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Irish COUNTRY SPORTS and COUNTRY LIFE

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Front Cover: The Millenium best sidelock shotgun from Cogswell & Harrison



Irish Game Angler cover:
Stevie Munn does some fancy casting on the Six Mile Water.

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Drumbanagher Estate Shoot

Tom Stalker visits Drumbanagher Estate Shoot in Co. Armagh and finds a hidden gem sparkling amongst the hills of Poyntzpass.

Drumbanagher is a walled demesne situated a few miles south of the scenic village of Poyntzpass in the county of Armagh, Northern Ireland. The historic seat of the Close family, the demesne extends to some 650 acres and is one of the most fertile and beautiful private areas in the Emerald Isle. Sadly, Drumbanagher Castle, the once handsome primary residence of the demesne, built in 1837 by Lieut.-Col. Maxwell Close is now demolished.

However, the large portico, which stood in front of the Italian-style house remains to the present day and gives a sense of the impressive grandeur of the demesne.

The topography of Drumbanagher makes it one of the prettiest expanses of Irish countryside where steep wooded valleys and tree-lined pastures idyllically lend themselves to superlative driven game shooting. Drumbanagher Estate Shoot is rightly

regarded as one of Northern Ireland's premier high bird shoots and the shooting offered there has become much sought after by high bird aficionados throughout the island of Ireland and further afield.

The shoot operates today with a military efficiency under the direction of Brian Byrne who fulfils the combined role of Gamekeeper and Shoot Manager and has done since 2000. The twelve named drives at



Quality birds - Gun's eye view at Drumbanagher.



Excitement mounts as the shooting is about to begin.

Drumbanagher produce stratospheric birds with repetitive ease. However, the true sporting potential of the estate only became a reality in relatively recent times and for years this gem of Irish game shooting lay undiscovered and undeveloped. Brian takes up the tale of the shoot's development:

"I had kept on a number of other estates in Ireland over the course of around 25 years. Each of the estates made wonderful driven shoots in their own right but were limited to varying degrees by their topography and in some cases by the history of their development before my time with each of them. When I first saw Drumbanagher it was clear that the estate presented an expanse of land with a practically ideal topography for driven shooting, but the ground itself had seen no development whatsoever. In some ways that meant that taking the estate in hand as a shoot was an immense opportunity; I had a blank canvas with which to work. Although, with everything to do from scratch, coming to Drumbanagher presented some serious challenges as well.

However, I have been encouraged in my efforts at the estate by the Close family and by the local community. I am also surrounded by a fantastic team whose dedicated support has been invaluable in developing the shoot to the level at which it stands today."

As with many shoots, Drumbanagher is reliant upon a release programme each year. However, the shoot makes every effort to increase the wild stock of birds each year with feeding extended throughout the closed season and with the vigorous control of pest species year round. Habitat enhancement is also high among the priorities at Drumbanagher with large tracts of mixed game cover being planted in addition to an extensive programme of woodland management as well as tree and hedge planting in an effort to encourage wild stocks.

The shoot prides itself on a desire for quality which far outweighs any wish to unnecessarily increase quantity. In line with this the shoot aims to produce bags of between 150 and 250 birds per day but can also accommodate larger days or back-to-

back days if necessary.

The shooting is run on a very social basis and this is something that Brian has strived to maintain. "The social aspect of our sport is important. Whilst transport can be provided between drives, due to the compact nature of the estate, the drives at Drumbanagher are within walking distance of each other. Most of the Guns generally elect to do just that and this provides an opportunity for everyone to fully engage with fellow Guns, whether old friends or new acquaintances."

Facilities

The hub of the shoot is the enclosed stone-built courtyard which provides car parking for visiting Guns, kennelling for Brian's Drumnascamp line of cockers and which centralises on a comfortably converted stone building which acts as the shooting lodge. The lodge provides both shelter and warmth, provided by a generously proportioned wood-burning stove, and is a welcome retreat during the winter months.

Tea, coffee and a warm welcome are provided to all upon arrival at the lodge and light refreshments are served in the field after the second drive of the day. Visiting Guns have the option of stopping around midday and retiring back to the lodge for lunch, although the majority prefer to "shoot through", dining after the final drive of the day, when drinks, a hot meal provided by an excellent local restaurant, followed by dessert with tea and coffee are served. The Irish coffee also served at Drumbanagher has become one of the shoot's specialities over the years and is well worth the attentions of those who prefer something a little stronger at the end of the day.

