

# THE SOBER-SIDED SPANIELS

BY WILSON STEPHENS

**W**HEN the Princess Royal succeeds Lieutenant-Colonel R. S. Nelthorpe as president of the Working Clumber Spaniel Society next April, the current state of British spaniels in general will again be a lively issue. Spaniels are the archetypal gundogs. Their role in the sporting scene has been well reflected for three centuries by their place in sporting art. Paintings and prints show that, more than any others, spaniels are living heirs to the rise and fall of trends, practices and fashions in the conduct of shooting.

The royal patronage of Clumbers, one of the minority breeds, is a yardstick of current trends in spaniels themselves. Small is not neces-

sarily beautiful, but the rarity of working Clumbers provides a concentrated datum against which the immensely larger populations of springers and cockers, and other small populations can be measured. The long background of the past remains relevant.

Spaniels enter written British history with the gift of (possibly) a brace to a prince of Gwent when the victorious Normans were exchanging compliments with the Welsh after 1066. Game in those days was no less popular a dish for the well-to-do than it became after the introduction of sporting guns 600 years later. Pheasants, partridges, wading birds and waterfowl were preserved with this in mind, as well as for the sport of falconry (the gun did not displace the hawk until after





Shakespeare's time). Mass harvesting was by snare or net, and the skilful working of game birds and rabbits towards and into pre-set nets was the spaniel function. From it, much else followed.

Hence the emergence of the word 'springer' and the distinction between land and water spaniels, an early sign of the subdivision into separate breeds which was enforced by the differing terrains of various regions, and by the species of game hunted. After nearly 1,000 years the process is being maintained now and will no doubt continue.

Comparatively late in spaniel evolution, a mere 200 years ago, the first Clumbers arrived in Britain. Refugees from the French Revolution, a small stud of them was established at the ducal estate of Clumber in Nottinghamshire, to perpetuate their strain, and the estate's name became attached to them. Its accidental suggestion of 'cumber' as in cumbersome, combined with a solidarity of physique and an apparent solemnity in behaviour seem to have suggested to some subsequent breeders that these characteristics should be retained at all costs, so a certain stodginess is observable in many modern descendants of the original importation. To counteract this, and to sustain mobility, the Working Clumber Spaniel Society was formed.

Clumbers are not strangers to the royal touch. Kings Edward VII and George V were enthusiasts for them, for different reasons. The Edwardian covert-shooting style was the battue, in which the quantity of death was the measure of quality in the so-called sport, to a degree

exceeding even the worst excesses of the 'numbers game' in recent years. Clumber spaniels were held to be ideal aids in the long, slow build-up stages of a drive, when the airborne poultry were assembled and concentrated for take-off on their short journey to the Guns.

King George, a better shot and a better sportsman, changed all that, and valued Clumbers for their retrievership. Speed was no object. Infinitely painstaking as they were, they produced results in their own good time and left nothing behind. Even so they cannot have been scandalously slow, since that exactingly punctual King's sense of duty dictated that he never moved to the next stand while a bird remained unpicked.

Father and son, these two Sovereigns maintained the Sandringham kennel of Clumber spaniels for more than 50 years, until it was dispersed by sale on the orders of Edward VIII after his accession. His brother, reigning as George VI, was the best sort of modern game shooter, and a labrador man. To him a high, fast-travelling pigeon (such a one as fell to him on the afternoon before he died) was the equal of the best pheasants put over by beaters. The estate's sport has now changed full circle since it was bought by Queen Victoria as a country retreat for 'Teddy' in his long years as Prince of Wales.

Under the Queen and Prince Philip, no hand-reared pheasants are put to wood at Sandringham. Every bird is genuinely wild. The Queen works her own labradors, and from the start of her reign has decided their breeding and superintended their competition in field trials, of which she is a judge and in which, over the years, they won virtually everything except the Retriever Championship. There are no Clumbers. But the Queen has also bred cocker spaniels, and the imposing silverware of the Cocker Championship has done time at Sandringham.

But now, across the realm at Gatcombe, a Clumber spaniel drops to royal command. One senses that this young bitch puppy is unlikely to be the last. Readers of *The Field* will not need telling how dogs become de facto members of even the most exalted human families.

The Princess Royal bought Venaticus Edwina (thus officially named) as a present for her daughter Zara to work on the Gatcombe Park shoot after training by their keeper, Graham Cummins. The Princess, experienced with labradors, had seen Edwina's grand-dam and sire at work, and liked what she saw. Their owner, and the breeder of this puppy, is Mr James Darley, who lives in Buckinghamshire and is a long-time member of the Gatcombe picking-up and beating team. He has also worked with Sir Joshua Rowley in Suffolk for the restoration of the Clumber spaniel to its niche in British shooting as an ideal servant for senior sportsmen less quick on their feet than formerly.

