

Wildfowling tales of the unexpected

There may have been fewer restrictions and more freedom for shooting folk in the past, but there was also less attention to safety. **Nick Horton** recalls two stories of wildfowling involved in horrendous punt-gunning accidents

SHOOTING SPORTS have an enviable safety record. In fact, you stand more chance of being injured by playing or watching football than you do by taking part in a sport using firearms. Safety, above all else, is drummed into the beginner from the moment they first express an interest in shooting, whatever branch of the sport attracts them.

Wildfowling clubs are among the most diligent groups where safety is concerned and today's newcomers are given a rigorous grounding in gun safety, with particular emphasis on the danger of clogging the muzzle end of your barrels with mud. However, before the club system, the foreshore could be a rather wild place where safety appeared at the bottom of a long list of concerns – if it appeared at all.

The following two stories tell of events that took place around a small fishing village called

Emsworth in Hampshire. It nestles against the sea wall in the upper reaches of Chichester Harbour and is ideally positioned for excursions into nearby Langstone Harbour.

Signs of extreme use

FOR EVERY professional fowler who treated his punt and gun with respect, there was another who regarded it merely as a tool and treated it accordingly. Old Dridge was a prime example. Dridge was an acknowledged expert on gunning punts, having started shooting in the 1880s. By 1910, the great 20oz muzzleloading gun he had bought many years before was showing signs of extreme use and no small amount of neglect.

Made locally, the 1½in-bore gun had led a hard life. Originally 10ft long, it spent almost six months of the year mounted on the punt, exposed to the elements. Old Dridge was a

fisherman, but the gun had earned him many a pound when he spied a trip of fowl pitching into the main Emsworth Channel. The punt's constant state of readiness had frequently enabled him to beat his competitors to the shot.

Properly cleaned and stored, a punt-gun can last more than 100 years. However, Dridge's gun already had more than 1lb of lead sweated into the great rust-eaten pits on the outside of the barrel. I don't know about the state of the bore – and neither did Dridge, because he never looked. All he knew was that every 10 years or so it was necessary to saw about 3in of rotten metal off the muzzle end to prevent cutting his hand when he loaded up, which was why the gun measured little more than 9ft.

The state of the barrel didn't particularly bother Dridge as there were plenty worse about, but the gun's lock was proving to be a constant source of irritation to

Putting a brave face on trouble in a family of gunners

ONE NIGHT, Jack Cooper set off in his punt from his family's floating gun store, which also doubled as a houseboat. At high water he heard wigeon in Shut Lake just off the sea wall of Farlington Marshes. Jack lay down and sculled towards the sound of the birds.

However, unbeknown to Jack, his father was stalking the same bunch of flatbills. He was of the old school, where you shoot first and ask questions later. His father had seen movement ahead and promptly fired the punt-gun.

Jack was peppered about the face and forehead, bleeding profusely with one eye irreparably damaged. Badly concussed and disorientated, Jack fell out of his punt. Hearing the commotion and realising his dreadful mistake, his father rowed across quickly and tried to drag Jack into his punt. As Jack was a big lad, his father

'Permanently scarred about the face and blind in one eye, he might have been forgiven for giving up fowling on the spot'



him. The mainspring was weak and the sear and bent were so worn that ignition of the single percussion cap was becoming a completely random affair. However, this didn't matter to old Dridge because he knew that a sharp rap with a toffee hammer would send the 1/4lb of BB singing on its way.

If an accident is an event that happens by chance, then it was not an accident that befell old-man Dridge. Overfamiliarity, complacency and neglect led to the coroner's verdict of misadventure. A modern shooting man might almost call it suicide.

Signs of extreme use

IT HAPPENED when half-a-dozen wigeon had pitched in the creek about 300 yards from the punt, which sat on the mud at the edge of a small crab run. It would be a simple matter for Dridge to keep low so as not to spook the birds, to ship the anchor, spin the punt round, scoot her across the mud to the nearby creek and stalk the birds.

The old gun was loaded, primed and capped, following an aborted stalk earlier that day. Crouching, almost on his knees, Dridge reached the punt. With both hands on the bow, his torso barely 2ft from the great eye of the muzzle, he started to push the punt.

At first the punt slid easily, but then her stern stuck fast on a patch of gravel. The hefty shove he gave her was his last action on this earth. It may have been that the gun was at full cock, but the hammer was so loose that he would not have noticed.

The entire charge of the gun hit Dridge in the right shoulder and practically tore away his arm and upper chest. Unsurprisingly, he died where he fell – the victim of an "accident" entirely of his own making. ■

nearly capsized the boat while trying to get him aboard. In desperation he called out for help and by the grace of God a third punt-gunner heard him shout. Between them they got Jack ashore, half drowned, frozen and unconscious.

