

Diaries of a south coast fowler

When Nick Horten began his research into the wildfowling deeds of yesteryear on the south coast he could not have imagined that he would stumble on a set of diaries as intricate as those by the legendary Colonel Peter Hawker. But he did, and this is the story of Edward Mudge.



One Thursday of late I was despatched to the attic to retrieve some domestic utensil which the wife was convinced had been sent aloft for safe keeping. I never did find the three pinned sprocket grinder or whatever it was she sent me up amongst the cobwebs to find, but I did find something far more interesting tucked away in a tea chest behind the chimney stack.

Shooting diaries are intensely personal things and finding these three dog-eared notebooks written almost twenty five years ago was akin to the discovery of my very own time machine. Leafing through them I relived for a moment some of my earliest fowling memories; my first curlew, the first right and left at wigeon, three whole pages devoted to my first punt gun shot - six wigeon killed with a half pound gun which was, fortunately for me, at the end of its recoil travel when it caught me a smart blow to the forehead. Funny how I'd almost forgotten that.

Sadly, my own efforts at keeping a shooting diary have come in fits and starts, usually with more fit than start, which means that I have the greatest admiration for those with the strength of character to start a diary and stick to it. Such a man was Peter Hawker who in 1802 penned

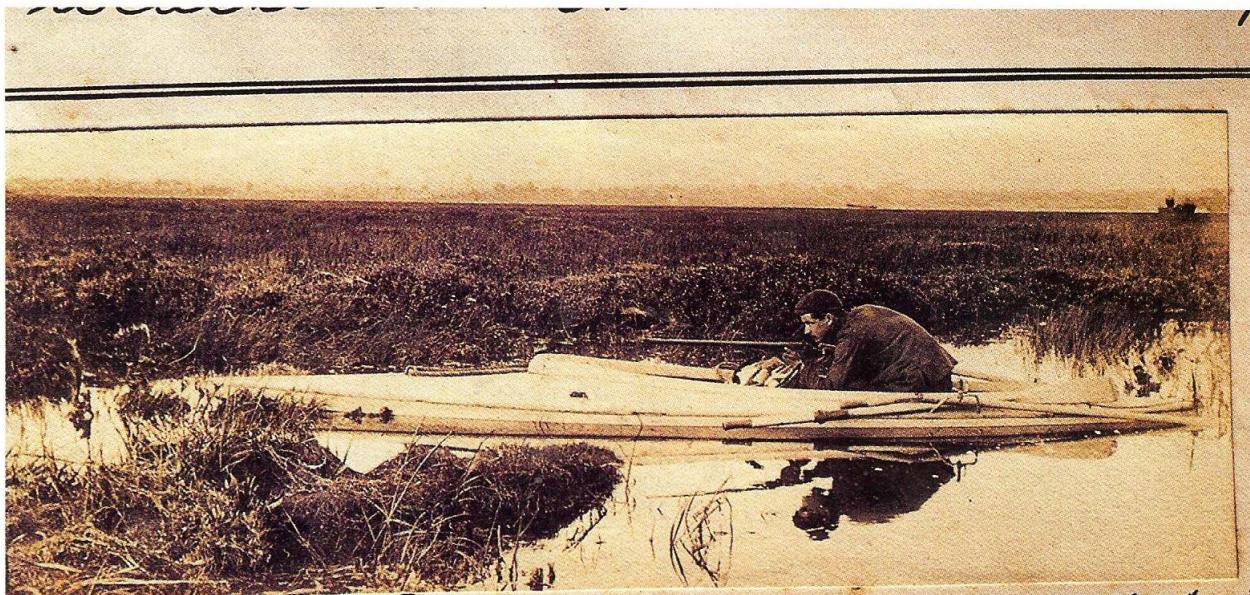
the first entries in a series of diaries which was to run unbroken for the next fifty one years, leaving us with an unequalled insight into the man and the sport he pursued with such enthusiasm.

As an amateur researcher into the history of wildfowling on the south coast my sources of reference to date have included just about everything but diaries. These are extremely rare, few professional gunners kept a record of what to them was a job of work and I long since gave up any thought of finding a latter-day Hawker.

