

With a lifetime's involvement in the sport and a level of commitment somewhere between fanatical and lunatic NICK HORTEN was shocked to discover that he's developed a kind of fowling tunnel vision brought about by being on the inside looking out for far too long. Finding it hard to understand why others don't feel the same passion lead him to confront some popular misconceptions...

## SHATTERING THE MYTHS





**I** started coastal gunning as a boy, having been born and bred within a stone's throw of the marsh I shoot on to this day. I live and work within sight of my favourite fowling grounds and, when the wind blows, I can drop everything, grab gun and dog and be on the foreshore within 30 minutes. Aren't I the lucky one? But has this surfeit of fowling opportunity warped my judgement?

I recently discovered that there were four blokes at my new place of work who all did a bit of clay pigeon shooting and were looking to expand their horizons. So, smelling four new recruits to my fowling club, you can barely credit my surprise when my offer of cheap guided day permits was decisively declined in a manner that bordered on the frosty.

Newcomers to shotgun shooting used to be queuing up to join a fowling club but this no longer seems to be the case. It isn't that fowling clubs are inaccessible - a quick phone call to BASC or trawl of the internet could put the newcomer in touch almost immediately, so why do so many perceive it as so difficult?

I sat my four new guns down around the table and, over a few lunch breaks in the work canteen, teased out some issues that frankly surprised me.

If you're new to shooting, and don't know many people who participate in the sport, where do you get your information from?

The answer, for these four at least, was from shooting magazines. Now, magazine editors have a vested interest in, and do an otherwise excellent job of, promoting the sport. But it would seem that, sometimes, their good intentions are subliminally

subverted. The message that they, and by default the wildfowling community, send out is not

A full fowling wardrobe is only needed when you're sure of your commitment to the sport

necessarily the one that they intended.

All four of my guinea pigs told me categorically that non-lead shot does not work and that it is expensive. One of them brought in a recent magazine to prove it. The article was written by a contributor who, by his own admission, had issues with non-lead cartridges. In fairness, the article was reasonably balanced technically, but had patently left barely-informed newcomers with completely the wrong idea.

My suggested solution to the shortcomings highlighted in the article? Simple. Don't use that particular cartridge. There are plenty of others out there that do work. Non-lead shot has improved in leaps and bounds in recent years and yes, it isn't particularly cheap but you won't be firing it in industrial quantities.

I also hinted gently at the fact that, since none of them had ever shot wildfowl with lead, any comparison was meaningless.

Despite my freely given invitation to shoot, the hoary old chestnut that fowling is a closed shop and clubs are impossible to join was accompanied by another dramatically flourished magazine article. This one started off by alluding to a fictional fowler's interminable wait before his name '...came to the top of the waiting list for the wildfowling club.'

The article was humorous and the comment tongue in cheek, but since none of the four had the knowledge to counter the claims, none of them made it past the first paragraph.

So once we'd established that the cartridges work and that you can actually experience wildfowling without putting your name on a waiting list since birth, my four newbies began to thaw.

The next few points rather threw me but I can understand how they were arrived at. One chap said 'All the pictures of fowlers I've seen show them dressed in expensive looking camouflage clothing which I don't possess. Do I need to buy it?'. The simple answer is no. I explained that the plain brown or green waterproof jackets they already owned would be perfectly adequate. Likewise, their over trousers and wellington boots. True, they might want to expand their fowling wardrobe at a later date, but they were pleasantly surprised to discover that they were already well enough equipped to get started.

Once again, more magazines were rapidly thumbed through and an indignant finger poked at numerous photos. 'Apparently you need an ultra-long chambered auto 12 bore to go fowling. Everyone in these pictures is using one.'

An interesting observation that I explained my own reasons for occasionally using an auto centre on homeloading, but pointed out that I actually used a three-inch chambered 12 bore over and under exactly like theirs for much of my fowling.

Having established that fowling was accessible, the ammunition worked and that they had clothing and guns fit for the task, their last few misconceptions began to evaporate.

'But the quarry list is much reduced' ventured one. Well, yes. But you would have to have been fowling for more than a quarter of a century, since the passage of the 1981 Wildlife and Countryside Act, for that to have made any difference. In any event, the present quarry list is infinitely more varied than the clay pigeons that comprised their current bag. And tasted better!

They felt that they might get a hostile reception from other marsh users. I responded that my club, like many others, had recently passed its half century anniversary and enjoyed an excellent relationship with all the other harbour users and that we were widely regarded as a long-standing and vital component of the wider conservation movement whose credentials were beyond reproach.

Wildfowling can be dangerous. Well, yes it can. But you will be carefully supervised during your first year, at the end of which your level of knowledge, confidence and ability will have grown enormously. Most wildfowling clubs offer a level of training and access to a whole range of social activities unparalleled in any other branch of shooting.

Wildfowling is expensive. Measuring the cost of any sport is not an exact science, but, since my newcomers already had a suitable gun and adequate clothing and we had previously agreed that they were unlikely to fire enough non-lead ammunition to break the bank, how was it expensive? Costed out over a season my own club fees work out at less than £1 per day. Two of the chaps were keen football supporters who happily paid £650 a season for the dubious delight of cheering on their club from the terraces. Now, to me, that is expensive.

Were this a work of fiction I would conclude it by relating how all four subsequently joined the fowling club and lived happily ever after. But, unfortunately it doesn't end like that. It took a great deal of time and effort to convince these chaps to sign up for a single day ticket and forced me to confront issues about the popular perception of the sport that I had not even considered. If my four freshman shooters were in an information vacuum - then so was I.

Your experience of recruiting new members, and your opinion as to why it can be an uphill struggle may be completely different from mine. All of which adds to the confusion. Which is why Dr. Peter Marshall's *WAGBI's Centenary Survey 2007* and *Centenary Wildfowling Club Survey 2007* could not have been organised at a more opportune moment.

With the potential to throw a definitive light on the thorny question of where to direct both wildfowling club and BASC resources to best secure the sport's future, I beg you, if you are asked to complete the survey forms, for goodness sake do it!

