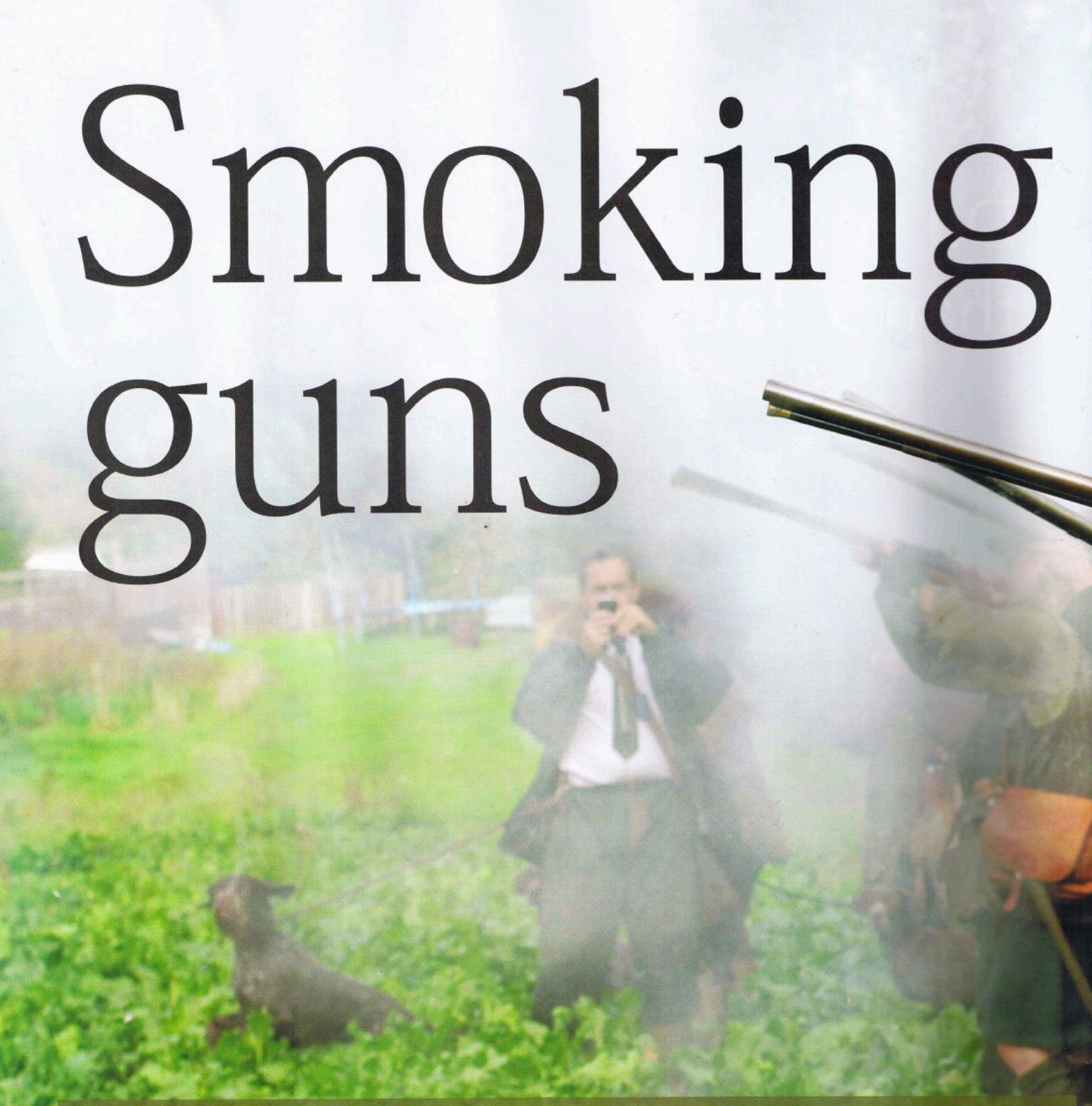
Smoking guns



JAMES MARCHINGTON joins a group of muzzle-loading enthusiasts walking up pheasants over pointers in Norfolk.

It's a dull, damp morning at the Bunwell Wood Shoot, a few miles from Thetford in Norfolk. The Guns are pulling on coats and boots, looking forward to the day's sport. A light drizzle hangs in the air.

It's a familiar scene — but this one is a bit different. A couple of the Guns are dressed more like undertakers, with black top hat and tailcoat. Another is resplendent in a Scottish kilt and Glengarry. Even those in more typical gameshooting attire are festooned with pouches, bags and ramrods.

This is clearly no ordinary shoot day — but despite the flintlocks and muzzle-loading percussion guns we haven't stepped back in time. These are modern enthusiasts who love the old ways and want to enjoy their guns for their intended purpose, not just as ornaments.

Shoot captain today is Bev Keeble, a retired engineering lecturer from Chelmsford. He first came here two years ago, a treat for his 60th birthday. He and his friends enjoyed it so much they've made it an annual event. Bev looks apprehensively at the sky. He has a single-barrelled flintlock made in 1810 and flintlocks are vulnerable to damp getting into the priming powder. Bev has made up his charges of powder in advance, and keeps them in a bag safely out of the drizzle. His shot is in a leather tube around his neck, and there's a ramrod carried through a ring on his game bag.

