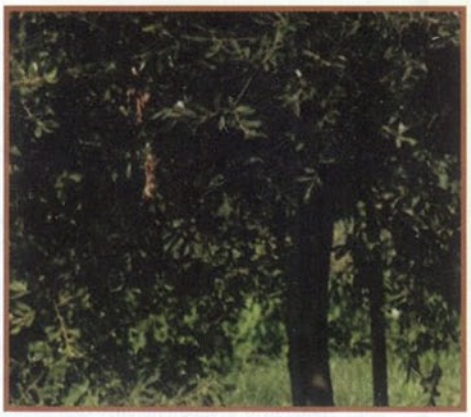
By James Darley

The Clumber Spaniel



Heritage and horizons

Clumber spaniels are not a common breed. Only one dog in roughly every 7,500 is a Clumber. Even with a UK dog population of 7.4 million, most people go through life without meeting a Clumber face to face. Yet the fortunes of the breed are a mirror to much that singles out this island of so-called dog lovers.

Clumber spaniels are the largest, one of the oldest, and certainly the grandest of British spaniel breeds. Like the national character of their owners, as working dogs they are by nature independent and undemonstrative, stubborn yet reliable, hard to motivate and slow to ignite, occasionally brilliant and sometimes disappointing. Their appearance is immediately appealing and yet unlikely. Just like we Brits, they are full of contradictions!

An Historical Perspective

Clumbers have been part of the British sporting scene, as a pure breed, for more than 200 years. The story goes that in 1789 a kennel of them was sent to the Duke of Newcastle by a French duke facing the guillotine. If true, these orphans of the French Revolution became our foundation stock. Alternative theories as to their origins have been advanced, but all are speculative. It is known they took their name from Clumber Park in Nottinghamshire, the Duke's estate near Worksop. In time they spread to other properties, in the Dukeries and then further afield, to build a reputation for their dependability as sporting spaniels.

As the muzzle-loading shotgun gave way to the breach-loader, and sport with driven game grew in scale and social dimensions, they readily adapted to being worked in large teams in addition to their role as all-round roughshooting dogs. Never the speediest of spaniels, in Victorian England they were highly regarded and highly prized as gamefinders. In early field trials at the turn of the century, they were pre-eminent.

They became the favoured shooting companions of kings Edward VII and George V, both of whom kept large establishments at Windsor and Sandringham. Yet, as the Empire faded away, as the pace of 20th century life quickened, and in particular as a consequence of the austerities of World War II, Clumbers fell from royal favour, they declined in number, and the respect they had long enjoyed as working dogs largely evaporated.

Many breeds all but disappeared during the war years. Clumbers survived, albeit with a dangerously depleted blood bank, because of a few committed show breeders. That is a debt owed to these enthusiasts by the rest of us. The only one. Breeding for show continues to shape the breed's development and health status. In the last 50 years, Clumbers have not attracted sufficient support from sporting owners to ensure that their working qualities and soundness have been retained at levels higher than those incidental to the quite different priorities of the show ring. During these years, numbers of Clumbers have nevertheless been bought for work as gundogs and many have given great satisfaction. But few were purpose-bred.

The Working Clumber

During this time, the revival of a real working Clumber has been kept alive as a goal by a few isolated individuals, their eyes cast back to the qualities of the past. They have had to draw largely on show-bred stock as all exclusively working bloodlines seem to have been lost. Since the war, a handful of dedicated - you could also say daft - owners have run Clumbers in field trials. In the 50s the best-known and most successful was Sidney Little, of Essex, with his Mushbrook dogs. Since the mid-70s, I have myself become a familiar figure at trials.

For many well-meaning springer and cocker devotees, I have become identified with St Jude, patron saint of lost causes! For the record, just 27 field trial awards in total have been made to Clumber spaniels since the war and up to the start of the current season. No fewer than 18 of them have been to four dogs run by me, including the only two awards in Any Variety stakes since the 1920s, and the only win by a Clumber in a field trial open to other breeds since before the First World War. I would not deny that I take some pride in that. But it has to be said that few capable handlers, and no skilled professionals, have made a serious attempt at competition, so there has been no major challenge. Given my limitations of ability and access to game and ground, the record is there to be broken.