Searching for information was like panning for gold dust. Sifting through the local history section in public libraries turned up odd grains, occasionally a factual nugget would turn up in the most unlikely of places, sometimes a mother lode of reminiscence by a grizzled old punter would swell the fact file, but just recently the entire gold mine fell into my unsuspecting lap.

When Hawker went to the celestial fowling ground, where clouds of Brent always darken the winter skies and muzzle loading punt guns never misfire, I would have thought it unlikely that anyone would have picked up the Colonel's pen and continued to write in such detail and with such enthusiasm for so long a time. Yet I genuinely believe the

“Mudge shot on Southampton Water from 1898 to 1953 and lived through some of the most momentous events of the twentieth century”



My friend, P. Woodley in my flat (Sept^r 12th 03.)

*Take a good sized bunch of d
+ 1 0 f.*

Main picture, previous page: Edward Mudge updating the diaries on board his yacht Tiger during the winter of 1921. This photograph was taken with a plate camera and a magnesium touchpaper. **Above:** Flight shooting from the flat (punt) minus the punt gun... the occupant, Mudge's friend, is pictured in 1903. **Opposite page, left:** An outstanding day in February 1926... note the Canada geese which were relatively scarce at the time. The diarist poses wearing leather thigh boots and carrying his 8 bore double by Patstone of Southampton. **Opposite page, right:** Not bad for an eighteen-year-old. A page from the diary showing the detailed records he kept of his bags, where shot and how much he received for them. Prices fluctuated but a single redshank might be worth 6d - the hourly rate for a labourer in 1900.



Yearly Records * all wildfowl undertaken
 Aug 1 1899 to Feb 28 1900

Date	Number & kind of birds shot (last but not least)	Where Shot	Grand Total
13 Aug 1	6 Redshanks, 5 Plover, 1 Curlew, 1 Moor.	Peak to Funchal	13
2	1 Plover, 1 Redshank	Big Leek	
3	4 Redshanks, 1 Plover, 1 Curlew, 1 Moor, 1 Curlew	Middle Leek	
4	1 Plover	Trunk Leek	
5	3 Redshanks, 1 Dunlin	Little Middle Leek	
6	3 Plover, 3 Redshanks, 1 Curlew	Middle Leek	
7	25 Dunlins, 1 Oyster Catcher, 1 H., 1 Curlew, 2 Plover (6 Red)	Badland to Funchal	
8	1 Redshank	Middle Leek	
12	3 Redshanks, 1 Curlew	Middle Leek	
13	4 Redshanks, 2 Plover	Middle Leek	
14	6 Redshanks, 1 Plover, 1 Whimbrel	Little Funchal	31
16	2 Redshanks, 1 Turnstone	Middle Leek	
17	1 Plover, 1 Redshank	Middle Leek	92
18	1 King Plover	Berry	
19	1 Curlew, 5 Redshanks, 4 Turnstone	Marshwood	
20	2 Plover, 2 Curlew, 2 Turnstone, 4 Red, 2 Dunlin	Badland to Funchal	
25	1 Plover, 1 Redshank, 2 Plover, 1 Moor, 1 Turnstone	Badland	
27	3 Curlew, 3 Plover, 5 Redshanks	Badland to Funchal	
31	2 King Plover	Dean's Lake	
1 Sept 2	5 Redshanks, 1 Plover, 1 Teal	Marshwood, Berry	162
3	1 Duck, 4 Redshanks, 1 Plover	Dean's Lake	
4	5 Curlew, 4 Plover, 2 Redshanks	Dean's Lake	
6	9 Plover, 8 Redshanks, 1 Snipe	Dean's Lake	
14	1 Teal	Badland to Funchal	
16	1 Redshank, 1 Duck	Trunk Leek	
17	5 Redshanks, 1 Plover	Big & Middle Leek	
23	7 Redshanks, 2 Plover, 1 Blue Rock Pigeon	Carbond	182
24	6 Dunlin, 1 Godwit, 3 Plover, 2 Curlew, 1 Whimbrel	Funchal to	
25	1 Greenshank, 1 Teal	Dean's Lake	209
29	1 Teal, 2 Plover (10 - 1000)	Big Leek	
31	1 Plover, 1 Redshank, 1 King Plover, 1 Gull	Big Leek	315
4 Feb	3 Curlew, 2 Redshanks	Round Badland	
		Dean's Lake	324

seven ledger sized, hand written volumes I have before me are as important a record of south coast wildfowling in the first half of the twentieth century as were Hawker's writings to the first half of the nineteenth.

