

An emerging Scottish power

The magnificent Raehills estate in south west Scotland is the setting for an unforgettable shooting experience.

MARTIN PUDDIFER reports.

PHOTOGRAPHY: GLYN SATTERLEY

Charles the First's hard stare is burning a hole in my back. I know he's watching me. He's been doing it all evening, saying nothing, just staring. It's pitch black outside and for 40 minutes I've been reclining, chin pinned to my chest, in one corner of a candlelit dining table at Raehills, talking shooting and American literature over port and Cuban cigars. The air around me is fat with smoke and the echoes of hoarse, knee-slapping laughter from those around the table's perimeter sharing shooting anecdotes and massaged shooting successes.

"I just want to get out there and get on with it now, I can't wait," says Craig Denman, twisting a corpulent cigar back and forth between his forefinger and



Walking to the pegs can be an adventure in itself.

thumb as he relights it for a third time. The ex-City trader from Hackney, north east London, has been a lively soul all evening, but his brain is a rattling tumbler of nerves, awaiting the excitement of the following day.

As the estate's new sporting director, Craig, of Cowans Sporting, has overseen a vast number of changes to the shoot, all under the relaxed eye of our host, Lord David Johnstone. David's is a fresh, bright mind with long-term plans. His nurturing of the estate is a very personal subject, and he sees the shoot as an extension of his garden. More landscape gardener than flowerbed tender, he is realistic about what has to happen to his drives to present the best birds. He doesn't want to risk losing their character and will only employ large-scale change where necessary.

"It entirely depends on the physical aspects of the drive. We're trying to create drives that fit into the landscape, and which look like they've been there for a long time. Sometimes the landscape itself requires a lot of work to get to that stage, but where we can do things by hand, so much the better."

"We've planted a number of small woodlands with a mixture of trees and shrubs to provide shelter for pheasants, but they also provide benefit to numerous species - grey partridge will also be released next season. We have also, in conjunction with Scottish Power, been planting some of the old Linns with native Scottish trees to re-establish old natural woodlands. The area around



The Glen draws together the best attributes of the shoot.

SHOOT FEATURE

◀ Raehills is a designed landscape, and over the past five years we have started a programme to replace the plantings as they are coming to the end of their natural lives.”

Conversation during the evening also revolves around the supporting role that Raehills, the guns' quarters and the day-to-day residence of my hosts, will play. The attention to detail paid by Penny, Lady Johnstone, on everything from the five-course dinner to an extra pillow or glass of whisky in the bedrooms, means the guests want for nothing during their stay. The sandstone stately home is certainly a majestic place, but exudes the warmth of a family home. Modelled on an 18th century Italian villa and crenellated around each side of its four storeys, it has a regal demeanour. At the front, an arched veranda looks out onto the River Kinnel as it bends its way through the grounds. Inside, high-ceilinged and finely furnished rooms and passages pull the eyes in every direction. Portraits of naval battles past hang on the walls, and artefacts awarded to the Johnstone and Annandale clans over the centuries, including an Order of the Garter, sit neatly in glass cases. Even the chairs and sideboards in the dining room were made from the wood of HMS Bellerophon, a 74-gun ship that fought in the Battle of Trafalgar on July 15 1815.

The following morning is clear and sunny, with a light wind drifting through. The landscape is hypnotic, its early autumn palette warm with rustic colour. Stretching up into the hillsides, rows of bold firs stand in single file, casting a shadow over the land below. At the sides of streams branching away from the Kinnel, trees torn apart by centuries of cruel Scottish weather fall backwards grotesquely, their severed branches reaching forward and wide, their boney fingertips clawing at the thin, crisp air. Fallow deer and rabbits bound through the epic maze of gullies and troughs. Coils of bracken and crisp leaves litter the floor, and the odd redundant fence post, bloated with moss and damp, labours behind the pristine new lines that sweep off into the distance.

One of the things that makes Raehills

so enticing is the romantic notion that areas of the estate, which once belonged to the 1st Marquis of Annandale, have never felt the tread of human footsteps. This fact is not lost on David, but such is his determination to create a unique shoot that he decided it would be better to take advantage of the ground rather than just leave it as scenery. Every one of the 22 drives has been designed to

“Like the track of a rollercoaster, its hill climbs sharply towards a plateau and up again before curving steeply down and around successive levels of mint fir.”

suit the landscape, meaning that even getting to the pegs can sometimes be an adventure in itself.

The first drive of the day, Johnstonecleugh, is a mile south of the main house. A ride of about 40 metres runs into the boundary between a regimented area of fir to the left and a scattering of beech on the right, while a thin brook, sinking below, meanders



Raehills' sporting director, Craig Denman.



The challenging sport takes guns out of their comfort zones.

slowly back towards the entrance gate. Pegs are situated close to one another, some in the dry patch in the brook, others on the grass verge. When the first birds came the guns only had a split second to get their barrels up as they caught sight of their quarry hugging the beech, curving left and right as they negotiated a path into the firs behind.

