

Shooting in Britain

By David Penn, Secretary, British Shooting Sports Council

Back in 1979, a journalist called Edward Baxter termed shooting ‘The Invisible Sport’, flourishing, but unnoticed.

It was not always so. By the middle of the 19th Century shooting as a sport was spreading widely among the middle classes, and was a high-profile activity encouraged by the Royal Family and many influential individuals. Competitive rifle shooting grew out of the Volunteer Rifle movement of the 1860s, born of a fear of French invasion and reaching 171,000 civilian riflemen by 1861, which began a close relationship between target rifle shooting and the military that still endures. The National Rifle Association was founded in November 1859, 12 years ahead of its American counterpart, and target shooting was treated by the media as a mainstream sport, with 80 reporters covering the NRA’s 1905 meeting at Bisley Camp and writing over a million words of text. The first reference to competitive (live) pigeon shooting in England was in 1777, and this sport was highly evolved by the 1860s, becoming the precursor of today’s clay target shooting. Game shooting was also becoming more accessible to those with disposable incomes, and deer stalking and shooting in Scotland were popularised by Prince Albert, the Prince Consort. By the turn of the century, the growing popularity of ‘miniature’ rifles (small bore rifles for short range target shooting) and air rifles were providing affordable urban sport for the less well off, with the founding of the Society of Working Men’s Rifle Clubs in 1901, to be succeeded by the National Small Bore Rifle Association in 1948. Civilian target shooting was promoted by the Government (in 1900 the Prime Minister Lord Salisbury stated that his intention was that ‘a rifle should be kept in every cottage in the land’) and the military.

This was also the period when Britain, with almost no restrictive firearms legislation, was a major innovator in the field of firearms, with the development of the sporting double barrelled shotgun, cartridges and rifles for dangerous game hunting, double action service revolvers and military rifle cartridges designed for exceptional performance at very long range (both as a defence against field artillery and for the British passion for shooting at targets 1,200 or more yards distant). Revolver shooting as a sport had also seen great development in England.

So how did shooting transmogrify from a high-profile Establishment-encouraged activity into Edward Baxter’s ‘Invisible Sport’ of thirty years ago? During the First World War, the scope and effectiveness of the Government’s ability to regulate its citizens’ lives increased exponentially, and the first effective firearms controls were introduced to ensure that service calibre small arms were destined solely for the war effort. In the aftermath of conflict, there was a hope that the horrors of war had been consigned to history and a desire to turn away from military matters. With the Firearms Act 1920, there was the first serious attempt to control rifles and pistols in civilian hands, engendered by a desire to control surplus military arms with which Europe was awash, to hinder the acquisition of firearms by Bolshevik revolutionaries and, ostensibly, as an anti-

crime measure in the age of the armed 'motor bandit'. Target rifle and pistol shooting entered a quiescent period and faded from public awareness, but retained its military links. In some ways, target shooters felt protected: as early as the 1920 Firearms Act, the concept of the Home Office Approved rifle club came into being, and rifle clubs could benefit financially through becoming charities by virtue of a provision covering activities which contributed to the defence of the realm.

Clay pigeon shooting, however, expanded hugely in the 1920s, with the founding of the Clay Pigeon Shooting Association in 1928, with added cachet deriving from the interest of HRH Edward, Prince of Wales. In 1925 the first 'Sporting Clay' competition was inaugurated, introducing what is arguably Britain's greatest contribution to the sport, and one that is increasingly popular today, nationally and internationally.

During the Second World War, rifle clubs provided training facilities and instructors for the armed forces, with a Small Arms School at Bisley, and with many clubs forming the basis of Home Guard units. Post 1945, target shooting continued to operate below the radar, but by the 1960s with a growing interest in more technically sophisticated rifles, rather than the converted service rifles of old, and in pistol shooting, a sport well suited to indoor urban ranges. By the mid-1980s, Britain was host to the world's biggest annual pistol shooting event run by the National Pistol Association.

This tranquil period was ended by a series of event-driven changes in the law. The 1965 Firearms Act required the registration for the first time of dealers in shotguns, and increased the minimum length of a shotgun barrel from 20 to 24 inches. This legislation was passed just before an Act to abolish capital punishment. In August 1966 three police officers were shot dead by petty criminals armed with illegally owned pistols. Strong public revulsion and demands for the re-instatement of the death penalty were countered by the introduction of a licensing system for shotgun owners in the Criminal Justice Act 1967. The British Shooting Sports Council (BSSC) was created from an *ad hoc* committee of all the major target shooting, field sports and gun trade associations that came together in (and was at first named after) Purdey's famous Long Room to operate co-operatively in opposing 1960s legislation. Its role continues to be to co-ordinate activity on the political and legislative fronts.

In 1973, the Government issued a discussion document on the control of firearms, proposing draconian new controls on firearms, including licensing shotguns in the same way as rifles, a ban on repeating shotguns, on imitation firearms and on collecting. The BSSC led the campaign to protect the sport, while the Ad Hoc Committee on Historic Firearms brought together museums, collectors, the antique arms trade and other heritage interests. The BSSC's and Ad Hoc Committee's opposition was successful, as the proposals were perceived as disproportionate, and they had been introduced when there was no specific public or media concern over firearms.

An 'amok' mass killing in Hungerford in 1987, involving a legally owned AK47-type self-loading rifle, resulted in the banning of semi-automatic and pump action centrefire rifles and some repeating shotguns, and tighter controls on repeating shotguns. After the

Dunblane tragedy in 1996, in which a 9mm pistol was used, on a tide of media and public emotion at the time of a general election 'small firearms' (i.e. with a barrel of less than 30cm in length, or an overall length of less than 60cm) were banned for the purpose of target shooting.