Shooting Impressions

Typically shooting begins at around 09:30 following the usual safety briefing and drawing of peg numbers. Although Game Cards are issued, Guns are closely chaperoned to ensure that everyone finds their way between

drives and to the right peg. The visiting Gun can therefore relax and soak up the atmosphere of the day without the need to concern themselves about where to be and when. Those new to the shoot are briefed at the peg on what to expect from any particular drive.

I visited Drumbanagher on a day in mid-December with the shooting season at its zenith. The weather was unusually fine and dry which in most opinions might not have proved particularly conducive to presenting high birds. However, the standard of birds that were to be shown during the course of day was what can only be described as exceptional.

The team of Guns on the day in question were well acquainted with the drives at Drumbanagher having been there on numerous occasions in the past. Spirits were high as the Guns made their way the short distance from the courtyard to the pegs for the first drive of the day at Bell's Hill. On this drive Guns are positioned on pegs in an open area of former parkland known as the Lawn Field. The horn signalling the start of the drive was sounded as soon as the Guns were on their pegs and comfortable. Before the Guns is a long, elevated wood bounded by an extensive cover crop on its upper right hand edge. The wood extends for some distance to the rear of the flushing point, which is some little way back in the wood at its highest point above the Guns. With some distance to be travelled by the beaters in blanking-in the drive, some while passed before the birds began to appear, first in ones and

twos, then in larger but controlled flushes. The birds flew extremely well gaining height and speed and provided shooting throughout the line. The large number of shots fired was testimony to the number of birds presented and the cartridge to kill ratio (which won't be recounted here for reasons of etiquette) certainly gave an indication of the high quality of the birds.

With the horn blown again to signal the end of the drive, picking up completed by an efficient team of dog handlers, and after regrouping, congratulations and commiserations were shared throughout the team of Guns, before a further short walk to the area known as Claypark. Upon arrival the Guns were swiftly directed onto their pegs for the second drive. Claypark is perhaps the highest point on the estate and is a large and steeply inclined area of pastureland bounded on all sides by narrow woodland. The beaters unobtrusively blank-in the surrounding woodland to the high ground above the Guns before skilfully driving manageable flushes over the treetops some distance ahead of the Guns. From there the birds fly over the pegs and on to an unseen home wood some way in the distance behind the Guns. The quality of the birds on this drive was quite simply startling. Hen birds in particular appeared as small as starlings such was their height and despite numerous volleys of shots from the double-banked Guns many birds seemed untouchable. Added to this that, due to having covered a significant distance before reaching the

Guns, most birds were already on set wings and sliding through the air at phenomenal rate, they really were an incredibly difficult and deceptive target. Those Guns with the ability to pluck these archangels from the air with any degree of regularity clearly possess a particular set of well-honed skills. The flushes of pheasant on this drive were also interspersed by a number of mallard adding variety and at a height equal to that of any of the pheasants shown. Spectacular.

With the drive over, elevenses were served in the field in the form of a warming soup and crackers. This gave the Guns as well as the numerous beaters, pickers-up, flankers, etc. a short interval in which to socialise, revive and discuss the morning's sport before moving off to the next drive, Carrickbrack.

Carrickbrack is an incredibly steep area of spinney on one side of a narrow valley. The spinney terminates at the foot of some mature woodland perched high above a laneway. Guns are located along a section of the laneway which cuts horizontally across the face of the spinney. Again some Guns are double-banked with a number at the foot of an even steeper slope below the lane. The drive involves blanking-in the wood above before the unseen line of beaters sweeps across the face the spinney some way above the Guns. The variety of birds presented by this drive is amazing. Initially birds emerge from the highest point in the drive producing spectacular driven birds crossing the valley below, heading for a wood on



The banter starts after an amazing drive.

the other side. Upon reaching the Guns and particularly those in the back line they have reached an astonishing height indeed. Owing to the topography, the birds are only visible and indeed manageable when practically overhead. Guns therefore need to be at the top of their game if they are to have any measure of success on the Carrickbrack drive. When the beaters change direction upon reaching the spinney itself, many of the birds sweep along the line of Guns producing tantalising shots at birds that have generally already been missed by ones neighbouring Gun. The habitat on this particular drive is also ideal for woodcock and a number of this most prized of gamebirds put in an appearance on the day in question sending ripples of excitement along the line to the cries of “woodcock forward” from the beaters.