The Gatcombe puppy can thus be seen in relation to the majority breeds as well as the minorities. To understand them all in the modern scene, it is necessary to consider their history. The past still has a message for us through our spaniels, actions speaking louder than words.

Those spaniels which went as a diplomatic sweetener to Gwent all that time ago were not the originals of their breed. This must have been established long previously, for they would have been chosen as something special and enviable, a real compliment, with generations of purpose-breeding already behind them. The French word '*espagnol*' (meaning, from Spain) became expressed phonetically in English as 'spaniel'. The Iberian peninsula was to add two more distinguished breeds to the world's gundogs, the pointer and the labrador in the 18th and 19th centuries respectively. But that was seven and eight centuries after spaniels had become part of the British scene.

The spaniel far antedates other gundogs. Its inborn skills, instincts, reflexes, drives, aspirations and, above all, its desire to please a human partner, have been concentrated and developed by selective breeding over the whole of that time-span. Setters came later, as offshoots of spaniels, called into being by the vogue for recreational shooting. Retrievers are recent genetic creations, evolved for their specific task in response to the technological innovation of breech-loading shotguns.

It is the spaniels alone that reach back across a millennium of human service to the nets of the fowlers in a working partnership with human beings. The warm, ardent, thrusting, high-spirited spaniel character, a hyperactivity curiously at odds with their physical silkiness and affection when at rest, is their heritage laid down layer upon layer across



Leaner, lighter, longer in the dock than show-bred Clumbers, clean-shouldered and reachy of neck, a brace work true spaniel ground for Mr Darley. The day's first rabbit is already in the game bag.

PHOTOGRAPHS BY FRANK HERMANN





the intervening centuries, even more concentrated by passage of time.

Inevitably, a tribalisation developed among spaniels, chiefly through differing regional priorities and purposes. Since the institution of dog shows and the imposition of breed standards on which shows depend, each spaniel tribe in turn has been split down the middle by the distinction between dogs bred to win show prizes on a few minutes' visual inspection only, and those bred to discharge the day-long, ever-active spaniel functions of game presentation and retrieving. The two objectives have influenced in contrary directions the choice of progenitors for each succeeding spaniel generation.

Thus we have in Britain the two major communities of cockers (approximately 7,500 bred annually, fewer than 5 per cent for work), and English springer spaniels (6,250 annually, more than 70 per cent for work), plus the minorities of Welsh springers (600, about half of which work), Clumbers (160, about 25 per cent for work), Irish water spaniels (120, 50 per cent work), field spaniels, (80, 30 per cent work) and Sussex (80, 30 per cent work).

Some points are obvious at first sight. English springers are the only spaniel breed in which the annual input of workers outnumbers the show dogs and pets; otherwise the ratio of workers to show spaniels and pets is higher in the numerically smaller breeds—perhaps reflecting a greater loyalty to declining breeds by those who value their dogs more for active service than appearance.

There is genetic curiosity about the two most numerous spaniel breeds. Until the first decade of the present century it was the custom to register puppies at about 12 months old; to do so earlier would have been pointless, since distemper then led to the death in their first year of half or more of the puppies born. Owners of these two breeds would at that stage weigh the surviving puppies and register those scaling 25 pounds or more as springers, and those less than 25 pounds as cockers.

Even though bred in the same litter, animals distinguished only by weight disparity have been the progenitors of two fundamentally dissimilar breeds. Differences in physical features—the compact build of cockers against the raciness of most of the infinite variety of working springers, and the contrasting rhythms in leg action, for examples—are marked but not conclusive. What are conclusive are mental differences—the mild, confiding nature and unvarying optimism of springers, and the egocentric, terrier-like independence and hard-boiled realism of cockers. These mental contrasts, consistently possessed by either side but rarely crossing the dividing line, and surviving the ancestral admixture of genes only 30 dog-generations ago, are marvels with few equals in any form of selective stock-breeding by aptitude assessment.

These variations on the spaniel theme, and their implications for spaniels as a whole, bring us back to Miss Zara Phillips, to the Clumber puppy of which she is the proud possessor, and to the Working Clumber Spaniel Club which is about to receive royal patronage.





Across Buckinghamshire the view is England as the year turns, and team spirit splits three ways. Rabbits sit out in winter fog; a stick pile must be checked, and woe betide the Gun if he misses.