Over the last two decades, a movement to re-establish the breed as sound and effective working spaniels has gathered strength. The force behind it has been THE WORKING CLUMBER SPANIEL SOCIETY, set up in 1984 on the initiative of two owners, Shaun Freke and myself. It has members in all parts of the country, and throughout the world.

When 70 breed enthusiasts gathered in a village hall near Bristol 12 years ago and resolved to set up the Society, they did so because they wanted an organisation dedicated to their needs. It was not a case of a few eccentrics getting together to share an offbeat interest in working their dogs. It was, instead, a group of people combining a love of field sports with Clumber ownership, intent on creating a new body that represented their values, harnessed their vision of the breed's redevelopment, and gave them a collective voice for the first time.

The objectives of the Society were there agreed and remain unaltered to this day:

* To promote and encourage training for work
* To restore physical soundness and working qualities
* To encourage breeding from sound, work-proven specimens
* To hold educational and competitive working events
* To resist moves to alter type which may damage utility.

A Difficult Path

Born from a dissatisfaction with the breed's health and working status, and a yearning to recover its latent potential, the Society was quickly involved in strife. With the opposition of the breed club, Kennel Club recognition was not easily or quickly won: not surprising, really, as the decision was entrusted to its Show Committee. Until recognition was achieved, the Society was excluded from consultation over proposals to alter the Breed

Standard. Advice and expert evidence it submitted ran contrary to that offered by the breed club. The amended Standard, published in 1986, authorised massive increases in weight.

This was a fundamental and non-negotiable source of dispute. Of course, a change to a breed Standard is, by definition, a contradiction in terms. If Standard is to have any meaning, it is substantially unalterable, permanent, not subject to whims of fashion or expediency. It might otherwise be better known as the Breed Optional, or Breed Variable. The revised Standard expressed as ideal weights 80 lb for dogs and 65 lb for bitches. The new design was thereby larger than the largest animals conforming to the existing Standard, which permitted 55 - 70 lb for dogs, and 45 - 60 lb for bitches, and compared with a pre-1909 Standard - when, remember, Clumbers were at their peak in the early field trials - of 40 - 45 lb.

Bearing in mind the continuing trend to excess in the show ring, it will come as no surprise to learn that Clumbers of 100 lb are not exceptional. Of course, to a sportsman, the notion of a spaniel working hard at such a weight is simply laughable.

The Society rejected the new Clumber in favour of the previous model, and continues to encourage the breeding of specimens whose modest size, lack of exaggeration, and physical and temperamental soundness are more consistent with the complementary demands of health and capacity for work.

An Uneasy Alliance

This issue proved irreconcilable between the Society and the Kennel Club. For a working gundog society to find itself at odds with its parent body is no isolated occurrence. Societies representing owners of working English springers, cockers, labradors, golden retrievers, pointers and setters, of which there are several score, are all KC-registered while committed to types not conforming to the respective Standards. It is an uneasy alliance. Like the representative bodies for these established working breeds, the Working Clumber Spaniel Society had to agree to differ with the only organisation by which it was permitted to be represented.

Since then the Society has achieved much success and passed many milestones. Among these, it has:

* Revived the "minor breeds" field trial and run it for eight years
* Held all manner of educational and working events
* Developed its unique Breeding Commendation Scheme based on a working ability assessment, hip X-ray and eye examinations, and size
* Attracted HRH The Princess Royal as its President
* Maintained a high profile and become the voice of the working Clumber
* Reawakened awareness of the breed's special characteristics
* Raised the issues of soundness and purpose-breeding for work
* Educated the sporting public, in turn influencing breeding practices.

Members of the Society continue to be guided by their shared recognition of a simple logic: it is that excellent working Clumbers cannot be unsound or exaggerated; that they have to perform the function for which the breed was originally created, and which is substantially unchanged today; and that fitting them for that purpose will assure Clumber

spaniels of a future good for more than winning rosettes.