Today's Guns include several of the Great Britain muzzle-loading shotgun team, who have recently returned from success at the European Championships in Austria where

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Bev himself took gold in the flintlock class and fellow Gun Martin Crix won gold in percussion.

The rest of the Guns — Bill Pink, Dave Elvin, Ed Bettany, Dick Edgington and the kilted 'Tosh' McIntosh — have an assortment of weaponry, mostly side-by-side percussion shotguns. Bill is especially proud of his Joseph Harkom. "It's a lovely gun, beautiful engraving, probably made in the 1830s or 40s." He uses it to shoot clay competitions, as well as for driven game. "I sometimes share a peg with Martin," Bill explains. "When you've fired both barrels you move back and reload while the other steps up to shoot. It works pretty well."

Welcoming this colourful group is Mark Howard, head keeper, shoot manager and proprietor of the shoot for the last 26 years. The shoot is run commercially with five separate syndicates, starting early in the season with 200–300 bird days on partridges. They move on to pheasants in October. "We don't have the woodland to keep going on driven pheasants, so we finish about Christmas and have some walked-up days in January," Mark explains.

The shoot is a popular venue for field trials with all the HPR dog breeds. It was this connection that led the muzzleloaders to come here in the first place. They were looking for walked-up shooting over pointers in the old fashioned way — much as it would have been done by Col Peter Hawker in the early 19th century.

Mark says the day is easier and in many ways more enjoyable to run than a typical driven day. "There isn't the pressure of a 200-bird partridge day," he says. "It's very similar to a field trial really. You need to allow time between each shot for the Guns to load."

Mark isn't into muzzle-loaders himself but enjoys the way the guns and the dogs work so well together. "These dogs were being bred around the time muzzle-loading guns were in use, and they match each other. The pace is right."

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Mark calls the small group together; with no need for beaters, we are just seven Guns and a handful of others. There is French-born David Gauthier, Mark's right-hand man on the shoot, Mark's elder daughter Hannah, who has the day off college, and Lucie Hustler who breeds and works GSPs.

After a short walk we reach a patch of set-aside where Mark splits the Guns into two groups. For the first and only time today, we will have four standing Guns while the other three walk through the cover. Lucie, Hannah and David go with the walking Guns, and David directs the line.

As we take our first step into the rough grass, a pheasant lifts off and heads towards the standing Guns at the edge of the wood. From this distance we see a belch of flame and cloud of smoke long before the boom reaches our ears. The bird falls just outside the wood.

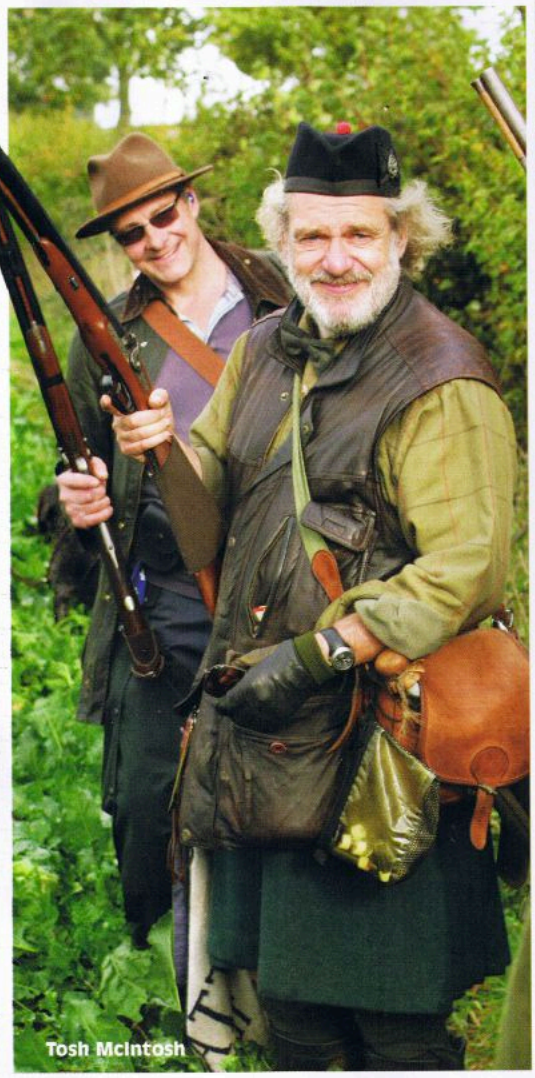
We press on through the set-aside. It isn't crammed with pheasants; this wouldn't make a drive for a conventional team of Guns, but the handful of birds we do flush are ideal for this way of shooting. As each bird gets up, the line stops and watches it head towards the inevitable distant puff of white smoke, which hangs in the damp air before slowly drifting across the field. We can just make out the frantic motion of the shooter's ramrod, and wait until his gun is ready again before moving on.

