

SPORTING CLAYS

HOW IT ALL BEGAN

GEORGE LIGOWSKY MAY HAVE INVENTED THE CLAY TARGET BUT, SAYS RICHARD RAWLINGSON, IT IS THE ARISTOCRACY OF VICTORIAN BRITAIN THAT WE MUST THANK FOR THE SPORT OF SPORTING CLAYS

Have you ever wondered about the origins of Sporting Clays? It all started back in England and its development is deeply entwined in the history of Victorian Britain and the early shooting schools – hence the phrase 'English Sporting'.

In Britain, in the last quarter of the 19th century, shooting was at the very height of fashion. The sport of royalty and the landed gentry, it inevitably attracted the new industrial aristocrats – those who had made their money from trade and manufacturing and longed for the social status to go with their wealth. They saw the new fad of formal driven game shooting as a passport to high society and threw themselves into it with a passion.

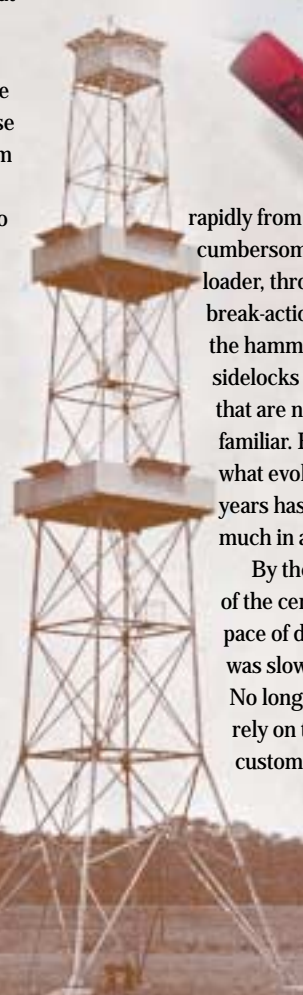
All this was great news for the gun trade. No longer just suppliers to Princes, Dukes and Earls, the gunmakers of London vied with each other to part these new tycoons from their money. It fueled the most concentrated period of development the trade has ever seen. Between 1850 and the turn of the century the sporting shotgun passed

rapidly from the cumbersome muzzle loader, through early break-action designs to the hammerless ejector sidelocks and boxlocks that are now so familiar. Essentially what evolved in just 50 years has not changed much in another 100.

By the latter years of the century the pace of development was slowing rapidly. No longer able to rely on their customers coming



GUN FITTING USING THE NEWLY INVENTED TRY GUNS WAS A MAJOR PART OF THE WORK OF THE SHOOTING SCHOOLS



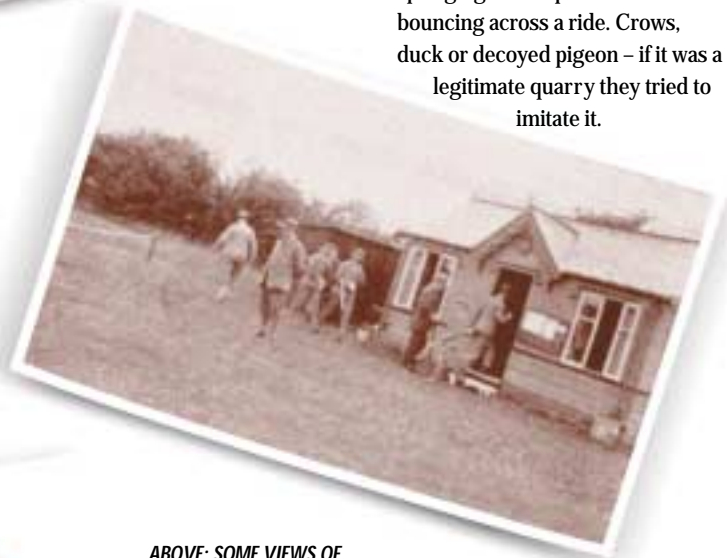
NOTE HOW THIS EARLY TRAP ADVERTISEMENT MARKETS THEM AS 'NECESSARY AT EVERY COUNTRY HOUSE'!



back every few years for the latest invention, the trade had to find new ways to tempt buyers back into the showrooms and differentiate their (essentially identical) products from those of their rivals. Only the most fanatical could tell the difference at five paces between a Purdey, Boss or Woodward – so something else was desperately needed.



adept at simulating the shooting of game, both the furred and feathered variety. Driven grouse, partridge and pheasant remained the staple diet, but the fertile imaginations of a new breed of celebrity instructors soon had areas of their grounds laid out to provide representations of teal springing from a pond or rabbits bouncing across a ride. Crows, duck or decoyed pigeon – if it was a legitimate quarry they tried to imitate it.



The trade embraced marketing in a big way. If you could no longer claim to have a more modern gun than the next man, then other features and benefits had to be sought. With the arrival of the clay target in the early 1880s, need and opportunity fell happily into each other's arms. For the first time the teaching of shooting at flying objects became a practical proposition. No more glass balls full of feathers, the new invention could simulate the flight of game birds in a much more realistic way.

