

FOR MOST OF today's fieldsports enthusiasts, the Clumber spaniel is a breed with a past. A glorious one, maybe - the Clumber's known history goes back to the 1780s - but only a past.

It's seen as a breed with its best times behind it, out of step with modern demands upon working spaniels for pace, punch and pizzazz; an anachronistic if charming relic, suited to an earlier era when time, and everything else, moved more slowly.

No longer. Through a programme of selective breeding by a handful of passionate owners, the modest size, practical type, soundness and above all the working qualities of the Clumber of 19th century England have been recaptured.

What's more, the restoration Clumber of today is being equipped for the needs of tomorrow, with the style and speed to compete for the favour of serious, skilled handlers and field triallers, not just the driven shot or rough shooter with an eye for the unusual.

Of the various minority spaniel breeds, which also include Welsh springers, Sussex and field spaniels, Clumbers now look most likely to provide a realistic alternative to English springers and cockers.

While diversity is desirable in itself, the breed's new claim for attention is based entirely upon performance. After all, no amount of wishful thinking or hype cuts any ice with experienced working gundog owners. The dominance of the two popular spaniel breeds is no accident. Guns, keepers, beaters and pickers-up, as much as field trial judges, are impressed only by what they witness under actual shooting conditions.

And it is in the field that Clumbers are demonstrating how they have changed. On the Buckinghamshire shoots where we have been regulars this season, not a day has gone by without my Clumber receiving unsolicited plaudits from keepers or other helpers.

In and around Exmoor, John and Debbie Zurick get the same interest in their Sedgehurst dogs, out not less than three days a week. Up and down the country, it is the same story for Clumbers regularly worked to a high standard.

Then there is the field trial record. Many would argue that Clumbers (as much as their owners) are temperamentally ill-suited to the

James Darley, co-founder of the Working Clumber Spaniel Society, rejoices in the revival of one of our rarest breeds of gundog.



Sporting COMEBACK

Returning at speed - James Darley's Sedgehurst Maxim Venaticus, the first Clumber since 1900 to win more than one stake open to other breeds.





HISTORIC BREED

Clumbers are the largest native breed of spaniel. They have been part of the British sporting scene, as a pure breed, for more than 200 years.

The story goes that a kennel of them was sent to the Duke of Newcastle at Clumber Park by a French duke facing the guillotine. In time they spread to other estates and reached their heyday in the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

With the advent of World War One and the scaling down of the big estates, the Clumber went from top dog to almost total obscurity. It was nearly lost for good as a working dog.

Only one dog in roughly every 7,000 is a Clumber, and with a UK dog population in excess of 6.5 million, many people will go through life without meeting one face-to-face.

For more information about the Working Clumber Spaniel Society visit its website, www.workingclumber.co.uk or contact Debbie Zurick on 01643 831427.

tensions and regulated expectations of trials. Even so, a handful of amateur handlers have been prepared to stick out their necks - and those of their dogs.

By way of reward, in the five seasons to 2001-2, five different Clumbers have won field trials open to other breeds. While these trials exclude English springers and cockers, the historical record shows this improvement is unprecedented.

There have been four trials restricted to minority breed spaniels this season. Clumbers have taken 11 of the 17 awards given. The most memorable was the stake held at North Molton in Devon by the Working Clumber Spaniel Society in December, sponsored by Gilbertson & Page.

It left no doubts about performance and provided a fitting response to the Kennel Club's recent decision to reinstate the minority spaniel breeds' field trials and awards in the official journal of record, the Stud Book. Puppies bred strictly for careers in the field are still few in number. The gene pool may be small, but it is being carefully enlarged. Litters planned for this year will benefit from a minimum of eight generations of solid breeding for work.

They are athletes compared with their show-bred cousins - smaller, lighter and faster, with shorter coats and longer muzzles. They look purposeful, much like the dogs of Clumber Park in Nottinghamshire portrayed in Victorian times.

To reach this point has taken more than 25 years and has been far from easy. The many problems now largely overcome in working lines include bad temperaments, eye defects and the worst hip dysplasia in the dog world.

Suitably bred Clumbers can be expected to

train and respond willingly, hunt with vigour and courage, retrieve reliably, and work with stamina for many years. And be noticed.

A Clumber doing a good job in a beating line, particularly if other spaniels are flushing birds 150 yards ahead, may suggest that the breed is by nature steady. But, as with any spaniel worth its salt, this dog will self-hunt or run riot given the chance, so control is still down to the trainer and handler.

As much as its pearly white coat, marked with orange or lemon, the really distinctive feature of the Clumber is its nose - always large and pink. To cover its ground it relies on its nose above every other faculty. Guns who have not seen one before soon discover that, for all its unlikely appearance, the funny big white dog is a remarkable game finder - and its owner somehow always seems to have more than a fair share of the action. The Working Clumber Spaniel Society recently presented a promising puppy named Sparkle to its president, Princess Anne, and counts four professional trainers and A-panel field trial judges among its growing membership.

Once jealously restricted to grand estates, the Clumber was the favourite of Edward VII and George V, who worked packs of eight to ten of them as 'blanking in' dogs. Pre-eminent in the first years of spaniel trials, it is today earning a new place in the shooting field - on merit.

CLUMBERS are great game-finders, using ground scent to maximum effect.