Home Farm is a geological marvel. Like the track of a rollercoaster, its hill climbs sharply towards a plateau and up again before curving steeply down and around successive levels of mint fir.

The woodland in the centre of the line has been felled, leaving a disorderly arrangement of stumps, wood shavings, branches and copper bracken. While birds coming off this bald land were low to the ground, once they broke over the edge and locked their wings, guns waiting at the bottom of the hill

had to readjust their jaws before taking aim. Shooting at the far left of the drive was tricky, since the guns on this side were much higher up than those in the centre and right. It was an excellent lesson in knowing when birds could truly be considered sporting.

Craig doesn't really favour the kind of drives where birds (reared and supplied by Nick Hill at Barocco Game Farm) appear 150 yards away and give guns time to watch before they mount and pull the trigger. He prefers to take guns out of their comfort zone and present them with unpredictable but attainable birds.

“Our main objective is to offer a diverse range of sporting birds that evolve and change from season to season. With the scope and potential for over 35 drives, guns are guaranteed new



The briefing took place on the doorstep of the majestic stately home.

scenery and different challenges every time. Raehills' layout really helps in this endeavour. I have shot on many estates around the country and although they differ in topography, all are very similar in style. Raehills' topography allows us to mix and match sport, offering the gun the opportunity to test his skill and ability over the course of the day.”

Mollin Plantation is an intimate affair. The guns lined out either side of a brook snaking around the front of a small patch of woodland atop a rocky outcrop. Pheasants flew fast from the wood, and because not all guns could see one another there were more than a few opportunities to wipe their neighbour's eye.

After a healthy morning's shooting the guns broke for lunch at the recently converted shooting lodge right at the heart of the estate. The air was alight ▶

with talk of high birds, and guns Stuart Robertson and Alistair Jack continued a volley of harmless insults that had been steadily brewing throughout the morning.

The choice of fortification on offer could have easily led to the cancellation of the afternoon drives. The peat smoked haddock soup and saddle of Annandale lamb was filling enough for some, but after washing down the lemon posset with a glass of red, others could have ended up being rolled out of the lodge like Violet Beauregarde.

Fortunately, Lodge Bank was on the doorstep and guns didn't have far to walk to get to their pegs. With their backs to towering hardwoods they waited for birds driven out of an unseen cover crop, which, like the Mollin

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Plantation drive, sits behind a rocky outcrop high above the guns. The birds often banked sharply to the right as they headed towards the wood over the gun's shoulders, and those at the far left of the line were in the thick of things.

The Glen closed the day's shooting. Dismounting from the fleet of 4x4s after a drive deep into the woods, the guns eventually arrived at the side of a river flowing at speed. The glen itself is narrow, with no more than 60 yards between the towering firs reaching out to one another from either side of the valley. The lower numbered guns were positioned on the banks of the river, while those towards the middle found themselves stationed a little further up on the verges – light relief from the tricky journey they had made to their pegs. The rest of the guns ventured further inward, slowly making their way down into the depths of the valley floor. The valley sides appear to be almost vertical, and bare branches obscure a clear view.

The decision to create The Glen had only been made in the beginning of



Drives are carefully managed to maintain their character.

July, and draws together the shoot's best attributes. Partridge and pheasant pens were already in position at its top, and access to pegs was the more important remaining job. Craig was granted the full services of the groundstaff to create what must surely be one of the shoot's most challenging drives.

“Walking to the pegs was no easy task, so for all the groundstaff to get there before tracks and bridges were built was amazing,” said Craig, thinking back to its construction with wide eyes. On more than one occasion both he and David had to cling onto anything for dear life while on reconnaissance.

“I can say from personal experience that carrying 35ft telegraph poles through the undergrowth was not easy.



Tight and fast sport on Home Farm.

Diggers were used to widen the banks against the river to allow for better access, but they were only able to go so far, given the need to take into consideration the quality of the water for fish spawning. Shovelling the stone tracks by hand was pretty hard work, as was getting the bridges in place.”

The guns were astonished by what they saw on the drive, and everyone agreed that it was a great way to end the day's shooting. One gun later commented to the headkeeper that it was the best drive that he had shot in over five years. A bold statement, but judging from the expression on the gentleman's face a sincere one. Those birds not taken by the guns, or the beaters as they headed back to nearby Moffat, were split between the purpose-built game larder on the estate and the local game dealer.

“The object here is that although it is a commercial shoot, both David and I want the shooting to return to the “old days”, said Craig, reflecting on a terrific day's shooting. “We can cater for large driven days shot singularly or back to back with no drives repeated. Smaller, less formal days are also available. The emphasis is on good quality shooting for all to enjoy, no matter how big their budget. It's driven game shooting with a difference. It's an experiment that looks like it is definitely paying off.” ○

For more information about the shooting and accommodation at Raehills, contact Craig Denman on 01387 760284 or 07775 760651, or visit www.cowansporting.co.uk or www.raehills.com