



Fifty Years of Fowling

SHOOTING TIMES

They were quiet times in the Suffolk of the 1950s. Farming settled back into its old routine after the war years, seed time followed golden harvest on the land, and the long shingle beaches which sweep from Dunwich to Orford Ness were returned to the longshoremens and their fishing boats, and were as yet largely undiscovered by holidaymakers or day trippers. On autumn evenings, when local men had finished their work on the land, they looked up at the sky and watched the little parties of wigeon coming out of the east, then turned towards the marshes and tidal creeks and pulled their old hammerguns from out of the cupboard. Aldeburgh Town Marshes were still a patchwork of small grass fields divided by lily-starred dykes, and when the winter floods came they were alive with ducks. The Alde estuary was black with fowl in hard weather and the secret fens and reed beds at Minsmere had yet to become a flagship RSPB reserve. The fowling there was legendary.

Even so, there were those who realised that all this must surely change. All around the coast of Britain, thanks largely to the influence of a few visionaries at WAGBI, local fowlers were banding together to form wildfowling clubs, and 1956 was a particularly important year for the wildfowlers of east Suffolk.

Much of the credit for the formation of what today is the thriving Alde and Ore Wildfowlers Association must go to a schoolmaster from the small town of Leiston, Bill Newbery, who saw that if something was not done to bring the local wildfowlers together, then the free shooting which they had enjoyed for generations would surely disappear. Exactly 50 years ago he founded the Leiston & District Wildfowlers Association. The club rented its shooting at Eastbridge, on the edge of Minsmere level, for the princely sum of £1 a year and met in the library of Thorpeness Working Mens' Club.

One of its earliest members was Tony Ralph. At the age of 15, Tony bought a single barrel 12 bore hammergun from Elderkins by mail order and wandered out onto Aldeburgh Town Marsh, where the right of fowling at that time was free to local people under the terms of an ancient Charter. Newbery was Tony Ralph's teacher.

“He was a nice gentleman,” recalls Tony. “When you are a 15 year old, you don't worry much about the future of wildfowling and things like that. But he got me into the club a year after it was formed, and I used to cycle over with my friends to the meetings. A lot of Leiston people were members, plus people from the surrounding countryside and local towns like Halesworth.”

To the south of Leiston, the fowlers of Aldeburgh had less to worry about, or so they thought. Thanks to their Charter they had their free shooting on the Town Marshes, and

beyond that were the Alde and Ore estuaries which ran from Snape via Aldeburgh before swinging south behind Orford Ness and emptying into the North Sea at Shingle Street. Below the sea wall on the saltings and mudflats it was no man's land and the shooting was there for any one who cared to enjoy it. On winter mornings, Tony and his mates would line the sea wall at Westrow on the Alde and wait for the wigeon to flight off the marshes and out onto the tidal river, which they did at dawn, as regular as clockwork.

But, as Newbery had predicted, all was about to change. In 1975 the Leiston fowlers lost their shooting at Eastbridge, and increasingly they found themselves in competition with the Aldeburgh men for the tidal fowling on the river. Nor were things going well for the men of Aldeburgh. Incursions by poachers, freelance shooting by Americans from the nearby base at Bentwaters and the widespread killing of protected birds threatened to upset the long-established rights over the Town Marshes, and the local council decided that the shooting there must be regulated. Thus the Aldeburgh Wildfowling Club was formed, and for several years the Aldeburgh and Leiston clubs glowered at each other in greater or lesser rivalry, a relationship which was not helped by the fact that the longer-established Leiston fowlers had blocked Aldeburgh's affiliation to BASC.

Worse was to come. In 1989 Leiston's last remaining inland marshes at Sizewell were under threat, and on the tidal river the Crown Estate was reviewing the general shooting agreement which it had negotiated with WAGBI back in the mid 1960s. The freedom of the foreshore was fast drawing to a close. At that time, the Secretary of the Aldeburgh club was Bryan Upton, grandson of a former professional wildfowler who ran the family boatyard at Slaughden Quay, Aldeburgh. His counterpart at Leiston was Paul Litten.

"I approached Bryan and said 'this is silly. Why don't we get together'", recalls Paul. The two were already punt gunning partners and firm friends, and with their encouragement the idea of amalgamation took hold. Each club held its own Special General Meeting, and the marriage was solemnised. At first the club was known as the Leiston and Aldeburgh wildfowlers, but in 1991 the name was changed to the Alde and Ore WA, the club having secured, following detailed and complex negotiation, a sporting lease over that part of the Crown foreshore on the tidal river which had not been snapped up by the Suffolk Wildlife Trust. Two years later in 1993 its efforts were recognised by BASC with the award of the Stanley Duncan conservation trophy.

Today the Alde and Ore club is a thriving and dynamic association. Its 112 members still shoot over the tidal estuary and the Town Marshes, but in addition the club has landholdings both in the Waveney valley near Bungay, where it bought a block of freshwater grazing marsh in 1999, and on the tidal saltings along the mouth of the Ore estuary at Barthorpes creek, formerly part of the Crown's Hollesley Bay estate. Furthermore the club now enjoys a formal lease from the National Trust at Lantern Marsh on Orford Ness itself, a wild and remote stretch of salt marsh where even in the frantic 21st century you can lose yourself in vast dawns and sunsets where the North Sea growls against the shingle bank and the teal slip into the creeks at dusk. In all there are six areas available for wildfowling, while for the coarse anglers there is also fishing on the River Waveney.

Probably the best of the club's shooting requires access to a boat, but there is plenty of opportunity for the footslogging fowler. And for those who want to shoot all the year round, the club has access to a huge amount of pigeon shooting nearby at Great Glemham. This summer it celebrated its Golden anniversary with a clay shoot at nearby High Lodge shooting ground. It was a huge success, with around a quarter of the membership turning out to enjoy the day. The membership reflects the club's long history. Tony Ralph still serves on the committee, as he has for 35 years, though he is now partially retired from his job at the local engineering works and no longer runs a fishing boat off Aldeburgh beach. Bryan Upton is now chairman, and can still be found at the boatyard, while several other members are drawn from local fowling families. Many others, though, come from much further afield, the usual mix of builders, engineers, farmers, a policeman and even a retired airline pilot helping to swell the numbers into what all of them hope will be a further fifty years of fowling.

Graham Downing 25th August 2006

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