They placed Jack on a wooden punt cover and then staggered and fell two miles along the shore in pitch blackness to the army garrison at Hilsea Lines. The medical orderly took a brief look at Jack, pronounced that he wasn't about to die and then promptly told them to go away!

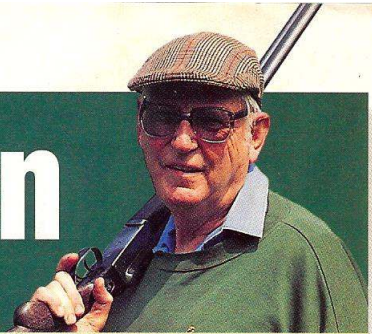
For four tortured miles the two middle-aged men lugged the groaning Jack until they finally collapsed outside the Royal Hospital, where Jack remained for a week. Permanently scarred about the face and blind in one eye, he might have been forgiven for giving up fowling on the spot. However, he was made of sterner stuff and punted on regardless for many more years.

Family affair: the Greentree brothers and the Cooper brothers, pictured in 1920.

Jack Cooper (r) was lucky to survive a fowling accident in which he was shot by his father

Town Gun

WITH COLIN WILLOCK



'Though Walsingham fully understood the value of decoys, I doubt that the great man ever realised their pulling power on crops'

I OFTEN wonder what the masters of the last century, the great country-house game shots such as Lord Walsingham and Lord Ripon, would have made of decoying woodpigeon. Many of the nob who toured the great country houses as guests, largely on the strength of their prowess with the gun – not to mention their skills with the cards and lady guests – were at their brilliant best with high pheasants.

I doubt whether many of them were all-rounders, whose fieldcraft was as excellent as their shooting. There were exceptions, of course, and there is little doubt that Lord Walsingham was high on the list of Shots who understood and took pleasure in understanding his quarry.

Walsingham on pigeon

WHEN I was researching my own *Book of the Wood Pigeon* recently, I came across passages in the Badminton Library's classic *Shooting: Field and Covert*, in which Walsingham revealed that he knew all about "lofters" and favoured stuffed birds, "with copper wire coming from within the body of the bird and passing down the legs, leaving about 15in or 16in projecting through each foot." The noble lord included in his equipment an item which I fancy not even John Batley could tuck away in his knapsack. This was, "an active lad who can climb high among the branches and fasten the decoys by mean of copper wire to suitable twigs..." However, I missed out on the best of Walsingham on pigeon. If only I had consulted another old master, Chris Cradock, that great expert could no doubt have set me on the right trail for fuller information.

It was Chris who wrote the introduction to a massive work in my bookcase called *Experts on Guns and Shooting*, by G.T. Teasdale-Buckell. G.T. paints a vivid portrait of Walsingham as a pigeon shooter, quoting the great man on the subject. Walsingham had recently scored a "ton" – 121 to be precise – which another well-known Gun was willing to bet was not the biggest bag of pigeon ever recorded. The Lord replied, "I have little

doubt that you are correct. I can well believe it could be largely exceeded under favourable conditions."

The revealing thing about Walsingham's diaries is that only one pigeon shoot took place in the open over decoys. The rest took place in woodland, either at roosting time or in conditions of high wind and light snow.

Though Walsingham understood the value of decoys, I doubt that the great man ever realised their pulling power on crops. Alternatively, perhaps he simply hung up his guns at the end of the game season.

The account of how he shot his "ton" makes fascinating reading. The date was December 3, 1887 and conditions were by no means ideal, with, "...a thin layer of snow, but no snow falling and very little wind". Walsingham compensated for the lack of wind by deploying considerable manpower. He wrote, "Six men and boys were posted in neighbouring coverts, also frequented by pigeon, at distances varying from a quarter of a mile to two miles from the spot where I stood. They were ordered to walk about and disturb the birds whenever two or three settled together." The wandering ground troops kept the pigeon on the move all day. Walsingham used only three lofters in what today we would call a "sitty" tree.

"In addition to these," he wrote, "the first 20 or 30 birds were set up in scattered groups on the ground in the most open places, the snow being scraped away around them to give them the appearance of birds feeding where acorns were most accessible."

This, I fancy, is what Archie Coats would have called "advanced decoying". I wonder what sort of bags the old masters would have made on decoys properly set up on a stubble or pea field? I bet they'd have equalled today's top scorers.



Next week Country Gun talks about eccentrics who shoot.

How did the old masters tackle pigeon?

J. BATLEY