

Sporting birds on Mrs Swinneys  
outwitted many guns.

# Arbigland, Dumfriesshire

This geologically diverse shoot spoils its guests with sporting birds, as **Martin Puddifer** discovers.

Photography: **Glyn Satterley**

**A**rbigland sporting tenant Craig Denman was worried about the weather. Black clouds draped themselves over the secluded lodge in Kirkgunzeon he runs with wife Sarah, and an unsettled forecast diverted his attention from the football and towards the windows. Later, when we took our places for dinner, Craig, a former stockbroker, announced, "Whatever happens tomorrow, your worst day's shooting is still better than your best day's work, isn't it?"

Arbigland lies three miles to the south east of the lodge. Its shoot was private from Victorian times until 2000 when Jamie Blackett, a former guards officer, took over the running of the estate from his father, Captain Beauchamp Blackett. The shoot's running costs were unaffordable by then, and in a bid to keep the old gamekeeper employed, Jamie

outsourced it. Craig became the second shoot operator under this arrangement in 2006, and since then both he and Jamie have been polishing the shoot to share its family atmosphere with their visiting guns.

It takes a while to work out why the shoot feels narrower than it is. Even when standing at its heart the undulating landscape makes features in the distance appear much closer - good portents for shooting? There are 1,200 acres in all, sliding down from Criffel Hill towards rolling arable fields lined with hedges and spinneys that level out onto marshland and two miles of Solway Firth shoreline.

The metamorphosis from private to commercial shoot has been steady. Craig has thrown in a good deal of his own personality, with every aspect of keeping, bird welfare and drive geography studied meticulously. Everything is seen



### Inheriting a family jewel

"I GREW up here and obviously had a lifetime's experience of being involved in the shoot," said Jamie Blackett. "When I took it on it became apparent that it could not survive in its original form, and I wanted to keep our old gamekeeper employed, so I instantly set about outsourcing it. I originally did this with a local sporting agent for around five years. It was when that arrangement came to an end that I met Craig.

"The Blackett family are very much the sleeping partner in the whole shooting arrangement and we've given Craig all of

the responsibility for running the shoot. Craig brings great enthusiasm to the shoot and is always willing to try new things. He is very hands on, and with a bit of help from us through our rural priorities stewardship scheme (such as planting of woods and game crops) we are making progress.

"We want to continue with the emphasis on quality rather than quantity, we are keen to foster bio-diversity on the estate anyway through our conservation efforts. A spin off from this is that we are slowly improving our snipe shooting." ■



The gloomy conditions affected neither gun nor bird.

through a constructively critical eye, and Craig will never settle for 'okay' drives offering 'okay' sport. At the end of the season there is no room for sentimentality if things haven't quite worked out.

Fledgling let shoots always have to make hard decisions and Arbigland has had its share of problems. The recession saw a loss of sold days and there have been a number of risky gambles that have failed, including cover crop mixtures and potentially fruitful pen positions proving ineffective. Craig has always been philosophical when things don't quite come off, reasoning that he has to be prepared to fail if he wants to get anywhere. His might be an informal, relaxed shoot, but he doesn't do 'satisfactory'.

The following morning, he was prepared for the light rain sprinkling the kitchen windows of The House on the Shore, the Blackett family home. I followed Craig from the lodge down to the narrow lane behind the house where guns were rounding off breakfast. The sky above was dank and grey. With the tide well out, Craig briefed the guns on the beach and while they ambled back to the house he left to join beaterkeepers Doug Potts and Jim Blackwood, already in position for the first drive.

Mrs Swinneys is a long field with a spinney above its centre-left, and the sides and bottom of the field are surrounded by a staggered tree line. There are no pegs at Arbigland, Craig preferring to position guns where he perceives the birds will fly if responsive to his beaters. The guns lined up in a shallow crescent, about 40 yards apart, and 150 yards back from the dry stone wall surrounding the spinney. Positioning guns this way is rather cunning, since it tests both their judgement of a bird's height and line, and their awareness of their neighbours. Craig and Jamie discourage poaching, and those that resisted the temptation,

especially on Mrs Swinneys, found if they were ready, any birds missed by their neighbour would present a higher and faster target for them.

"The birds did well without the wind," Jamie uttered while sleeving his gun, "the beaters did well to dribble them out like they did." While Craig helped to pick birds and guns joked politely about whose birds was whose, I asked Jamie if he was concerned about the impending rain. "Being at sea level we sometimes miss the bad weather," he replied, a hint of 'wait-and-see' in his voice.

### An interesting journey

The two back guns on Lay-By started off by walking through a saturated field. The drive was a blanking exercise, the two guns shuffling along slowly, following beaters roaming through woods the other side of a single-track road. While they saw relatively little sport, the sound of gunshot in the distance suggested there were consistent pockets of action elsewhere. Around 15 minutes into the drive the back guns came to the natural end of the field, joining a number of guns who had



The team of pickers-up were kept busy.