Edward Mudge was a remarkable man by any standard, like Hawker he was fanatical about his fowling, possessing not only the physical resilience to set out in his punt at any time of night or day, but also the strength of will to sit down upon his return, doubtless wet and exhausted, to write up the day's events. And how he wrote them up. Page upon page of detailed description, sketch plans even photographs, yet all written in an easily read style liberally sprinkled with a gentle humour.

Mudge shot on Southampton Water in Hampshire from 1898 until 1953 and lived through some of the most momentous events of the twentieth century, including two world wars, the first in which he served. When he started shooting, the aeroplane was in its infancy; when he finished, flying boats from nearby Calshot were the bane of his life. In his early years punt gunners abounded, yet towards the end he had Southampton Water and the Beaulieu River virtually to himself. He saw the disappearance of the Zosteria in the 1930s and watched helplessly as vast tracts of coastal

and inland marsh were swallowed up by oil refineries, power stations, and huge extensions to the Southampton Docks.

Yet his enthusiasms never waned and he remained, like Hawker, committed to the sport he loved until the day he died.

October 10 1901

'Really if I did not have good sport with the big gun, at the commencement of the season, that can hardly apply now, for this morning I shot at a goose and a wigeon, at Redbridge Leak and got them both. I can hardly describe how pleased I was, for it was so unexpected. Starting at about half-past-four in the morning from West Quay I was under Berry by daybreak, but still seeing nothing here, though I heard two duck get up, I rowed uplong farther, 'till

chancing to look behind me at Redbridge Island, I was surprised to see two birds placidly feeding within 100 yards, as though there was no such thing as punts and swivel guns shooting 16ozs of shot. There was no time to unship the oars, so laying out, I did my best to scull a little closer without striking my sculling oar against the left hand rowing one, which of course trailed in the water. Just then the larger of the two birds cried out several times - wink, wink; this told me what I had to deal with, and if possible I squeezed myself still ▷

"If Hawker discovered shoulder gunning for wildfowling relatively late in his shooting career and puntgunning even later, Edward Mudge was born to both"

◁ closer to the bottom boards. Then the next difficulty arose, the smaller bird swam away from the other, and would not come closer, and poor me, was afraid they would see and clear out. However I was spared shooting at the goose alone, for the wigeon after a while, began to swim up slowly, feeding as he went, and finally stopped about three feet from the other bird. This was all I wanted and next moment there was a roar that woke up all the curlew and redshank within half a mile. Back went the punt like a little launch, and a minute later I was admiring one of those noble birds I had often read about, but never till now had the pleasure of handling. A fine pink footed goose which weighed 7lbs.'

Two days later, as a footnote to an entry detailing a successful shot at peewits, Mudge writes: - 'West Quay is still wondering over the Pink Footed Goose affair. There has been quite an exodus of punts since they heard of it, but as far as I can hear, they have all brought home "fisherman's luck". Mr. Pickett told me that this is the first of that species he has ever known to be shot here as it is so far south.'

Interestingly, the Mr. Pickett to whom he refers is none other than John Pickett, yacht and boat builder, himself a highly experienced punt gunner who actually built the majority of punts used by Sir Ralph Payne-Gallwey.

Not only did Edward Mudge shoot over some of the very same marsh and mudflat that Peter Hawker trod some fifty years before but he even shared many of the legendary Colonel's character traits, not least an iron determination, a passion for shooting plus an observant eye and analytical mind. Like Hawker he did not enjoy the best of health and on a number of occasions it was sheer willpower that carried him through serious illness rather than physical strength.

