

RETURN OF THE CLUMBER

by DAVID TOMLINSON



1—*Clumber Spaniels and Pheasants*, painted by Tom Heywood in about 1904, when clumbers were prominent in field trials

THIS year, Crufts Dog Show has moved to Birmingham for the first time in its 100-year history. Not only is this change of location significant, so is the change of date. Historically, Crufts was always held at the end of the game-shooting season, when gamekeepers could come to London to exhibit their working dogs, and discuss new jobs with potential employers. For the shooting community, Crufts was more than a dog show. It was a major social occasion, an employment exchange, and, for most gamekeepers' wives, the annual visit to London.

Crufts' growing popularity persuaded the Kennel Club to move to Birmingham, where a world-record 23,232 dogs will be exhibited over the four days. The change of date was forced on the exhibitors by the availability of the NEC. Even so, the choice of this coming Saturday as gundog day is unfortunate, for most working gundogs (and their owners) will be out shooting, beating or picking-up. Only a tiny percentage of the so-called gundogs at the show will ever have ever worked with a gun. Most will be pure-bred show animals, bred for their looks, not their working ability.

For one breed of gundog, the clumber, Birmingham is a scene of past show-ring success. In 1859, Earl Spencer, of Althorp Park, exhibited a clumber spaniel which



2—*The Clumbers of Clumber Park*, c1880, by John Emms

took top honours in a show in Birmingham. This was a significant moment in the clumber's history, for until the middle of the 19th century it was a little-known breed. It was success in the show ring that brought it to the fore. Until then, the clumber's fame

had not spread far from Clumber Park, in Nottinghamshire, where the Duke of Newcastle's spaniels were noted as exceptional game-finders.

As with most ancient breeds, tracing the clumber's ancestry is a combination of research and guesswork. James Farrow, whose work *The Clumber Spaniel* was published in 1912, believed that the breed's origin lay in the old Blenheim spaniel, which had been bred for centuries as a sporting dog. Other theories claim that the clumber was developed by crossing large spaniels with St Hubert's hounds or bassets, but this seems unlikely as clumbers never give tongue when hunting.

The most attractive story, which may have its roots in fiction rather than fact, suggests that the Duc de Noailles gave an entire kennel of spaniels to the 2nd Duke of Newcastle at Clumber Park, shortly before he and his family were killed in the French Revolution. Apparently, the Duc's kennels had long been established on his estate in the Limousin area, south of Limoges, but no other dogs of a similar type are known in France at the time.

The clumbers on show at Crufts this year will bear only a passing resemblance to their 18th-century ancestors. There will be similarities, such as the colour of the coat, and even the dog's overall configuration, but

A rarity in the shooting field, the clumber spaniel would probably have died out if it was not for the show enthusiasts. There is now a strong move to re-establish the clumber as a working gundog.



3—Venaticus Duncan and (right) Venaticus Beryl the Peril: compact, purposeful working gundogs

the modern clumber is a giant compared with its Victorian forbears. According to Farrow, a late-18th-century clumber probably weighed around 35lb. Today's show dogs weigh twice as much again.

It can be argued that the growth in size of the clumber parallels its rise and fall as a gundog. The clumber's golden period was a century ago. The sudden popularity of driven shooting demanded dogs for flushing game over the waiting guns, a task for which the short-legged clumber was well suited. No breed had a better nose, or hunted the ground more methodically. They had a reputation for being easy to train, which was just as well, as one professional trainer and huntsman would handle as many as 30 dogs.

When gundog field trials started in 1899, they were initially dominated by clumbers. According to one contemporary writer, C.A. Phillips, the clumber "lost nothing in pace to his rivals, even the long-legged springers". However, even then the working clumbers were notably lighter in build than the show dogs of their day, and the early field-trial winners were not thought to be typical examples of their breed.

Although the ubiquitous springer soon started to challenge, and later supersede, the clumbers, the popularity of the white dogs continued. The Prince of Wales, later Edward VII, was a clumber enthusiast, and

kept a kennel at Sandringham. The dogs were ideally suited to hunting the rhododendron thickets and heather-covered heaths on the royal estate. Following the King's death the kennel was disbanded, only to be started again by George V.

When George V died, so did royal interest in the breed, for the Sandringham kennel was sold by auction in 1937. Today, there is a royal connection once more, as last winter HRH the Princess Royal bought a clumber bitch for her daughter. The puppy, Venaticus Edwina, is from a working strain, and is being trained by the Princess's gamekeeper for work at Gatcombe Park. Her Royal Highness has agreed to be the Working Clumber Spaniel Society's next president, and will take over the role following the society's next AGM, in April.

Re-establishing the clumber as a working gundog is the aim of the society, founded in 1984. Show enthusiasts have been responsible for preventing the breed from dying out, but for many years they have bred dogs for their looks alone, so the true working clumber is virtually extinct. Even so, clumbers, descended from generations of show dogs, have still retained working abilities, and it is argued that, through selective breeding, the clumber can once again be a force to be reckoned with in the shooting field.

