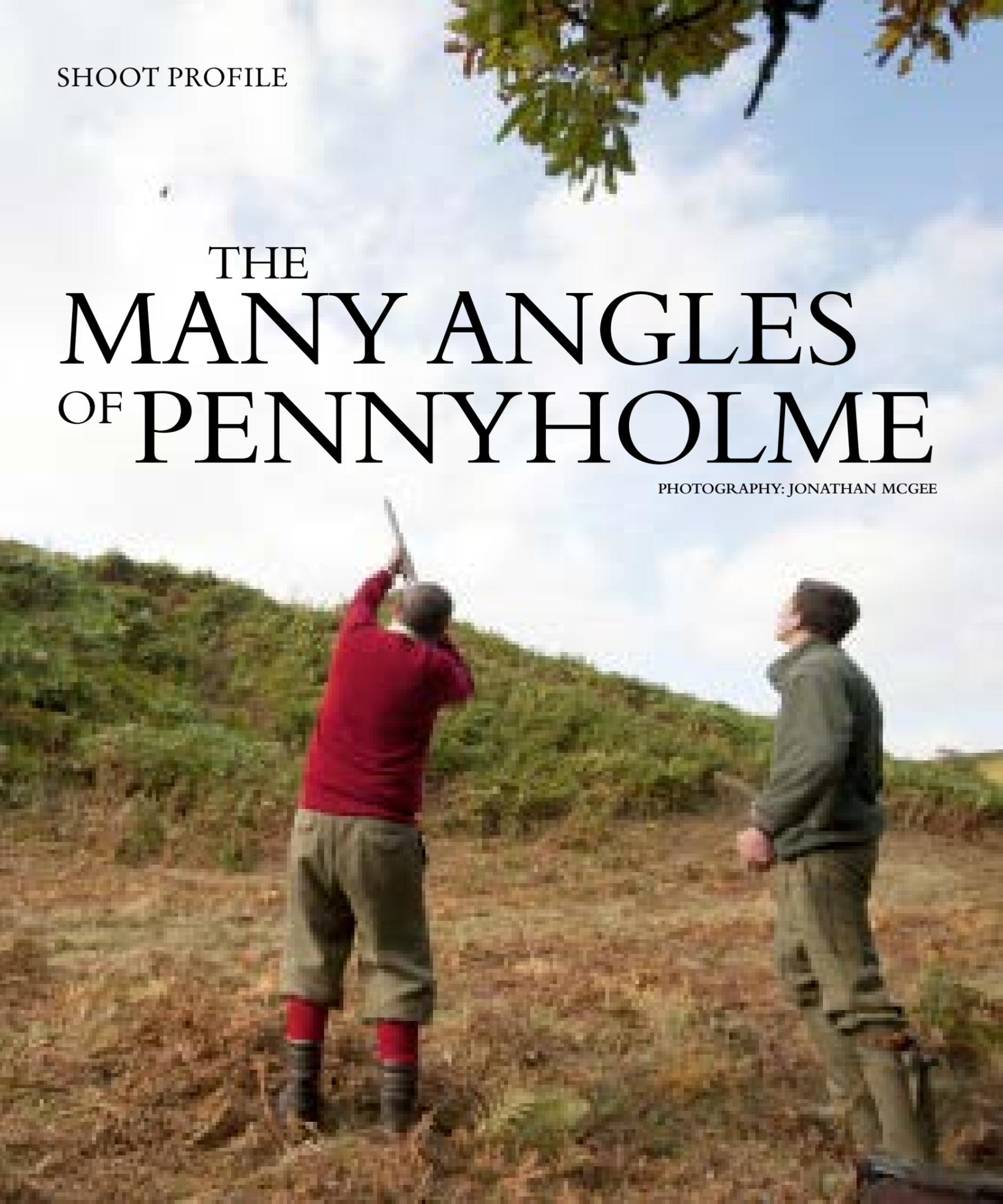


THE MANY ANGLES OF PENNYHOLME

PHOTOGRAPHY: JONATHAN MCGEE



Granted, being a country sporting journalist has its perks. As I caught a glimpse of Stoneley Woods Manor through the golden-flecked woodland, set in the heart of the 19,000-acre Pennyholme estate, there was little doubt this would be one of them. I had familiarised myself with the surrounding picturesque villages and twisting roads prior to arrival, but not intentionally – the satnav may well have been gibbering in Latin – such is Stoneley’s seclusion and privacy. But there are worse places to get lost in than Yorkshire’s rugged valleys and moors.