But if Hawker discovered shoulder gunning for wildfowl relatively late in his shooting career, and punt gunning even later, Edward Mudge was born to both. His father was an accomplished gunner who understood and nurtured young Ted's interest and it wasn't very long before he set out on his own.

Born in 1881 in Southampton, Hampshire, the young Edward entered his father's thriving tin smithing business situated at 10 West Street, Southampton, as soon as he left school. But it was sport with the gun rather than the family business that interested him the most. Indeed, by the age of twenty-three and with his father's blessing Edward parted company with the family firm and struck out on his own as a professional wildfowler.

It has to be remembered that, at the turn of the century, a working class family still spent seventy per cent of its income on food. Protein was expensive and wildfowl, from dunlin to swan, sold well and at a

handsome profit. Even larks and thrushes found a ready market whilst anything unusual or rare could be disposed of to local taxidermists.

Already an accomplished boatsman skilled at setting and sculling a punt and with the loan of his father's punt gun and eight bore muzzle loader to supplement his arsenal, Edward set to work with a will. From August to February he was up well before dawn every day of the week, but, as it is today, wildfowling was an uncertain business fraught with unexpected problems.

September 18 1898

'This day was a day of adventure and accidents. Dad towed me down as far as Cadland and then let me go. I got out of the punt and walked to the bank where I shot a greenshank. I then fired at two curlews but missed. Then some peewits flew by and I shot one which I got. Then a redshank was punctured which I also got. Seeing some peewits farther in I tried to walk them up but I had only got half way when up got a pheasant which fell dead in a little stream. I had picked up my bird when a hare started out of its form but had not gone six feet when he rolled over and over. Running to get him I stumbled and fell breaking the stock of my gun.'

Much of Mudge's early shooting was with a 12 bore from his punt, largely at waders and other small fry; he didn't shoot his first duck, a mallard, until August 22 of that year. But the total mounted steadily until the end of the season of 1898 when he turned in a profit of £1-10s-4d. Not bad for a boy of seventeen still living at home with negligible overheads.

Occasionally revenue came from other sources...

August 24 1900

'This evening I took the whole outfit out again and had very bad luck in not getting anything with it, there being practically no flight. However I was not to come home empty handed. Jack Pickett in his yacht the "Tom Tit" had taken a Gent out for a sail and the wind fell light when they were off Netley, and as the Gent had to catch the Le Havre boat and I was rowing by, Jack hailed me and I exchanged punt gun for Gent, rowed on up in the tide and earned three shillings! A very reasonable job.'

Mudge grew up alongside the Pickett family at West Quay but, as is the way of wildfowlers, their friendship didn't stand in the way of the odd practical joke:

November 21 1900

'There was a few duck this morning in Butts Leak and it is an enigma to me



Above: Having survived the Great War, Mudge looked forward to the resumption of his beloved fowling.

how I missed smashing up six of them, they were only about 60 yds and huddled up together and I did not shoot till I covered them, when I did, I did not touch a feather. Then I went up farther where I got five Dunlin, but coming down I shot at the coots with far different results stopping about fourteen.'

A footnote written at the bottom of the page in Edward's hand, but from the style of writing added some years later reads 'The above is an enigma no longer. I have since found out that some of my West Quay "friends" drew the charge of shot from my punt gun. What a joke to play on a chap, of course it was the PICKETTS.'

Reading his diaries today, what modern wildfowler would not leap at the chance to change places with Edward Mudge when the shooting season began in August and ended on the last day of February, when there was no such thing as the Protection of Bird's Act and today's rabid antis were yet unborn. Idyllic though this seems, punting for a living was still an extremely dangerous occupation.

January 24 1903

'All this time it had been blowing half a gale but as the wind was slightly off the land, it did not trouble me much. So I waited for flight, but though I had a fairish chance at a single duck when it was almost dark, I missed, and like the boy who did not get the cake, had to do without. So darkness fell and I began to think of England, home and dinner. Here was I four miles from West Quay and half a gale of wind blowing. Row back? Not me. Not while I had a sail and a piece of string for a main sheet.

