

IN THE FIELD

DECEMBER 2019

By Sir Johnny Scott Bt.

"IN THE FIELD"

Of all the months, December is my favourite: I love the gaunt, leafless trees, the bleak beauty of a barren, lifeless landscape and the ancient, musty smell of decay. December is the glorious colours of a cock pheasant glinting in thin winter sunshine as it rockets out of cover, the music of hounds in full cry and the creaking of roosting partridge in the gloaming. A full moon brings an "irruption" of little plump waxwings from Northern Europe and Scandinavia, harbingers of freezing weather moving south from the sub-arctic. When these "snow birds", or "Bohemian chatterers"- from their wheezing, crackling, clicking and stuttering calls - arrive, great flocks of them frenetically strip hedgerows of the last autumn berries or invade urban parks and gardens. December is iron hard frost crunching underfoot when I take the dogs for a last run before going to bed and the ghostly contact calls of male and female tawny owls, as the cock bird begins his courtship feeding, bringing food for the larger hen in the hope of building her up for early breeding.

All part of the atmospheric build up to the main event of the month, but for me, the best of December is the Twelve Days of Christmas, that remarkable phenomena, when the whole Christian world is on holiday at the same time. The fever of life which dominates most people's day from dawn to dusk and reaches a climax in the run up to Christmas Day, slows to a manageable pace. The manic pressure of business has finally stuttered to a halt; the mailbox on the computer lies empty and unlike other holidays, there is none of the anxiety about commitments building up in one's absence. There is tranquility and peace, the most important word in the Christmas message and, there is that precious commodity, time.

What better way could there be, or greater gift to give, than devoting time to educating a young person to gun safety? The ever increasing popularity of shooting has many enormous environmental, economic and social benefits - shoots are involved in the management of two thirds of the UK rural land area and spend over £250 million a year on conservation, to say nothing of the rural incomes they generate, but with greater numbers comes a greater risk of accidents. BASC provide a wonderful service with their Young Shot's Days, but nothing compares to spending time on your own with an experienced shot, who was taught gun safety in the days when one was not allowed to pick up a gun until all the verses of; "A Father's Advice", the poem that should be known to all of us, had been learnt by heart. So eager



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.

IN THE FIELD

DECEMBER 2019

BY SIR JOHNY SCOTT BT.



was I to start shooting, that even now, after the passage of more than sixty years, it is the one poem I can remember verbatim and at the start of every shooting day, the dread words; "All the pheasants ever bred, won't repay for one man dead" always comes to mind.

A Father's Advice was written by Mark Hanbury Beaufoy, of Beaufoys Vinegar Brewery, the Liberal MP for Kennington, philanthropist, chairman of the Kennel Club, landowner and keen shot, who had shoots at Coombe House near Shaftesbury and at Ashmore in Dorset. He gave the first copy of the poem to his son, Henry at the same time as he presented him with his first gun, a 28 bore, on Christmas Day 1902. A further one hundred copies were subsequently printed which were sent to friends and before long, the verses spread throughout the shooting community, to the extent that cartridge makers included extracts of them on every box of cartridges. More's the pity they don't do it today. The verses in A Father's Advice cover all the etiquette in the Golden Rules of Shooting, and encapsulate the ethos of always thinking about others first and the safety of those around you, before your own enjoyment can be considered. More than anything else, A Father's Advice amplifies the warning that a loaded shotgun is a deadly weapon and learning all the verses was only the beginning of my early tuition in gun safety. For months I walked beside my father carrying a .410 loaded with snap caps whilst I learnt how a gun should be held correctly, when it should be empty or loaded and where it would be safe to shoot. A season had to be spent in the beating line under the watchful eye of a grizzled old keeper, who taught me something of field craft and the ways and wiles of game birds.

Eventually, the day came when an Eley clay trap was set up and whilst the gardener lobbed clays, I fired my first shots; then came the visits to Mr Gage at the Holland and Holland Shooting School, and finally, sharing a peg with my father on my first driven day. It was a long apprenticeship and throughout it, I was constantly reminded that although there would be many years of enjoyment to come, they were entirely conditional on scrupulous gun safety and that one day, I would be responsible for passing it on to someone else.

CONTACT HOLTS

info@holtsauctioneers.com

www.holtsauctioneers.com

+44 (0)1485 542 822