

# SPARKLING *at Perrystone*

**James Johnsen** visits a Wye Valley shoot embracing change but sticking with the philosophy: if it's worth doing, it's worth doing splendidly.

Photographs by **Charles Sainsbury-Plaice**

**H**EREFORDSHIRE is one of those unsung counties, tucked, as it is, between the Welsh Marches and Severn estuary, forming much of what was once the kingdom of Mercia. The Wye Valley in particular rejoices in some of the county's most glorious countryside, marked by such colourfully redolent names as Old Gore, Much Marcle, Hole-in-the-Wall and, my personal favourite, Snogsash, all telling of ancient ways and distant folklore. Among the Wye Valley's many hidden gems is the Perrystone estate near Ross-on-Wye, its 2,500 acres of gently rolling coverts and fields overlooked from Wales by the Black Mountains.

Since 1865 four generations of the Clive family, MPs and soldiers mostly, have inhabited Perrystone Court and it can be seen that the estate has never been run on crudely commercial lines. Hanging oakwoods, belts of larch, game crops of artichoke and maize all mark a deep and long-held interest in game conservation and game-shooting. For many years, private invitations generously extended to neighbours and

friends have been coveted and Perrystone's reputation has always ranked high in the county. Today, others can enjoy Perrystone's shoot. I joined the team of six guns, all the guests of the new owner, former advertising executive Peter Clay, on a crisp and frosty December morning that had me blessing the addition of long Johns to the usual sporting raiment.

## HIGH MERE ROOKERY

The first drive, High Mere Rookery, provided a taste of things to come when a steady stream of sharply climbing pheasants was pushed over the row of five front and one back gun in an array that on many shoots would have done for a grand finale. Despite the lack of wind, Perrystone's enviable topography enabled a show of really testing birds. I tried to distract George Stephenson, the back gun, with idle chat, but with the practised ease of an old Africa hand and dexterous management of his over-and-under 20-bore, he dealt with several by now very high and fast birds, barely pausing in our conversation. There is something about good birds that ➤

Henry Hood has no problem with the high birds at Perrystone





# “Queen’s Hollow involves a three-way beating manoeuvre, all completed with a minimum of fuss and noise”

brings out good shooting. By the end of this long and supremely produced drive, the valley floor was neatly dotted with well-felled quarry.

As so often with early expectations raised, the next drive marginally disappointed. Adrian Hanks, the headkeeper, clearly concerned, caught up with us for the soup and sherry. Whether a fox or buzzard (or an altogether more sinister interlocutor), something had unsettled his birds on that drive and many had disappeared. “Don’t worry, you can still keep your job,” banters our host; after all he knows his man. For Peter was born and brought up at Brockhampton, “five minutes away – or 10 if you have forgotten your gun!” as his father, Jeremy, found out. Clay *père* has been coming to Perrystone for nearly 40 years. Accompanied by his keeper, John Hudson, to help load and spot the oncoming birds, what he might have lost in speed of reaction was more than made up for in guile. As he modestly put it, “After 40 years, you begin to know what some of the birds will do.”

## CONTINUITY AND CHANGE

The two families having virtually grown up together, Clay  *fils* had, of course, known the Perrystone shoot since boyhood. Little did he think that he would one day buy the estate when a combination of financial difficulties and a stroke forced the Clives to think about some form of strategic exit. It is not just that Mr Henry, as he is respectfully referred to, was able to remain in the house during his convalescence, but that the essential ethos of the place and its delectable shoot can be maintained by someone who already knows it intimately and cherishes its sporting values.

Adrian is soon smiling again as the next drive, Queen’s Hollow, goes according to plan – no mean feat involving a complex three-way beating manoeuvre, all completed with a minimum of fuss and noise, always a testament to a good keeper in my book. As he later commented, after 23 seasons at Perrystone, he should know how to do it. Indeed, Peter is lucky to have inherited such an experienced headkeeper who, apart from a brief foray across the river to the Ingstone shoot, has been at Perrystone boy and man. The feeling is mutual, with Adrian clearly excited about plans to thin three of the woods to help produce nine pheasant- and partridge-drives, six of them new. “It’s important not to get stale and to keep experimenting with new ideas,” he says. With an additional 500 acres to add to Perrystone’s, he has a total of some 3,000 acres to play with, more than enough to cope with the driven days planned.

All the regular team remain in place. “I have been coming here for 17 years, organising the picking-up and helping place the guns,” Nino Berni said. A third-generation Italian whose family settled in Cardiff, here was a man who understood the dangers involved in change and was anxious to see the high standards maintained. He watched approvingly as today’s team showed their true sporting instincts, selecting the really high shots and leaving the less challenging birds to



Guy Rasch, “one of the best shots in Wiltshire”



Clockwise from top left: Nino Berni, who organises the picking-up, chats with Margaret Sainsbury; shoot owner Peter Clay; retrieve; Johnnie Pilkington gives a good account of himself; back gun George Stephenson; agent Richard Hutcheon; Paul Boucher with headkeeper Adrian Hanks

try again another day. “It’s no point doing it unless you are going to do it properly,” was his laconic comment.

The fourth drive, the Lawns, was another showpiece. Standing in a deep valley with their backs to the wood, guns were seriously tested. Guy Rasch, probably one of the best shots in Wiltshire (recently renowned for being mistaken for Jeremy Clarkson in a Salisbury watch shop – the assistant refused to let him pay for the battery he was trying to buy), took his coat off to deal with the array of birds exploding from all sides. After expertly folding one only just subsonic partridge, he pithily commented of his host: “Pete’s really fallen on his feet here, this place is the business.”

## PILKINGTON CLASS

Over a delicious lunch of curried partridge breasts – one of the many original touches at Perrystone – in the very comfortably appointed lodge next to the main house, I was able to chat with Richard Hutcheon of Fisher German Sporting, which handles some of the let days at Perrystone alongside Roxtons, of which Peter happens to be a non-executive director. Richard is clearly thrilled by the opportunity: “This is only the first season that we have taken on Perrystone. As you can see, it is a quality shoot in a stunning part of the country, so we expect there will be lots of interest.”

I am inclined to agree, judging by the two post-lunch drives. Bennetts 1 and 2, so called after the person who

planted the long belts of larches from which the birds flew so well, were nothing short of sensational. Johnnie Pilkington, the photographer and equally stylish handler of the shotgun, gave a good account of himself (until he ran out of cartridges, eliciting much ribald comment from his host), with birds shot overhead falling a good 75yd back down behind him in the valley below. Incidentally, he is the only gun I know who sports a pair of denim plus-tvos which he had run up specifically “to annoy the golf course farts who do not allow jeans”. Next door, Henry Hood, a divorce lawyer from Dorset, was dealing with these really testing birds with elegant aplomb. Pity the matrimonial litigant who crosses him if this is his legal style, too.

It is difficult to retain objectivity when you come across a shoot like Perrystone. But if one were to introduce a scoring system which took into account all the key attributes – and people – behind such a top-quality day, then there could be no doubt that a Strictly Come Shooting jury of expert practitioners would all be showing their nines and 10s. ■

## PERRYSTONE

To shoot at the Perrystone estate, contact Richard Hutcheon (head of sporting) at Fisher German LLP, 2 Birch Court, Blackpole East,

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