The manor really *is* a home from home. In fact, clichés aside, I would stick my arm in a log chopper to call this incredible place my home. The 1930s house has recently undergone a multi-million pound, three-year renovation project, instigated after the Wilkinson family bought and integrated Stoneley Woods Manor into the Pennyholme Estate. And what a job. Pictures lining the walls detail the vast transformation and immense scale of the project. The interior of the manor was designed by Jo Wilkinson and is now contemporary, incorporating Wi-fi, Sky TV and flat screens, yet retains the all important traditional country house feel, without the leaks, drafts and creaky floorboards.

Comfort of royalty, painfully good food and partridges that don’t follow the rulebook – not a bad day in the office for Patrick Tillard.

As shoot host Luke Wilkinson gave me the grand tour, I felt the urge to hibernate in each of the nine king-sized bedrooms, each with their own bathroom. Downstairs the feng shui was just as inviting. A fire crackled in the drawing room, where drinks were taken before supper in the commodious dining room. With elegant dark wood furnishings and views into the unsurprisingly immaculate garden – based on Percy Cane’s original design – this was to be the perfect setting in

which to gorge myself into a food induced coma later that evening. In the corner of the room was a thick telescope, and for good reason. The seclusion of the manor and complete lack of sky-tainting urban graffiti produces an astronomical feast for any star-gazing enthusiasts.

This October retreat had been organised by fieldsports monomaniac Simon Cotton, who had arranged a two-day adrenaline binge for a team of close friends. For openers, a 300-bird

partridge day. And day two, driven grouse on the formidable Bransdale moor – as featured in our Summer 2013 issue – a 16,000-acre chunk of the estate and one of Yorkshire’s finest. And Simon had kindly invited myself and photographer Jonathan McGee to tag along. As I said, tough day in the office.

The guests, ranging from teenagers to octogenarians, were a great bunch. At supper, sandwiched between Simon and his son Frank, I was soon drowned in envy as both shared stories of recent sporting success – 30lb salmon from the Tweed, even bigger from the Alta, frantic pigeon decoying sessions, gold medal roe buck etc. “Will you adopt me,” I interjected through a mouthful of delicate cheese soufflé. Simon chuckled – he clearly thought I was joking. I looked for grounding in 17-year-old Olli Beswick, but to no avail – it materialised that he is one of Britain’s stellar RZR buggy racers. Roast beef followed, then tangy lemon tart, and what with the pre supper canapés, I had all too easily chewed myself into temporary obesity. But then came the



Estate manager William Blizzard & shoot host Luke Wilkinson



The safety brief prior to setting off to Hodge Beck



One of the nine bedrooms



SHOOT PROFILE



Thomas Wordsworth at Hodge Beck



“Partridges at Pennyholme clearly haven’t heard of flight paths, or if they have, are haphazard with their employment of them.”



Headkeeper Ed Blizzard & underkeeper Connor Thody



xxx xxx xxx xxx at the stunning third drive, Jack’s



Steve Cotton takes a partridge at Oak Tree

cheeseboard: my Achilles heel. It’s rude to say no. An hour or so later, having clawed my way up the stairs as if making the last few strides to the Everest summit, never has a pillow-thick duvet of goose-down and fine linen by Heirlooms – the supplier used by the Queen! – been so well received. Bliss doesn’t come close. If heaven is as comfy, bring back that log chopper.