Handsome is as handsome does in any kind of performance test. Eye-appeal need only be seen to be assessed, but efficiency must be measured by results. Show dogs are to be looked at; working dogs prove their worth by rendering their services—not merely for 10 minutes on a lead, but for hours on end of testing exertion in what is for spaniels rougher country than that to which other dogs are required to devote their working lives. Willingness, courage and stamina to do so are more important than breadth of skull, eye colour, set of tail, or other points of conformation. Owners of workers cannot afford to dilute the blood of their dogs with that of non-workers, and here lies the great divide in spaniels. Consider its cause and effect.

Showing a dog does it no harm. The damage lies in breeding it to win when shown. The crucial distinction between show dogs and working dogs can be better described as being between breed-standard dogs and performance-test dogs. Each system omits certain factors from its objectives as superfluous to the aim in view.

Breeding to the standard is mere template breeding, an attempt to make whole breeds identical, and does not involve concern for variables in the minds, hearts and nerve-sensitiveness in the resultant puppies. Breeding for work excludes concern for physical construction other than that required for operational effectiveness. Given that, human athletes can be of any shape, size and colour; so can working spaniels. They need not look like spaniels in the opinion of some people; but

it is essential that they think and act as spaniels. A skull of the specified shape is useless unless it contains brains and initiative.

These are recognised truths among experienced spaniel owners of both persuasions. Few working cockers would be identified as cockers at all by people acquainted only with show cockers. Show springers, however charming as companions, have been bred to be too ungainly for true spaniel work with its premium on agility, though many make passable retrievers. With an ample pool of working blood in English springers, and a sufficiency in cockers, there is no doubt about the continuance of the working potential in both breeds.

This being so, peace reigns between the two interests in each breed society. Neither side feels inferior. The blood-lines are far enough apart to be those of separate breeds. Inter-breeding across the 'divide' is virtually unknown. There being no contact except that of good fellowship, disputes do not arise. Co-existence is untrammelled. There is no longer any empty-headed talk of 'dual purpose', a fertile source of acrimony in Gundog circles before the myth was exploded.

In the minority breeds the situation is less easy. Excluding Welsh springers, always a law unto themselves on the shooting field, and sometimes off it, total numbers are too small for inter-breeding to be wholly avoided, and the attendant consequences of divided objective have been inescapable. At times the united resources of both wings have been needed to keep a minor breed in being and, though inherent working capability exists in all of them, it is dispersed. Several generations of careful mating are needed to reconcentrate it, after which real progress could be possible.

The potential of the minor breeds may be briefly expressed thus: the value of Welsh springers in hunting the severest of country is not to be disputed, and their stamina is bottomless; but as retrievers most of them have scope for improvement. Some Clumber strains have shed their ponderousness, and are capable workers of cover at a pace welcome to elderly Guns for whom matching strides with springers is no longer possible, especially in typical spaniel country.

Other Clumbers are being bred so gigantic as to be physically incapable of spaniel work. Irish water spaniels' natural country is snipe bog or wildfowl estuary; in English conditions they are generally better at retrieving than at beating out brambles, willing though they are. Field spaniels are rare in present-day shooting; they were, however, the last breed to contest the Spaniel Championship against the all-conquering English springers, and to win awards—albeit minor ones and 50 years ago. Sussex spaniels are thorough, in the Clumber tradition, but at their own pace; when, occasionally, one of them has run in a field trial the writer has formed the opinion that they are no fools and have game sense, but their lack of turn-of-foot makes them no match for springers at working ground, nor for cockers in style.

One of the difficulties faced by minor spaniel breeds is that few people outside employers of the major breeds in active shooting have any real idea what spaniel work should consist of. Most are obsessed with retrieving, forgetting that this is an addendum—a sequel, though a vital one, to the spaniels' real business. They also believe that this business, the working of ground, is a matter of merely galloping about and alarming by accident whatever game they happen to bump into. As every mobile shooter knows, this is far from the case. Until all spaniel breeders learn it too, most spaniels will continue to be bred with no hope of being able to do their real work at anything more than awkward-squad standard.

The Working Clumber Spaniel Club has been formed to incorporate the dependable and patrician qualities of the Clumber into a well-balanced, properly co-ordinated physique of a power-size ratio which will permit it to fulfil the destiny which, such is the force of heritage, is for ever trying to get out. It is a line that all enthusiasts must take if they wish their minor breeds to have a future in service to the gun. No amount of talking about the desirability of this, or of teaching dogs to retrieve dummies at training classes in summer meadows, will rectify the unemployability which breeding to standard has allowed to creep in.

Beauty is in the eye of the beholder. Work must speak for itself. Connoisseurs of either should tolerate each other. □