Accordingly I pushed off down the leak where I had a surprise, a very

unpleasant one too. I found that though the wind was off the land there was a nasty sea breaking on the edge of the mud. The first thing I knew about it was a nasty inquisitive wave (not a large one thank goodness) had come slap against the side and a goodly portion of it had hopped over, slightly wetting my nether garments and drenching my double. There was no time to lament, for another one, a perfect giant, came rushing up, but fortunately I had time just enough to turn the punt end on and so miss it. For the next few minutes, until I got in deeper water I had a nasty time of it and had to keep both eyes open or I should have my punt filled in a trice.

Once in deep water though I up my sail and scoured before it, holding the main sheet (a bit of fishing line) in my hand in case of accident. My word, it did blow. Talk about making and breaking records. In the puffs, my punt seemed to jump out of the water and fly. The string cut my fingers, but I held on, all the time keeping a good look out ahead to see that I did not smash into anything. (One can't be too careful, don't you know). All went well till I got to Big Leak, though once I nearly ran aground on the hard just past Hythe Pier, then without warning I ran slap onto a heap of mud, that one of the barges, drat them, had thrown out. I pushed off pretty smart, but though I wasted no time about it, I got two beauties aboard.

With two inches of water slopping about, I continued my journey, not quite so fast now, though it was blowing quite as hard, if not harder than when I started. Up through the Gymph I steered, missing a vessel moored there by a few feet in the blackness. When I reached the end of this island of mud I ran right before the wind, but getting into quite rough water over to leeward, I had to lower the sail and take to the oars once more. A few moments later I was safe and sound, and wet, on terra firma, very glad indeed to change into dry clothes and to sit down and refresh the inner man." □

Next month: Delving into the diaries... out in the punt with Edward Mudge.

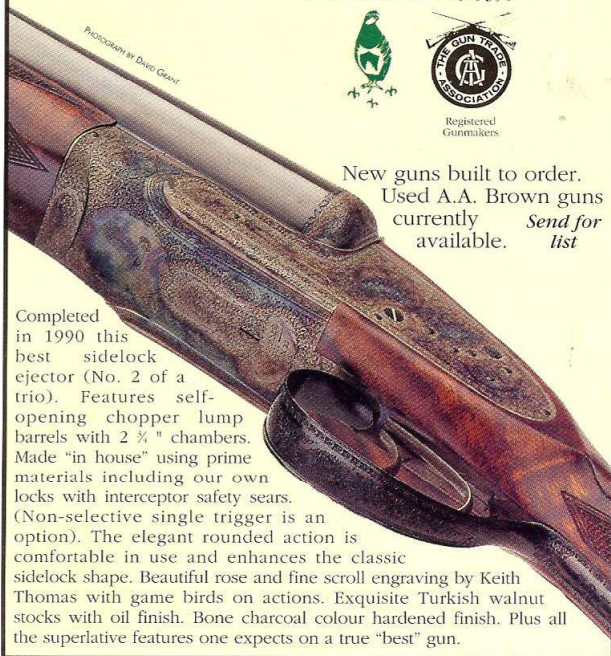
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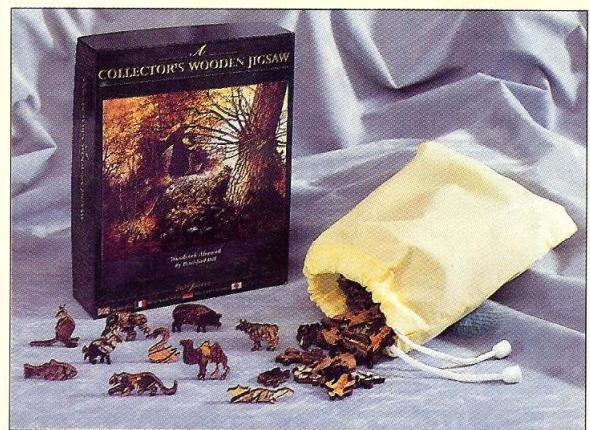


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