The society has been vocal in getting its message across - that while many Clumbers will work, those bred from proven working and proven healthy stock are better prospects. Central to its aims has been a breeding programme in which members participate to common goals - trying to rebuild the type of Clumber so successful in the past. A Clumber much smaller than today's show specimens, free from exaggerations, free from hip and eye and other defects, possessed of a compliant attitude to being trained, and the aptitudes for good all-round work as a gundog.

A Rare Breed In Reserve

The case for the Clumber could be advanced solely on grounds of biodiversity. Even while single breeds of cattle, sheep, pigs and poultry are artificially and intensively reared, the value of preserving rare breeds of livestock is widely recognised as a source of new vigour and alternative characteristics. And where, even with our planet's shrinking wildernesses, as many plant and insect species have yet to be identified, catalogued or named as have already been discovered, these reserves represent untold opportunities in the sciences.

Breeds of dogs are not exactly a natural resource. Each one of them has been made by man. His hand has manipulated and moulded the raw materials of the wild, to produce over several thousand years an extraordinary range of varieties. Originally, these would have been largely developed for functions - guarding, herding and hunting - all of them modifications of wild behaviour. Over time, they were also developed for more recreational purposes - including companions and pets. In these roles, juvenile characteristics were appreciated. Hence the downsizing of various types to the smallest extremes, and the retention of domed heads, short muzzles, floppy ears, soft coats, large eyes and a submissive temperament. All of them, incidentally, features seen in most spaniel breeds, even the working strains.

This rich inheritance has been handed down to us and in little more than 100 years we have done much to destroy it. The diversity of dog breeds was created by selective breeding, whether pure or cross breeding, for specific purposes - be they practical or decorative. Either way, physical and temperamental soundness counted for much. Weak and unwanted pups went in the bucket. Commercial considerations did not come into it. In modern times, three main influences have conspired to spoil this healthy evolution.

The Effect of Showing

The first is competitive dog showing, which grew from the middle of the last century to present-day proportions. Showing has two main disadvantages. One is that it is really only external physical features that are assessed. Hidden defects - whether in mind or body - can be tolerated. The other is its effect of emphasising the differences between breeds, in order to make them more distinctive, leading to exaggeration of all their features. Small dogs become smaller, large dogs larger, long backs longer, short legs shorter. Think about it: it applies to muzzles, ears, coats and every characteristic you care to mention.

The second influence is the Kennel Club, notably its registration system. Since the 1880s, this has increasingly discouraged the mixing of blood between breeds - the kind of practice that has ensured the vitality and variety of dogs. As a result, breeds have become fixed. Their genetic variability has inevitably diminished. Between the wars it was not exceptional to find cross-bred spaniels listed as such in an Any Variety field trial card. Registration for outcrosses was, in fact, available until 1970, under rules which allowed progeny to be recorded as pedigree after three further generations of pure breeding. It may have been infrequently practised. It probably would be, if still allowed. You need a big establishment and a deep pocket to indulge in such an uncommercial long game. But the desirability of actively expanding gene pools that are dangerously shallow is recognised by geneticists, and removal of the regulatory obstacle would be a welcome signal of the Kennel Club's concern for the long-term welfare of breeds threatened by slow decline. Better late, than too late.

The third factor is improved transport and communications. A top dog no longer enjoys a reputation locally or regionally, but nationally and internationally. Its services as a sire or dam are accessible on the same scale. The effect on narrowing breeding lines is inevitable.

None of these factors, on its own, would work to the detriment of the dog. Together, they combine to pose a real threat to its continuing development.

So the argument in favour of retaining the Clumber spaniel can be made with an eye to the characteristics peculiar to it - the particular features that make it a Clumber. Who knows when they may be needed outside the breed that possesses them.

Work as the key to the future

But the right to survival is rarely given on far-sighted, logical, or even sentimental grounds. It has to be earned. It is still a competitive world. Those unfit for their environment go to the wall. Today, just as throughout the last few thousand years, the conditions under which dogs compete for survival are created by man. And those conditions change.

For small game, furred or feathered, and the dogs that pursue them, guns have replaced nets and hawks. The rapidly-reloaded modern shotgun superseded slow muzzleloaders to enable the development of driven shooting. Sporting estates, in turn, are now managed by one or two gamekeepers where there were once a dozen. Kennels at one time filled with large numbers of dogs of various breeds, each with its specialised role, now house a smaller number of the more versatile breeds.