SHOOT DAY

There was a bubbly ambience at breakfast. There were many experienced Guns in the team,

several of which knew from perennial visits what to expect from Pennyholme partridges. Simon takes nine days during the season and, as a man of blunt Yorkshire dialect who knows a shoot from a shambles, I had no doubts as to why he takes so many. The sun was trying to make an appearance and lively blusters had joined the party. Pegs were drawn and Guns loaded into three Polaris 4x4s making for the first drive of the day, Hodge Beck. Guns were directed by Luke and estate manager William Blizzard, while

his son, Ed, headkeeper of six years, and underkeepers Ollie Wilkinson and Connor Thody orchestrated behind-the-scenes proceedings, flawlessly throughout.

Hidden in the shadow of a steep bank-face, the first covey pounced on the Guns like a pack of starlings. No sooner had they appeared, they were gone, and with the growing wind up their pipes these birds were shifting. Although not on today’s game card, some of the pheasants were cracking birds – the mind wandered to their likely quality in late January.

The opening drive was a good tester, plenty of opportunities for all the line, but it was on the second, Stork, that I really saw what these partridges had to offer. I’m talking angles. Partridges at Pennyholme clearly haven’t heard of flight paths, or if they have, are haphazard with their employment of them. Stork produced fabulous birds. They came from distance with height and speed, from the left, right and in front, kinking like pigeon. But they were to get better.

Drive three: Jack’s. Unquestionably, drive of the day.

The Guns faced a lengthy bank of bilberry heather and bracken; an autumnal mural of yellows, greens and browns. During elevenses, the beaters had blanked in acres of cover and from the off, with the flankers squeezing in the far sides, partridges flushed in small coveys, heading back towards the pens. An Archimedean understanding of geometrics would have been a helpful skill to suss the lead and side allowance of the numerous angles, as would eight eyes to detect the next incomer. On no drive have I ever seen such an

assortment of presentation. And working with both the breeze and gravity the redlegs were piercing the line like gannets, each asking questions of the Guns. “You don’t see many drives like this,” bellowed Simon as Frank folded a left-and-right. He was bang on. You don’t. Ed Reeves, a seasoned Shot, was adamant he

SHOOT PROFILE

took the bird of his life on peg 3.

A short respite before moving on to the last two drives allowed the opportunity to revel over great birds shot and great birds missed. And a chance to watch picker-up Tom Hodgson working his collie – not a sight often seen on shoots.

By any standard the fourth and return fifth drives showed exciting sport, but not quite to the brilliance of Jack's – not many drives do. But it was a change of topography and a new piece to the Pennyholme puzzle. With the Guns in a narrow ravine, wits and ninja reflexes were necessities. Blink and opportunity missed. Partridges were driven from canary grass and chicory game cover and once again exploited every possible angle in the book.

The cover crop programme had been trial and error for a number of years, but after many seasons of toiling and battling to establish strong blocks, and under the tutelage of Clive Wood from Kings Crops, they have finally got there.

On the fourth, Ousegill, the higher pegs were in the hot seat as the wind forced the birds to hug the contours before peeling over the line and flaring. On both, action was dizzying as the Guns pirouetted to match the birds.

The final horn sounded. Where on most days this would signal the curtain call, here it was only the half time whistle. Fire, cake and a dram awaited at the manor, but first, a pitstop for a pint of malty Black Sheep in The Royal Oak, also part of the estate.

Tonight, round two. Had I learned my lesson from over-indulging the night before? Yes, don't wear a belt.

Tomorrow, the heroin of game shooting: Simon and his team were moor bound for an appointment with the king of gamebirds...

BAG: 346 redlegs

GUNS: *Simon & Frank Cotton, Steve Revell, Thomas Wordsworth, Russell & Olli Beswick, John Carr, Bob Ellis, Ronnie Howard, Ed Reeves and David Butcher*



Picker-up Tom Hodgson working his collie

Pennyholme lets 25 pheasant and partridge days a season, with bags of 100–300. There are currently 16 drives on the estate, individual Gun days can be bought and loaders are available on request. And with the website's written directions, it's actually straightforward to find. www.stoneleywoods.co.uk

To discuss availability, requirements and price contact william@pennyholme.com, luke@pennyholme.com or enquiries@stoneleywoods.co.uk



The team in front of Stoneley Woods Manor