

ON TEST

Is this Italian crossover the perfect gun for clays and game?

SHOOTING TIMES

The UK's leading weekly shooting title since 1882

& COUNTRY MAGAZINE

4th December 2013

GAMESHOOTING

A prize-winning walked-up day

Action and adventure on Scotland's wild islands



STALKING

Popping out for a Chinese

On the menu: Chinese Water Deer

LIVE! FROM INSIDE THE RABBIT WARREN

We go on the set of the TV show *The Burrowers*



WILDLIFE

Knock, knock! Look who's on your shoot

GUNDOGS

Shooting over clumbers: A sporting spaniel returns



Kites *and* Clumbers

Have efforts over the past 23 years to restore the Clumber spaniel as a hunting dog worked? **David Tomlinson** goes roughshooting over Clumbers to find out



James Darley and his home-bred five-year-old Clumbers, Boris and Bella

Back in 1990 I made two visits to the Chilterns. The first, in July, was to see the release of red kites. The previous year English Nature had launched its ambitious project to re-establish the red kite in England: I went to witness the release of a dozen young Spanish birds. My second visit was in December. This was to join James Darley for a day's roughshooting over his Clumber spaniel, Duncan. James was deeply involved with restoring the Clumber as a working gundog, and I was to write up my day for an article in *Country Life*.

I've always been fascinated by reintroduction projects, and I found the kite restoration particularly interesting. At that time the site of the release (in a beech wood on Paul Getty's Wormsley estate) was top secret, and I had to promise not to reveal it in anything I wrote. I was surprised at the choice of a location so close to London, though I noted the optimism of the release team that the birds would thrive.

A day of firsts

It was a hot summer day when I went to see the kites, and I remember witnessing my first purple emperor butterfly in the same wood as the kites' release pen. In contrast, it was bitterly cold when I joined James for the Clumber day, and it wasn't until nearly dusk that we eventually put a cock pheasant in the bag. My subsequent article was published in the same week as Crufts — a photograph of Duncan and his dam, Beryl, appeared on the magazine's front cover. This fortuitously anticipated the victory of a Clumber — albeit of a very different stamp — called *Raycroft Socialite* that was declared Best in Show, the only spaniel other than a cocker to capture the supreme Crufts title.

My latest visit to the Chilterns took place last month on a mild and bright autumn day. James had kindly invited me for a repeat day's roughshooting over Clumbers, and the chance to see how the breed has progressed after nearly a quarter of a century. As for the kites, I saw my first as soon as I turned off the M25 on to the M40, a reminder of the extraordinary success of the project.

© TOMLINSON



Bella retrieves a cock pheasant. She has six field-trial awards to her name

From the very start, both dogs hunted with genuine enthusiasm, noses to the ground

I was to see several more before I reached James's house in the hills not far from West Wycombe.

James is in the enviable position of having a roughshoot on the farm immediately opposite his house. It was, he explained, a property that specialises in horse livery, but young hardwood plantations had been established between the paddocks, and these usually held rabbits and the odd pheasant. I've always relished a good day's roughshooting, and though I was armed only with my camera I was looking forward to some good sport.

James was equipped with his William Evans boxlock 16-bore, a handsome gun that he has used for more than 40 years and with which he had bagged that pheasant 23 years before. Several generations of Clumbers have come and gone since then. James currently has four. Two are enjoying a well-earned retirement, so it was his home-bred younger dogs, Boris and Bella, who were to accompany us. Litter siblings, now aged five, they make a fine matched pair.

Bella (*Venaticus Henrietta*) has been the most successful Clumber bitch to be trialled since 1900. She has notched up no fewer than six field-trial awards, including two first places in minority spaniel trials and a recent Certificate of Merit in an AV spaniel trial, the first Clumber bitch to do so since 1938. Boris (*Venaticus Hercules*) has been almost as successful, so I anticipated seeing some fine spaniel work.

I wasn't disappointed. From the very start, both dogs hunted with genuine enthusiasm, noses to the ground, checking or investigating every likely piece of cover. Rather than working both at the same time, James chose to keep one at heel, allowing the other to hunt.

Both dogs proved equally responsive to the whistle, quartering well within range and never drawing too far away. They lacked the furious pace you expect of a trialling springer, but a Clumber isn't meant to be a springer substitute. For thoroughness and efficiency they were impossible to fault, and they were sufficiently stylish to please the eye.

It was soon apparent that there was plenty of scent, and I spotted a couple of cock pheasants running ahead of us. One made the fatal mistake of hiding in thick brambles, and eventually paid the penalty when he was nosed out by Boris and shot by James. It was a pattern repeated four more times. James bagged five cocks for five shots: each time the bird was neatly retrieved by either Boris or Bella. All the birds were shot cleanly, so there were no runners really to test the dogs.

Impressive outing

With five birds in the bag we decided that we had done enough: the success of the day was in marked contrast to my earlier Chiltern outing with James all those years earlier. Was it because the dogs were so much better? The honest answer was no, as we were on more productive ground, but I came back deeply impressed by what I had seen.

Unlike kites (I counted up to 18 at once during our outing), Clumbers remain rarities in the shooting field, but if you want a roughshooting dog that can really hunt, a Clumber has to be a breed worthy of consideration. ■

Gundogs

By David Tomlinson



Clumbers from the Victorian age

How I would like to see what our native spaniels looked like a century ago, in those heady days before the outbreak of World War I. But all I can do is look at the faded sepia photographs of the day, plus the work of the various artists who portrayed dogs. This was the golden age of dog portraiture, and few artists did a better job than John Emms.

Emms, who was born in Norfolk in 1844, grew up with a passionate interest in hunting and shooting. His favourite subjects were hounds and hunting, but he also painted many sporting dogs and was an accomplished portrait artist. He exhibited frequently at the Royal Academy, and gathered a sufficiently wide clientele to allow him to move to a large house with studio at Lyndhurst in the New Forest. He was an accomplished horseman, and he must have been a keen rider to hounds, for his hunting scenes have the hallmark of one with an intimate knowledge of the sport.

Spaniels feature in many of his paintings, and he is particularly noted for his portraits of Clumbers. At that time the Clumber was only half the size of many of the Clumbers we see today, but this was a distinctive and highly recognisable breed.

One of his most notable paintings is captioned *Faithful Friends*. It shows four Clumbers, three sitting, one lying down, with a bag of a brace-and-a-half of pheasants and a rabbit. These are handsome spaniels, predominately white, but with plenty of orange markings. Emms could capture an animal's character and form with his relatively simple brushstrokes, producing work that not only pleases the eye, but is anatomically correct.

The original can be seen in the Russell-Cotes Art Gallery and Museum in Bournemouth, but it can also be viewed on the art pages of the BBC website (www.bbc.co.uk/arts/yourpaintings). It's a painting that every Clumber spaniel show judge should study closely, to remind them what this breed should really look like. The modern show Clumber is a giant pastiche of its sporting ancestors, and thanks to various changes to its breed standard, not fit for function. James Darley and a growing number of shooting owners are striving to recreate the sort of Clumbers that Emms would have known, and dogs such as Boris and Bella (see *main article*) are a great example of what has been achieved. ■

You can email David at stgundog@btinternet.com.

Next week
David's impressions of the first HPR Championship Stake to be held this century