After the excitement of Carrickbrack comes Kennel Wood. The walk to this drive provides a ‘good stretch of the legs’ being located near the main gates of the estate and some little distance from Carrickbrack. The wood itself is an elevated, pear-shaped mixture of hardwoods with a dense patch of laurels at the flushing end. Guns are stood at a U-shaped pattern of pegs located on a steep incline in front of the wood with two to three more located on pegs some way behind the main line in an area of clear-fell adjacent to the avenue into the estate. A relatively short drive of the wood concentrated birds into the laurels with controlled flushing producing bouquets of quite excellent birds once again. The Guns to the rear of the main line were treated to some superb birds indeed.

Four drives down, two to go

From Kennel Wood it was on to the drive known as Demoan. This drive focuses on a large area of cover crop situated on top of a long incline of tree-lined pastureland and backed by woodland. The T-shaped cover crop requires skilful blanking-in to gently encourage the birds from the woodland

and the area of crop running along its exterior, out into the wide finger of crop that projects on to the high ground above the Guns. However, this task is one which has clearly been completed many times by the beating team and the drive progressed in textbook fashion. Shooting was spread evenly long the line of Guns throughout the drive with plentiful birds for everyone. Those Guns directly opposite the projecting finger of cover crop were clearly in the ‘pound seat’ in the latter stages of the drive on this particular day and due to the open vista their shooting skills were on public show for all to see – no pressure. All of the Guns however acquitted themselves well having well and truly found their form by this stage in the day and a good number of these deceptively high birds were added to the bag.

The final drive of the day was the drive known as The Bulge. This is perhaps Drumbanagher’s flagship drive. The drive is located adjacent to the Demoan drive and consists of two arms of woodland joined to a central ‘bulge’ of mixed woodland at the top of short but steep incline of pastureland. Both arms of woodland are blanked into the main central area requiring a significant investment of time before the birds are brought forward to a flushing point within the wood but some way back and above the Guns. In order to do the numbers of birds on this drive justice, Guns are again double-banked with approximately half their number lined along the boundary of the pastureland and the other half located on pegs situated on mowed stands within a clear-fell area some way behind. The shooting produced by this drive was quite simply extraordinary. With the blanking-in completed trickles of birds emerged with consistent regularity and at ever increasing height; powerful birds bent on crossing the lines of Guns to a wooded incline some way in the distance. Shooting was noticeably well spread amongst the Guns during the course of this protracted drive but the back line was

presented with some particularly fine birds. The drive in full swing was an amazing spectacle and no visiting Gun could be disappointed.

With the final horn of the day blown, the echo of gunshots gave way to the soft peeps of dog whistles from the pickers-up who were already engaged in the task of collecting the numerous fallen.

Smiles all round both from the Guns and Brian and his team alike.

This was quite the most superb day of driven sport the author has witnessed in some while. Judging by the demeanour of the Guns at the end of the day it was clear that it was for them too. It was a happy group indeed that retired to the shooting lodge for a sumptuous late-lunch, which seemed expertly timed with the arrival of everyone back at the courtyard.

What of the future?

But what of the aspirations for the shoot with a reputation for fine shooting which must surely be firmly acknowledged by this stage?

“You can never be complacent about a shoot,” says Brian, “and no matter how good it is, there will always be something that can be improved or tweaked. The main thing for us is to continue building on what we have, to continue investing the shoot’s development and strive for the best.”

Ireland has not always featured as greatly as it should when it comes to high quality shoots, even when they have been married so perfectly with tradition and expertise. However, Drumbanagher Estate must be the perfect example of just such a shoot and one which will surpass the expectations of even the most seasoned Gun.

Final Bag: 192 Pheasant, 26 Mallard, 2 Woodcock.

Read more at www.drumbanaghershoot.co.uk/

For enquiries and bookings call 07977253124 or e-mail info@drumbanaghershoot.co.uk

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