According to the breed's supporters, a clumber can do anything any other spaniel can do. But the breed's real appeal is in the way it works: more slowly, more methodically than a springer, yet with plenty of drive and purpose. A good clumber lacks the springer's speed and optimism, but it will keep its nose to the ground and hunt each line carefully, ignoring patches of cover where there is no scent. A clumber hunts by its nose and not by sight, and can be difficult to stop when its nostrils are filled with scent.

Look at 19th-century paintings of clumbers and you will see the sort of dog the working clumber enthusiasts want to recreate. John Emms's painting (Fig 2) shows a trio of dogs which are lighter in colour than the modern clumber, and which lack the exaggerated short muzzle of the show dog. If a dog's muzzle is too short it is handicapped when it comes to carrying a cock pheasant or a hare cleanly.

Similarly, a large, heavy dog is disadvantaged when working punishing cover, its weight sapping its stamina during a long day in the field. Clumbers are short-legged, but the demands of the show ring have led to animals which are too long in the back in proportion to their length of leg. These animals lose their natural agility. Similarly, the heavy, beetling brows of the show clumber impair the dog's vision,



4—Hunting and retrieving should come naturally to a clumber. Three-year-old Venaticus Duncan shows his ability to bring back a cock pheasant over a fallen tree: on December 28, he won his first field trial in an all-aged stake for minor breeds, held at Snape, Suffolk

and make it harder to mark a fallen bird.

Just over four years ago, the Kennel Club issued a new breed standard for the clumber. A good specimen should be "great hearted . . . with a determined attitude enhancing his natural ability", and should move "with effortless drive". The Working Clumber Society did not argue with any of this, but it did disagree with the new, "ideal" weight for the breed being increased to 80lb for dogs, and 65lb for bitches. The previous breed standard allowed dogs of 55lb–70lb, bitches of 45lb–60lb.

According to the society, the standards were changed simply to accommodate breeders of show clumbers, whose dogs have been getting steadily bigger in recent years. The society believes that the weight limits should not be raised, but the previous maximum weights adhered to, one of the

guidelines included in its own breeding commendation scheme.

The scheme's purpose is simple: "to promote the breeding of clumber spaniels with the essential qualities needed by a working spaniel, with physical soundness, modest size, and freedom from the exaggerations of the show ring". Owners who enter their spaniels for this scheme are provided with a breeding commendation certificate, with a four-part assessment of the dog's conformity to working type. Veterinary inspection is also required, as the society is determined to eradicate two hereditary faults which occur commonly in clumbers: hip dysplasia (no other breed suffers more badly from this) and entropion. The latter is a condition in which the upper or lower eyelid is turned inwards at the end, bringing hairs into contact with the

eye, and causing irritation and eventual blindness.

The society administers a breeding register, with the aim of making suitably bred puppies available to those looking for a working clumber. Clumbers are not the easiest dogs to breed from, so one can expect to pay perhaps half as much again as for a labrador. However, the society recommends that breeders of working puppies charge modest prices—certainly lower than the going rate for a show-bred puppy. The register should help keep costs down by providing a ready market for puppies, without the need for advertising.

The breeding register has a second role: by recording pedigrees and the details from the breeding commendation certificates, it aims to be able to identify genetic lines showing improved working ability and



5—Clumber enthusiasts claim that their dogs are capable of any form of spaniel work. Their game-finding abilities make them an ideal companion for the rough shooter

reduced incidence of breed defects. At the moment there are no clumber field-trial champions, but as an increasing number of dogs compete in field trials, so the likelihood of the first FTCh clumber must come closer. Any clumber which does do well in field trials is assured of being in considerable demand as a stud dog or breeding dam, so a considerable incentive awaits the keen handler.

Last month I spent a morning shooting over two working clumbers, owned and handled by James Darley. As secretary of the Working Clumber Spaniel Society, he has done more than anyone to try and re-establish the working dogs with his Venaticus line of clumbers. On a bitterly cold December day, the ground powdered with snow, his two dogs worked eagerly, powering their way through cover, and

displaying impressive drive. There was little scent, and birds were few, but they continued to work steadily, covering the ground as effectively as (and probably more thoroughly than) a typical English springer.

Clumbers have a special appeal: in the field their short muzzles and slightly droopy eyes give them an endearingly serious expression, while their white coats and subtle lemon markings are pleasingly different. They will retrieve readily, and, being less exuberant than a springer, are better suited to standing by a peg or picking up. Their real strength is not as an all-round gundog—other breeds are better here—but as a game-flushing, beating dog, the task for which they were originally bred.

After more than half a century in decline, the fortunes of the clumber now look more promising. However, the lack of

agreement between the Working Clumber Spaniel Society and the Kennel Club over the breed standard suggests that two distinct types are likely to emerge: large, clumsy (but pretty) show dogs, and smaller, leaner and more active working animals. Similar precedents exist with most of the other sporting breeds, from English springers through to golden retrievers, suggesting that it is high time that the Kennel Club made a serious reappraisal of the required standards of all working gundogs. Until it does, the so-called breed standards will remain a joke among those who breed a dog for what it can do, not for what it looks like.

Further information about the Working Clumber Spaniel Society from the Hon. Secretary, N.J. Darley, 39 Buckland Road, Buckland Wharf, Buckinghamshire HP22 5LL (tel. 0296 631155)

Photographs: Brian Moody.