In the case of the Clumber spaniel, the route to survival is complex and far from assured. Not only has the damage caused by its years as a Kennel Club registered breed - where its health has been compromised and its type altered to create a show strain far removed from its functional origins - to be undone. More than that task, hard as it is, it has to be adapted to the demands of today's sportsman. And tomorrow's.

The Need to Perform

It is no longer enough for today's owner to know that in a Clumber he has the oldest, the largest and, arguably, the most unusual, charming and unlikely-looking working spaniel. The dog has to perform. It is not enough that it was always the steadiest and most easily controlled, was worked in teams on large sporting properties to play its part in shooting in the grand manner, and when used in that way was not expected to retrieve.

The Clumber has to work at a pace dictated by today's needs, not yesterday's, or today's shooter will lose patience. Nor will his companions dally while his dog dithers. If they can kick more game up than the dog, they might as well leave it at home. Or use a stick.

Today's sportsman may be interested in reading how teams of Clumbers controlled by a kennelman carrying only a whip blanked whole hillsides into holding coverts from where the pheasants were trickled out over the guns; how they ignored flushing pheasants; how they were back in kennel, their specialised work done,

by mid-morning; and that such use of the breed, associated with famous estates in the Victorian and Edwardian era, endured right up to the 1950s at Tredegar Park in south Wales.

But that is all history. He is more interested in what one, maybe two Clumbers can do for him - to add to the delight of his shooting day, and add game to the bag slung across his shoulders or, neatly braced, to the shoot trailer.

The Clumber's job description is the same as any spaniel's: to find and flush game for the gun; to be steady; and to retrieve it tenderly, from land or water. Its pace is slower and more deliberate. But experienced and demanding enthusiasts are NOT content with a plodder, and look to create an active dog, lean of body and sharp of wits, with its own pleasing busy style and tail action.

Of course, his looks do set him apart from other working spaniels. He is not taller than many a springer, but is bulkier and carries more unsprung weight. His coat is pearly white (or, rather, it was when he got out of the dog box), with lemon or orange markings. His head is big, with a deep muzzle, and a thoughtful expression.

Distinctive Feature

The really distinctive feature of the Clumber is his nose - always large and pink. But the dog's difference from other spaniels is less physical than functional. To cover his ground he depends less on pace and sheer exuberance than on that nose. Whereas a snap of the fingers will send an ever-optimistic springer flying into cover, and convince a cocker especially if there's a chance of a chase on the blind side, a Clumber may consider the matter more logically. His nose will tell him whether it's worth the effort. He relies on the nose and expects the handler to show the same trust. Give him a hint of scent and he is transformed - and there is hardly a finer sight to behold in the field than a Clumber under full power.

Every owner of a working Clumber soon discovers the value of that nose, as the chuckles of his shooting friends turn to admiration when "that funny white dog" finds stuff missed by other dogs.

Ticket to the Future

In recent years there has been significant improvement in soundness and working build. While the breed as a whole continues to display the worst hip status of any in the UK, hip dysplasia X-ray scores have declined in work-bred lines. A double-zero has even been achieved, proving that perfect hips are not an impossible ideal. Eyes in these bloodlines have also become less prone to entropion, a turning-in of the lids, while size and type have been pulled back from the extremes favoured by exhibitors to the more sensible and practical proportions of a working spaniel.

But as the "minor breeds" field trial held at the end of December by the Working Clumber Spaniel Society was to show, there is still a major task ahead. Exceptionally, all nine Clumbers entered failed to survive the stake, a dismal result, depressing for the judges who wished for better, disappointing for the owners who expected better, and deeply disturbing for all who have laboured long and remain committed to the highest standards.

Those of us, however dedicated and hard-working, who succeed only in regenerating healthy dogs better suited to work will fail in our objectives if we do not achieve real and lasting improvements in working ability. Creating the potential is not enough. A working Clumber's prime task is to work. It is his only ticket to the future. Everything else, including health, is incidental. In the breeding policies we practice, we now have to see working ability as our main, maybe our only, guide.