



Alde and Ore Wildfowlers Association

SHOOTING TIMES

The biting wind hit me like a fist in the face as I got out of my car. It made the waves slap against the concrete slipway of Aldeburgh yacht club and set up a cacophony of halyards drumming their metallic din against the masts in the nearby boat park. At two o'clock in the morning it was pitch black, but Paul Litten was already beside the slipway making ready his dory for launching, and within twenty minutes the two of us had the craft afloat and our vehicles parked. Together with our dogs we were on our way downriver.

Each time the boat pitched downwards, a small beam from the dory's bow illuminated a semicircle of green water flecked with foam, the only light visible apart from the glow of the instrument panel as Paul and I hunched over a vast array of neatly stowed decoys and camouflage nets, our fowling coats hooded against the driving spray. Dark outlines of a sea wall passed on our left, and within half an hour we were at our destination, Lower Dan's Hole, a small bay sheltered from the wind, into which Paul beached the dory on the mud. The two of us spent the next hour setting out a rig of 75 decoys by torchlight, placing the decks on the mud where they would be picked up by the rising tide. Then, with hoops, rigging wires and camouflage netting, we converted the boat into a floating hide before tucking ourselves up as best we could between the two dogs and snatching some sleep before dawn.

It is a mysterious place, this part of the Suffolk coast, where Orford Ness runs south from Aldeburgh sending the Alde estuary in a 9 mile dog-leg before allowing it to discharge into the sea. To the west are Sudbourne marshes, a great swathe of freshwater grazing, intersected by dykes and separated from the estuary by a sea wall. To the east runs the thin pencil of Orford Ness, and beyond it the growling breakers of the North Sea, grinding against the low shingle bank in a hiss of surf and stones which inspired Britten's greatest music.

The Alde is a quiet river. There is neither industry or commerce at the head of the estuary nor commercial river traffic and, because Aldeburgh's longshore fleet puts to sea directly off the town's shingle beach, there are virtually no fishing boats. Even the pleasure traffic is absent during the winter, and because the river ices so quickly, yacht moorings are removed from October onwards.

All this is to the benefit of wildfowl. Surrounded on all sides by reserves or fresh marshes, the wigeon pile into the estuary in big numbers when the weather turns cold. Indeed, there is a great variety of ducks here. Pintail form around ten percent of the bag of local fowlers, while there are plenty of teal, gadwall, shoveler, pochard, tufted, Canadas and greylags. And when the weather turns hard in Holland, the whitefronts appear from over the North Sea. Most seasons see a few hundred, but in a hard winter there are a lot more.

Wildfowling has a long tradition on the Alde. The Leiston & District wildfowlers originally formed a club in 1956, and in the 1980s it amalgamated with the

Aldeburgh club to form the Alde and Ore Wildfowlers Association, which today shoots around half the Crown foreshore on the Alde under a formal lease plus Aldeburgh town marshes and some adjoining creeks. Access is mainly by boat. Club members shoot from a boat over big rigs of decoys, and the shooting can be very good indeed, with a fair proportion of fowlers making a couple of double figure bags a season.

The jewel in the club's crown, however, is the Lantern marsh on Orford Ness itself. Part of the Sudbourne estate until 1910, the area was then taken over by the Government and used firstly by the Royal Flying Corps and then the RAF for testing aerial ordnance. After the war, it became the home of the top secret Cobra Mist nuclear attack early warning station before being used by the BBC as a transmission site for the World Service. The upshot was that for more than 80 years Lantern marshes have remained unshot, except by a few RAF personnel. When the land was transferred to the National Trust three years ago together with the mouldering remains of its military installations, the Alde and Ore club negotiated a shooting lease, allowing local fowlers to shoot the marshes for the first time in three generations.

As dawn broke, I could see the tall radio towers on Lantern marsh outlined against the eastern sky through the morning mist. The wind had dropped, and I could hear wigeon, dozens of them, whistling and growling on the mudbanks opposite, as the tide rose and set the last of our decoys afloat. A pair of whitefronts headed downriver, but as the sky turned from Prussian blue through green and gold, the water was like a mirror and the sun edged into a cloudless sky. Paul and I had a couple of half chances at little parties of high-flying wigeon, but for the most part the birds were sitting tight, sunning themselves on the far bank.

It was hardly the ideal fowling morning, and yet I could see how the Alde can provide wonderful shooting in the right conditions. Paul explained to me how, on upper Lantern marsh, the old sluice has crumbled to allow the tide in and out of the marsh. This means that the marsh is unfrozen even in hard weather, and the seeds and plant debris that collect there make it a haven for every teal in the vicinity. When the wind turns into the east and howls through the drunken line of telegraph posts which line the path from Aldeburgh, sending breakers crashing into the shingle bank, then the fowl pour into upper Lantern marsh to provide magnificent shooting for anyone hardy enough to brave the boat journey or the long trek on foot from Aldeburgh martello tower.

Paul also told me a little more about the club. Its 100 members meet 11 times a year and run social activities, film shows and speaker meetings. During the summer there are regular clay shoots and the opportunity to shoot pigeons over 1,000 acres of local farmland. New members join initially for one year, during which time they are the responsibility of their proposer and seconder. Before they can shoot the club marshes they are required to pass a comprehensive wildfowl recognition test organised by the club's conservation officer and to prove themselves to be safe with a shotgun.

With the winter sun bathing the estuary with its low, bright rays, and with the tide now on the turn, Paul and I realised that there was little point in hanging on any longer, so we picked up the decoys and headed back upriver, stopping off at Stanney point, just below the river wall from Iken marshes, for a chat with club chairman Wesley Gregory who was also out with his boat and decoys and who had also experienced a

thin morning. Then we doubled back to Aldeburgh and Brian Upson's boatyard, where we finally hauled Paul's dory out of the water.

It had not been the most productive fowling morning, and both Paul and I had put in a great deal of effort for our empty bag. But the size of the bag is not what wildfowling is about, and I had been privileged to see the sun rise over some of the wildest, loneliest and most remote of East Anglia's coastal marshes. I look forward to the chance of going back there in an iron frost and an easterly gale.

Graham Downing 26th January 1999

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