At the end of the drive David blows a whistle and we stride across the stubble to rejoin the standing Guns. There will be no more driving now; the rest of the day is pure walking-up.

We line up along a path in a 60-acre wood and set off with the pheasants running ahead. With no stops or beaters to direct the birds, they seem to be flooding out of the cover ahead of us. On a driven day that could spell disaster, but here the Guns will be shooting low and forward, so stops are out of the question. Besides, the birds are running on into our main objective, a huge field of sugar beet. There will be time to catch up with them later.

A couple of shots ring out from behind some thick trees, and word comes down the line that someone has brought down a bird; the shooter will need a minute or two to reload. As we wait for the signal to move, I ask Bev about how the loads used in these old guns compare to a modern cartridge. He uses 1 1/8 oz of No.6 lead shot, sandwiched between card wads and propelled by 3 drams (3/16oz) of Swiss No.2 black powder. He tips much finer powder into the pan under the frizzen to catch the spark, carefully tamping it into the touch-hole with a pin kept on a lanyard. "This stuff is like dust. Even a light wind can blow it out of the pan," he comments.

The guns fire a volley across the field to empty their guns



Tosh McIntosh

When he pulls the trigger, the cock falls and the flint strikes the frizzen, lifting the lid of the pan and throwing sparks onto the priming powder. The powder flash passes through the touch-hole to ignite the main charge.

Performance is similar to a modern cartridge, the flintlock propelling the equivalent of 32g of No.6 shot with a muzzle velocity of a little over 1,000 feet per second, compared to the 1,200 or 1,300fps of a modern cartridge. However the gun's barrel is a true cylinder, with no choke (it is impractical to ram the charge past a constriction at the muzzle). The unchoked pattern restricts the gun's range; Bev says he wouldn't shoot at a bird beyond 30–35 yards.

Suddenly a pheasant clatters into the air and crosses in front of Bev at 20 yards, no more than 12 feet off the ground. Knowing there is no-one ahead, it's a safe shot and Bev swings and fires. There's a jet of flame from the barrel, a smaller one from the touch-hole, a loud boom and we are engulfed in sulphurous white smoke.

Bev appears out of the fog, a few black smuts clinging to his face. "I got it," he grins, going straight into his reloading routine — powder, card, ramrod, shot, card, ramrod, priming powder, tamping, close the frizzen, cock the hammer. He is well drilled, and the job is done in no longer than it takes to describe it. "Ready," he calls out, and the line moves on.

A few yards further on we step out into the calf-high beet where Lucie's dogs really come into their own, and it's a pleasure to watch them work. They hunt

Hannah has taken the day off college to pick up

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right and left in front of the line, directed by the occasional pip from the whistle and wave of Lucie's hand. When a dog comes on point the line moves forward expectantly. As the nearest Gun comes close enough, Lucie sends the dog in to flush. A flurry of wings heralds another volley of shots and the gunsmoke fog descends once more. The bird is picked and we wait while powder and shot are poured and rammed.

The percussion guns do not need priming powder in a pan like the flintlocks; instead brass percussion caps are placed on the nipples under the hammers. It doesn't appear to save much time in reloading, but back in the 19th century it must have seemed like a huge leap forward. As well as giving more dependable ignition in difficult conditions, the caps fire almost instantaneously, without the noticeable delay of the flintlock.

Bev explains that there's a definite technique to shooting flying quarry with a flintlock: "People imagine that because of the delay you'd need to give a lot more lead. In fact, with a crosser, you pull the trigger just as you reach the bird, and keep the gun moving. It's the delay that gives you the lead — by the time the gun fires, it has moved ahead of the bird. It takes some practice because it feels unnatural if you're used to shooting a breech-loader."

At the next flush Bev swings the gun... and nothing happens. He's forgotten to cock the hammer fully. He quickly pulls it back and swings again. This time the bird falls, right at the extreme of his self-imposed range limit. A fine shot.

Our stop-start walk brings us to the far side of the field in time to break for lunch. Of course you can't just slip the cartridges out of the breech, so emptying the guns is quite a spectacle. The Guns line up and on the count of three, fire a splendid volley back across the field. "It's like November the 5th," someone jokes as the smoke clears.

After lunch we walk through the other half of the wood, arriving at the far side of the sugar beet field. There is talk of partridges and eventually a small covey explodes from the cover — but too far away for a shot. Still, there are plenty of pheasants to keep dogs and Guns occupied, and this was only ever intended to be a 30-bird day.

All too soon we reach the end of the beet. The sun is sinking as the Guns empty their muzzle-loaders for the last time today. They insist that I fire a shot. It's an odd feeling, with more noise and smoke than a breech-loader but the recoil seems less — more of a shove than a kick — as I feel granules of hot powder residue pepper my face and get a lungful of thick smoke.

As the Guns stroll back to the shoot hut Mark sums it up best; "They're all smiling, what more could you ask?" he says. "To be honest I get fed up with just shooting large numbers of birds. Everyone's had a few shots, and there's birds in the bag. A day like today is all about the companionship and fun."