Jamie Blackett (in odd Wellingtons) discusses tactics with Craig Denman.



The House on the Shore was a fantastic base for the guns and guests.



Captain Beauchamp Blackett joined the guns on Jubilee.

### The Arbigland estate

ARBIGLAND HAS been the home of the Blackett family, and their forebears the Stewarts, since 1852. Its connections with Scottish history draw in thousands of visitors every year. John Paul Jones, seen as the founder of the US Navy, was born at Arbigland in 1747 and his birthplace is now a museum. The poet Robert Burns was also a frequent visitor to Arbigland House.

During the 19th century Carsethorn was one of the main ports from which tens of thousands of Scots emigrated to North America.

The House on the Shore was built in 1936 by Jamie Blackett's great grandmother, originally as a dower house. Like four holiday cottages on the estate, it is opened up to visitors throughout the year and is popular with parties of visiting sportsmen.

The estate is also home to a sizable farming operation, growing 600 acres of crops and 400 acres of grazing for its herd of pedigree Luing cattle. ■

For more information about Arbigland and its various activities visit [www.arbiglandestate.co.uk](http://www.arbiglandestate.co.uk)

moved onto the road. The newly assembled line was a strange procession of gun-beater-gun-beater-gun-beater.

Equally unusual was a stand-off at the gate to Snipe Bog, when a curious Luing bull, backed by a sizeable herd of cows, came over to nose at the guns. The bull was unwilling to move, and for a few minutes guns wondered whether they were going to be allowed onto his field. Even when the bull eventually sank back into the field he seemed ready to turn on his hooves and probe further. Guns ended the drive having kept their eye out for more than just the snipe and beaters searching for them.

### The day gathers pace

Things moved up several gears during The Cistern Wood, the last drive before lunch, and then later on Artichokes. Both were newly planted grass fields working their way up towards a wood on the brow of a natural contour from which the birds were flushed. The topography the two drives share means birds are quickly out of range, so guns need to be alert to their sudden elevation. The Cistern Wood suffered from some over-

enthusiastic birds peeling back into the woods early on, but it recovered well, wave after wave of sporting pheasants spreading themselves out over the line way down below.

I followed Jamie as he roamed his top left hand corner peg on Artichokes. At first he stayed close to the woods before catching sight of the beaters within. This foresight meant he saw a good deal of sport, especially from those birds going behind. By the end of the drive a large circle of cartridges lay on the ground, but despite the amount of birds he saw Jamie was clearly still quietly questioning the way the drive had worked in his mind.

As the grey daylight began to fade even further, guns drove along the back lanes towards Jubilee, dismounting in front of the gated driveway of a private mansion. Jubilee is largely flat, two broad, overgrown fields

bordered by high firs and the garden wall of the mansion to the far right. Freshly back from a meeting, Captain Blackett had come to watch, installing himself on the track running between the fields.

“Not really into big days here,” he began as light rain spattered his hat. “The best day we had during my ownership was about 243 head. We didn’t really set out for a big day, it just sort of happened.” I pressed him on whether he missed life on the peg. “I shot enough in my lifetime not to mind if I don’t shoot again. It’s no fun doing something badly. My father said you should give up at 70, which is what I did.”

We turned to watch the shooting, Captain Blackett suggesting that we fix our eyes on the end of the road, since birds were most likely to fly out of the gap in firs. He predicted that birds would fly in staggered pairs and bank sharply to our right. He tipped off the two guns in the right-hand positions and they doffed their caps. Sure enough birds hurled towards them, sometimes too quickly. Such was their speed, guns already loaded couldn’t be accused of poaching, they were just taking their turn early while they still could. It helps to know the ones who know. 🦅

*For more information about the shooting opportunities at Arbigland, which include walked-up and mini driven days, and wildfowling on the Solway Firth, contact Craig Denman at Cowans Sporting on 01387 760284, 07775 760651 or visit [www.cowanssporting.co.uk](http://www.cowanssporting.co.uk)*



The view from Criffel Hill.

### The vittles

GUNS TAKE lunch in the dining room of The House on the Shore. Prepared by Jamie’s wife Sheri, the meal of venison casserole and vegetables warms the cockles, especially on a day of wind and light rain. Lunch is taken while the shoreline, only metres away, is slowly being consumed by the Solway Firth.

Diners are surrounded by a number of family portraits, including that of Catherine Porterfield Blackett. The legacy of Blacketts past is also felt through paintings like that of Puffing Billy, an early steam locomotive, built for Christopher Blackett, owner of the Wylam colliery near Newcastle. ■



Guns take lunch in the intimate surrounds of the dining room.