

HOLT'S

AUCTIONEERS OF FINE MODERN & ANTIQUE GUNS

JOE WHEATER

Joe Wheater is numbered amongst *THE FIELD*'s 100 best shots. The forerunner of George Digweed and Richard Faulds, Wheater is one of those rare sportsmen who excels both in the field and against clays. He was born on October 6th, 1918. To listen to his description of a journey through 92 years is truly to have our past reveal itself as a foreign country. "I can remember back to when I was two years of age," he says. "My father was headkeeper for Lord Hotham on his Dalton Hall estate in the East Riding of Yorkshire. It was a very fine game shoot – all wild birds - and it was nothing to kill up to 1,000 head of game. I started with a catapult when I was about three years of age, then at six years of age I was given a .410, and either one or two cartridges would be dished out with instructions to shoot the same number of rabbits or pigeons.

"Aged nine, I progressed to a double-barrelled hammerless 16-bore. I was allowed to put one cartridge only in, and I was given a talking-to if I started missing. If my father wanted six snipe or pigeons for the Hall, I was given six cartridges and I would try to get two at a shot to give me one spare cartridge for a second shot." If all else failed, out would come the trusty catapult. "The first time I fired both barrels was at Scarborough, and I shot a right and left at mallard. At mallard..." he repeats, relishing the memory. Aside from teaching his son discipline and fieldcraft, Herbert Chapman Wheater could demonstrate the art of gameshooting to devastating effect. "He was a far better shot than I am, or ever was," says Joe Wheater. "He's the only man I know who has shot 100/100 in the field, and did so many times. After he retired aged over 70, he always carried his gun when Lord Hotham was out, to shoot the vermin coming back through the woods. The gentry would shoot a bag of 700 to 800, meanwhile my father would get 300 hares or rabbits in the day."

A clay pigeon shoot at Londesborough Park would soon portend a garlanded future for the headkeeper's boy. "We went on push bikes," Wheater recalls. "During the afternoon, Father said: 'would you like a shot?' When I said, I'd love one, he said, 'see that man over there? He's the headkeeper, Mr Ted Swift. Go and ask him if you can borrow his gun, and can you have a shot in the competition?' I borrowed his gun; I won the competition; I was 12 years of age. Against England internationals..." he adds. His natural talent honed to perfection, Wheater would be selected to shoot for Great Britain in the 1948 Olympic Games. Staged in London when food and petrol rationing were still in force, they were dubbed the austerity games. He was selected for Rome in 1960 and Tokyo in 1964, and went as an Ireland team manager to Mexico in 1968 and Munich in 1972. "At the Melbourne Games in

1956, we walked through Melbourne into the Cricket Ground with 100,000 people there, cheering their heads off: a wonderful experience. You're 10 feet tall when you represent your country."

In those days, sponsorship as we know it did not exist. The Browning shot by Wheater in Australia stayed there. "I sold it," he says. "I couldn't afford to keep it." Sometimes his guns would be delivered direct to a competition from the Browning factory at Herstal. "I used to win the shoot and sell the gun." Webley & Scott curtailed an arrangement based on his victories: "I was winning too much!" He lists a string of triumphs including the British Open, "I won that eight times", and the prestigious Coronation Cup, "which I won each of the 11 times I shot in it". What you see is what you get with this Yorkshireman who walked away from competition shooting in 1972. "I was banned a number of times," says Wheater, chin cocked. "I was honest and straightforward, which didn't suit some people." His sporting ethos was equally cut and dried. In any sporting contest, he was there to win. "It's no use coming second," he confirms, his mind-set that of a top sportsman.

Wheater's story is, however, more complex than it seems. He confesses that another passion, not shooting, has consumed him throughout his 92 years. "The most important thing in my life was flying," he says. The romance began during his schooldays when competitors in the King's Cup Air Race flew low over the family home to land on nearby Beverley Racecourse. "I left school aged 15, and became an under-keeper at Everlands in Kent for Colin Campbell, the banker, later Lord Colgrain. Whilst I was there, Sir Alan Cobham appeared with his flying circus." Those were the innocent days of open cockpits, the wind screaming past fragile wings and bumpy landings on farmers' fields. "The aerobatics man was the 1930 RAF aerobatics champion. I paid him 7/6d, more than a week's wages, and told him to do his worst. "Are you sure...?" asked the pilot. "I am," replied the boy who, 80 years later sighs: "It were wonderful..." A second "go" proved irresistible. "He threw it all over the sky," Wheater recalls, "and I was hooked then, on flying."

Wheater joined the Royal Air Force in 1937 to pilot an aircraft. Alas, "I realised that as an AC2 ACHGD I was the lowest form of life," he says. Nothing daunted, he worked hard and was made a Fitter Armourer Group 1. "I did hundreds of hours of flying," he remembers, but never at the controls. The RAF also made the fullest possible use of his sporting prowess. "Airfields were alive with game. I would fill my kit bag up with game when I was playing cricket in London." Posted to Reykjavik, an order to supply the commanding officer's table meant unusual quarry. "Icelanders were not allowed to shoot, and there were swans, ptarmigan, snipe, geese, golden plover..." Like Digweed, Wheater's superior hand-eye co-ordination allows him to play cricket with the best of them which, in the RAF during the War, meant with the Bedser twins and "half the England team". As an aside he adds, "I've scored a thousand runs in a season, and taken 100 wickets."

In Civvy Street, back in Yorkshire, after a brief spell as headkeeper on shipping magnate Thomas Wilson-Filmer's Bentley estate, Wheater first bought *R. Robinson (Gunmakers) Ltd* in Hull, and then a 600acre shooting ground where he turned to coaching. "But," he says, "the important thing was to learn to fly." He took flying lessons, and finally his dream came true. "I got my pilot's licence in 1950, and my first passengers were my wife and my son." He flew from Leeds Bradford airport

where the man in charge was Sqn Ldr 'Ginger' Lacey, the second highest scoring British RAF pilot of the Battle of Britain. Horizons continued to open up. "At 82, I became the oldest person in Great Britain to take up glider flying," he says, before railing against the modern trend towards stereotyping by age. He uses his side-by-side against game, and his annual trip to fish the Deveron, Scotland's hidden gem, is in the diary for later this year. "The year before last, my first fish was 13lbs. I had five on in the morning, seven in the day."

A wonderful life. "Oh, yes," he agrees. "And I was married for 57 years and to me, marriage is something out of this world."

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