a salt-water novice when Hawker still punted a few miles up the coast.

Like many fowling clubs, the Langstone Wildfowlers' Association was formed in the mid 1950s. However it came as something of a surprise to read in an old shooting diary that concerted, but sadly unsuccessful, efforts were made to start up a club in the 1920s. It came as even more of a surprise to discover, when thumbing through a 1913 edition of Stanley Duncan's book *Wildfowling*, an advert for the infant WAGBI (now BASC) which contained the name of a local Portsmouth resident listed as being a 'corresponding member'. A little further research unearthed the hitherto unknown fact that a Langstone wildfowler was directly involved with the very birth of WAGBI!

One of the problems that you might encounter in the course of your research is that much of the older local history of fowling is simply not documented, or it is to be found in a frustratingly fragmentary



“Why not retrace the steps taken by fowlers years before and find out a bit more about your club?”

form, hidden away in county archives, old manuscripts, newspapers or even books dedicated to quite unconnected subjects.

But it is there, and, like me, you can retrieve it. And what a fascinating picture it reveals.

So what have I discovered about the history of wildfowling on my own doorstep?

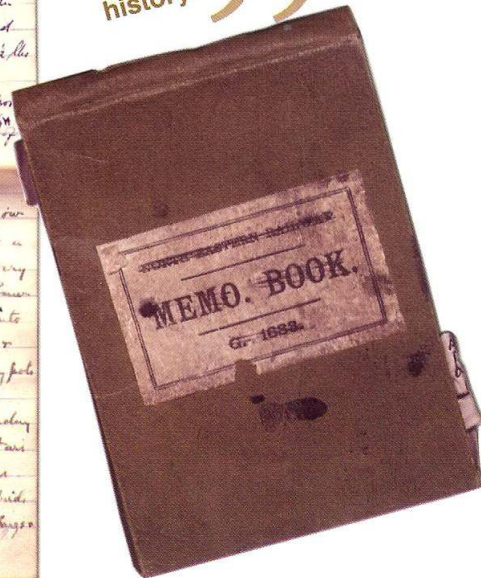
Punt gunners in undreamt of numbers - over 200 identified by name since 1799, who developed a distinctive style of both punt and gun previously unrecorded in any book on the subject. The unsuspected local manufacture of punt guns on a commercial scale. The earliest documented evidence of true punt gunning - Chichester Harbour, 1799. An early reference to 'shooting flying' years before it was supposed to be happening - Portsmouth, 1634. And one of the earliest duck decoys in the country - Bedhampton 1622. Not to mention enough social and sporting history and anecdotes to fill a book.

And it isn't all dry and dusty. Some of the stuff I've retrieved from the dustbin of history still has a practical application even today. The most efficient design of and method of fastening mud pattens to one's feet, and how to scull a gunning punt, to name but two.

Who knows what else we might discover about the history of the sport with a little collective digging? For me, this far from finished exercise has brought about a connection with my fowling ground that I never had before. I sometimes imagine generation after generation, some four hundred years worth of ghostly old saltwater gunners, looking over my shoulder and whispering: "Welcome to the brethren of the coast. The future of fowling is in your hands now. Look after it."



“Notes made by ancient fowlers hold the best key to your club's history.”



Main photo: Nick Ridley