Despite these bans, shooters and shooting organisations in Britain have demonstrated considerable resilience and have worked hard not only to strengthen and develop their sport but to improve understanding of their activities among politicians, the police, the media and the public. No longer is it acceptable to be an invisible sport, and the larger organisations have proved increasingly adept at positive public relations.

Quarry shooting has long been safeguarded and publicised by Britain's largest shooting organisation, the British Association for Shooting & Conservation (BASC), which had its beginnings in 1908, with the founding of the Wildfowlers Association of Great Britain and Ireland. In 1981 this became BASC, embracing all forms of quarry shooting, and it is now Britain's largest shooting association, with an all-time high in 2008 of 127,000 members and 100 staff, and a reputation for active protection of its members' interests.

Although its interests are much wider than field sports alone, the Countryside Alliance, founded in 1997 and with 407,000 members has proved not only one of the strongest supporters of shooting and other field sports, but also one of its most effective advocates in the media, for instance through its 'Game to Eat' campaign which has boosted the appreciation of the healthy virtues of game meat among the population at large.

The BSSC has worked on the Churchillian principle that 'jaw, jaw is better than war, war', and events have confirmed that negotiation is more productive than confrontation. The BSSC is in constant contact with the Home Office, and holds regular meetings with the police Firearms & Explosives Licensing Working Group. By ensuring better understanding by the authorities of both the likely real impact of legislative proposals and championing the wishes and expectations of firearms owners, the BSSC has successfully improved or at least considerably mitigated the effects on the law-abiding of legislation which is usually event-driven and intended to combat crime. To raise the profile of the sport among the population at large it holds 'National Shooting Weeks' to encourage people to come along and try target shooting. Game Fairs and Country Fairs also provide an enjoyable introduction to the sport. Acutely aware of the impact of United Nations legislation and of European Union Directives on British shooters and gun owners, the BSSC is a very active member of the World Forum on the Future of Sport Shooting Activities (WFSA).

The interests of those who collect firearms are the concern of the Historical Breechloading Smallarms Association which works closely with the Foundation for European Societies of Arms Collectors (FESAC) and with other national collecting bodies such as the Arms & Armour Society and the Muzzle Loaders Association of Great Britain.

The legitimacy of shooting as a leisure activity and an essential component of wildlife management is becoming increasingly recognised. The Labour Party's 2005 'Charter for Shooting' endorses self-regulation and recognises that there is no connection between legitimate sporting shooting and gun crime. The Olympic Games have provided an outstanding opportunity for publicity, and the benefits of the shooting sports have been acknowledged by the three major UK political parties.

So let us take an overview of shooting in Britain today:

- An estimated one million people in the UK shoot. The number of shotgun certificates is again increasing, as is the number of young people entering the sport. 1,200 entered BASC's Young Shots scheme in just six months in 2007, while the Scout Association's annual rifle competition grows year on year and there is a renaissance of interest in target shooting as a sport in schools.
- Hunting with firearms is a £1.6 billion industry in the United Kingdom, supporting 70,000 jobs, according to the 2006 PACEC Report. Shooting providers spend an estimated £250 million a year on habitat and wildlife management, five times the annual income of Britain's biggest conservation organisation, the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds.
- 480,000 people shoot game, wildfowl, pigeon and rabbits, accounting for just under 19 million head of game in 2004.
- Britain's deer population continues to increase, as does recreational deer stalking, which is now a well-accepted contributor to deer management. After close co-operation between government and the shooting organizations, the Deer Act has recently been amended to remove anomalies and improve deer welfare.
- 150,000 people shoot clay targets on a regular basis. 'Corporate days' for clay pigeon shooting are also very popular in the business world, and provide an excellent introduction to the sport.
- 250,000 people regularly enjoy target shooting with rifles, muzzle loading pistols and air weapons.
- There are 1,000 shooting clubs in the UK.
- 23 of the UK's 116 medals in the 2006 Commonwealth Games were for shooting, the second highest medal-winning discipline for UK athletes, exceeded only by swimming with 24. England's most decorated Commonwealth medal winner is Mick Gault, with 15 medals. In 2008 he was awarded the Order of the British Empire for his contribution to shooting-with a pistol.
- 'Field target' air rifle was born in Britain and combines high technology, precision marksmanship, range estimation skills and the challenge of varying

courses of fire over different distances, so its popularity is easy to understand. It has revolutionized air rifle and pellet design and performance.

- ‘F Class’ centre-fire target rifle shooting is proving popular with a younger age group used to ‘high tech’ precision equipment in other aspects of their lives.
- Courses of fire for pistols have been adapted for rimfire or lever action centre-fire ‘gallery’ rifles.
- The British are well aware of their firearms heritage, and the study of firearms, particularly the ‘working’ firearms of the soldier or hunter, rather than the decorative *arme de luxe*, has involved shooting to determine performance. From this study has grown the very popular sport of ‘Classic’ shooting, using the arms of the 1850s to 1945 in courses of fire appropriate to their age.
- Agreement in principle has been reached with the governments in England & Wales and in Scotland for the training of elite pistol shooter in Britain for the 2012 London Olympics.
- Modern Pentathlon for Juniors has introduced young people to air pistol shooting, and forms an important part of the performance pyramid for the National Pistol Squad.
- British shooters seem to shoot far more than their counterparts in other countries. They consume c. 250,000,000 shotgun cartridges a year.

Britain has a proud and continuing shooting and arms collecting heritage, but our shooting organizations have learned that to flourish unseen is not enough. Our task is to achieve an understanding and recognition of our sport among the population at large, and by the politicians and media. Only through knowledge can we finally be rid of the stigmatization and marginalization of the past.

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