

IN THE FIELD

MARCH 2023

By Sir Johnny Scott Bt.

"A MIXED BAG"

What an extraordinary season. Last year's outbreak of bird 'flu in the French gamebird rearing areas of the Loire Atlantique and Vendee, caused extreme disruption to gamebird supply, with many shoots operating either a severely curtailed calendar, or no shooting at all. Nor are prospects very rosy for this coming year, with more outbreaks in France and despite the most severe restrictions as vets and civil servants struggle to get on top of the pandemic, very little progress has been made so far. And yet, the shooting industry is remarkably resilient. I have heard of several big shoots who were not able to find enough birds in time for the season, who have three small drives in the morning followed by a big simulated clay pigeon drive just before lunch, which the Guns thought was terrific fun and reputedly, vastly improved their shooting for the drives after lunch. I met someone recently who normally turns his nose up at anything less than a two hundred and fifty bird day, eulogising about a walk and stand day, where the bag was fourteen wild pheasants, three pigeon, a woodcock, a jay, a squirrel and a high sporting crow. Another of the same ilk, who was in raptures over a walked-up day over dogs among the reeds and rushes on the moorland fringes, where lunch was a cheese sandwich and a bottle of beer with the dog handlers in a derelict farm building.

In the spirit of adapting to altered circumstances, I notice more shooting agents offering mini driven / walked up days, giving Guns the chance of a crack at everything from pheasant, partridge and duck, to snipe, pigeon, rabbit, hares and even, the occasional woodcock. Mixed bag small days are proving immensely popular, with Guns shooting a combination of walked up birds flushing from cover as the team walks the ground and driven birds, where they are strategically placed whilst areas of thicker cover are beaten to them. The focus of these days is on some of the hedgerows and spinneys lying further out from the heart of a shoot and often provide the most rewarding sport, given the variety of game on offer. Added to which, there is the pleasure of seeing more of the splendour of the countryside in all its winter glory, the joy in watching dogs work and the sense of achievement as a bag builds through physical effort. If nothing else, this wretched avian 'flu is making people recognise that shooting should be about quality rather than quantity and to appreciate the day, rather than the weight of the bag.

More than anything else, the resilience of the shooting community was reflected in the resounding success of Holts two-day November auction of fine modern and antique firearms, modern sporting guns and rifles, followed by their sealed bid auction at the beginning of December, which exceeded all previous records. This was their third sale for 2022 and 924 Lots were offered at the live auctions on the 21st and 22nd November, of which 86% were sold on



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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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the day for £1,553,550 and a week later, the online auction of 124 unsold Lots, of which 50% sold, raised £176,434 bringing the total to £1,729,984. Among the highlights of the November sale were: A magnificent cased, heavy calibre, double barrellled flintlock pistol complete with shoulder stock and all accessories, plus matching miniature "pocket" pistol, made by Joseph Egg in 1815, which sold for £35,000. The ever popular under and over small bores attracted a lot of attention, with a pair of Holland Royal De Luxe 20 bores selling for £82,000 and a Watson Bros, with two sets of barrels for £24,000. An extremely nice side by side Purdey 20 bore sidelock, sold for £19,000, but it was Lot 1675, that really turned the atmosphere in the auction room electric. This was an exceptional Boss and Co round bar, over and under sidelock ejector, with two bidders, one in the room and one on the telephone pushing the price through £100,00 to £130,000, making it £158,500 with buyer's premium.

The 5,431 Lots in the Sealed Bid auction, where there are no incremental bids and a bold one wins, attracted enormous interest among bargain hunters, with the top price of going for a Henry Monk .410 non ejector reaching £3,651 against an estimate of £500-£700 and 70% of Lots selling for £611,661, giving an unprecedented combined sales total of just over £2.28 million. The success of these sales not only demonstrates the continuing strength of interest in shooting sports, they play a significant role in driving the bulwark industries which support shooting, not least of whom are the independent gunsmiths up and down the country. In line with Holt's recommendation that all guns should be stripped, cleaned and serviced before use, all guns sold through an auction will benefit from the attention of a gunsmith, even if all that is required is adjustments to fitting.



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