

IN THE FIELD

SEPTEMBER 2020

By Sir Johnny Scott Bt.

"IN THE FIELD"

The British summer is celebrating the easing of lockdown by turning cold, wet and windy, but the start of it was as perfect a spring as I can ever remember. April, May and June were gloriously warm and sunny, and whilst the world was stunned into immobility by the pandemic, nature was its most joyous and exuberant. Wild flower growth was quite breathtaking, with verges on country lanes shining white as cow parsley, stichwort, dead nettle and hawthorn came into blossom, whilst woodlands filled with sweet woodruff, wild garlic and bluebells.

I have never heard such a boisterous dawn chorus, as all the little garden and farmland birds burst into their mating songs, and that most glorious sound of all, the melody of the summer visitors who flock to nest on our moorlands. The ground nesting lapwings, sky larks, golden plover, meadow pipits, merlins, dunlin, redshanks and dotterels, who rear their young in a safe haven provided by the 4 million acres of UK grouse moors. Without the dedication of generations of moorland and low ground keepers protecting the vulnerable from predators, our green and pleasant land would be a sad and sterile place.

I have not been particularly bothered by this social distancing business, except that all the shows I normally go to have been cancelled, but I do find it strange the way everything has become virtual. Virtual football, virtual cricket, virtual racing, virtual hound shows – there is even an International Virtual Hound Show, with entries from UK, France, Ireland, Australia, New Zealand, Canada and USA – and of course, there are virtual auctions.

Holt's two day sale of antique and modern sporting guns, the second since the auction moved from London to their new Sandringham sale rooms and viewing galleries, were another phenomenal success, despite being held at the very start of lockdown. This sale, however, was eclipsed by their online sealed bid auction on 11th June, their largest in the thirty years of trading, with 3125 lots of which 88 per cent were sold, with a total value of £422,478. The auction had an online audience of 32,691 people - equivalent to most premier league football attendances, but what is really interesting, is that 69 percent of the successful bidders were new to Holts. This not only demonstrates the popularity in recreational shooting continues to grow, it shows that being locked down at home during the pandemic was no deterrent to the British sporting community, who were quite happy to take part in the auction remotely.



Sir (Walter) John Scott, Bt. MFH

Sir Johnny (as he is better known) is an author, natural historian, broadcaster, columnist, countryside campaigner, artisan snuff manufacturer and retired hill farmer.

He wrote and co-presented the BBC2 series *Clarissa and the Countryman* with Clarissa Dickson Wright. He writes for a variety of magazines and periodicals on field sports, food, farming, travel, history and rural affairs.

A lifetime devotee of the countryside and its sports, he is currently:

- Joint Master, The North Pennine Hunt
- Regional Director, Vote OK.
- President, The Gamekeepers Welfare Trust.
- President, The Tay Valley Wildfowlers Association.
- President, The Newcastle Wildfowlers Association.
- President, The Association of Working Lurchers / Longdogs.
- Centenary Patron and Honorary Life Member, British Association for Shooting and Conservation.
- Patron, The Sporting Lucas Terrier Association.
- Patron, The Wildlife Ark Trust.
- Patron, The National Organisation of Beaters and Pickers Up.
- Board member, The European Squirrel Initiative.

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This was extremely good news for Holt's, but I do begin to have a prickle of anxiety over the accelerated dependence on the internet over the last three months and its long-term consequences. As we stumble towards some sort of normality, it is clear that among the many changes we are going to have to accept, are that retail outlets which had been familiar faces in our towns and cities will disappear, out competed by online shopping. The majority of our gun shops up and down the country depend on various other income streams apart from the sale of guns – shooting accessories, clothing, boots, fishing tackle and so on. I fear these may be at risk as the future unfolds – after all, Dickson's had been making their unique round actions in Edinburgh for two hundred years and yet their historic premises on Frederick Street, with its golden gun sign above the door, closed in 2017. Although Dickson's have relocated successfully to Dunkeld and are carrying on the tradition of gun making excellence, Edinburgh has lost one of the city's great institutions.

The emporiums of the holy trinity of London gunmakers – Holland and Holland, Purdey and Boss, have been as much an iconic part of the fabric of the West End, as historic landmarks such as Lock the hatters, Fortnum and Mason, Truefitt and Hill, Lobb the bootmaker, or the Savile Row tailors. For those of us who come to London as infrequently as possible, there is something very comforting about the dependable continuity of these famous monuments to British gun making. One of my earliest childhood memories is being taken to Purdey's by my father, just before Tom Purdey retired and I have since spent many a happy evening in the Long Room - aptly described as the spiritual centre of gunmaking - at the annual Shooting and Conservation Awards.

It seems inconceivable that these hallowed premises, which have been such a major part of our long history of game shooting, could ever disappear from the streets of central London and be relocated elsewhere, but these are strange times and a chill wind of change is blowing. It is up to us to see this does not happen.



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