Soon, just about every gun maker of any note had either opened a shooting school to promote his wares or had forged links with one of the independent operators such as Mr. Watts of the London Shooting School. The newcomers to the sport wanted to learn to shoot and they wanted to do it immediately. As G.T. Teasdale-Buckell, Editor of the renowned magazine *Land and*



ABOVE: SOME VIEWS OF THE WESTLEY RICHARDS SHOOTING SCHOOL. LEFT: A RANGE OF TOWERS SUCH AS THIS ONE AT WEST LONDON WAS CONSIDERED ESSENTIAL TO SIMULATE DRIVEN BIRD SHOOTING.

Water, noted: "This fashion is probably the result of the rush of the age. Nobody has time nowadays to take things leisurely. The business man who has made his pile buys his grouse moor first and learns to shoot afterwards. He has no youthful experience of potting small birds and unsuspecting bunnies."

The shooting schools became ever more sophisticated. High towers were built to simulate rocketing pheasants while realistic stone butts simulated conditions on the grouse moor. The pattern has remained unchanged to this day; go to any of the well known shooting schools in Britain and you will find the same towers and butts and the same eager clientele of successful businessmen looking for a fast track to shooting skill.

As trap technology advanced, the schools became ever more

As well as teaching the customer to use the gun they had sold him, the gunmakers made great play of their ability to fit it better than their competitors and once again the shooting school played an important role in this marketing tool. A flurry of innovations saw several patented try guns appear, each trying to outdo the other in range of adjustment and most realistic simulation of a proper gun. Again these same guns are still in widespread use today, many of them the original models from 100 years ago.

For all the success of the new shooting schools, not everyone was convinced of the value of clay target shooting. A common complaint (still to be heard today from those who have never seen a modern automatic trap with the spring cranked up) was that "clays go like a flash from the traps and begin to



SCENES FROM THE ORIGINAL WEST LONDON SHOOTING SCHOOL GROUNDS AT PERIVALE

slow their pace at once." As this was the direct opposite to the behavior of live game, the theory was that practice on such targets would not produce a technique that would be effective in the field.

A clear distinction was already emerging by 1900 between clay shooting for instruction and as a competitive sport. As in America, trapshooting, modeled on live pigeon shooting, had rapidly evolved leading to the formation of

the Inanimate Bird Shooting Association. But this was a new sport appealing to what historian David Baker, in his excellent book *The Heyday of the Shotgun*, calls the 'cycling class'. Certainly the moneyed shooter of live game would not be seen dead at the new trap clubs and Teasdale-Buckell dismissed it in *Experts on Guns and Shooting* (1900) saying: "we do not think that clay-bird shooting can ever become more than a means to an

end in this country, although it is an end in itself in America." Seldom can an 'expert' have got things so totally wrong!

He was wrong because man is by nature a competitive animal, as even he revealed when reporting on the test of a gun at some high tower targets, when he recounted his score with both the first and second barrels at a simultaneous driven pair.

It was inevitable that the highly motivated industrialist taking his shooting lesson would start to keep score and from there it was but a short step to full blown competition. The concept of the sporting 'course' made up of a number of stations set up around a shooting ground merely formalized the way in which a range would be used.

After the first World War clay shooting in Britain expanded rapidly, both trapshooting and the simulated game variety. The great game shoots of the Edwardian era would never reappear, but the ordinary man, particularly from rural areas where ownership of a shotgun was a normal part of life, was able to take part in the sport for the first time.

The first Amateur Sporting Championship was held in 1925, becoming in turn the British Open Championship – like its golfing counterpart the most venerable championship in the sport. Three years later the Clay Pigeon

Shooting Association (CPSA) was formed with the direct assistance of the dominant cartridge manufacturer Eley-Kinloch, which saw the great commercial potential of the shooting sport for every man.

And really little has changed in the 75 years since, although sadly some things have been lost along the way. Until relatively recently, for example, every Championship Sporting layout would have included a 'walked up' section, where the competitors walked along a path shooting targets as they were released at pre-set points. This traditional part of the sport is rarely seen today but not to be missed if ever you get the chance to shoot it!

One of the places where the 'walked up' is still a feature is the famous West London Shooting School, the only survivor of the golden age. It opened its doors in 1901, right at the end of the Victorian era and its founder, Richmond Watson, also laid out what may have been the first sporting layout in America when he established grounds for the Rumson Country Club near New York in 1913.

West London hosted the British Open Championship for 53 years and in recent times has been restored to its former glory. Just a short journey from central London, it is a must-see for any sporting clays enthusiast visiting the capital.

So rapid has been the worldwide expansion of sporting clays in the last 20 years, it is hard to believe that it is over a century since the first shooting schools were established. Today we still bemoan the fact that we can't hit rabbits, boast of our success on the driven grouse station or desperately seek a method to tackle springing teal. We owe it all to those rich Victorians!