

Wildfowling



Wildfowling may seem synonymous with wild and lonely places but, as CLIVE ELLISTON reveals, it can thrive on the most crowded shorelines.

WILDFOWLING in the holidaymaker's playground

The south coast of England is renowned for seaside holidays, a rapidly expanding commuter population and wildfowling – yes wildfowling! Nestled between the holiday homes and the business parks, pockets of wilderness still survive, a little flavour of what once was.

After the holidaymakers have drifted home, like autumn leaves blown away on the winds of the coming winter, then once again the marsh-men return to their muddy strongholds along the tide's edge and continue the tradition.

The coastline of West Sussex and Hampshire is heavily populated; indeed Portsmouth is one of the country's most densely populated cities with more than 200,000 people hemmed in between Portsdown Hill to the north and the Solent to the south.

Further west, Southampton continues to expand ever outwards, and the M27 corridor is strewn with hypermarkets, industrial estates and business parks. One day the fabled "Solent City" will have arrived and there will be no green space left to build upon; the conurbations of Portsmouth and Southampton will join together and become one sprawling metropolis.

LYMINGTON

The Solent

KEYHAVEN, CRADLE OF MODERN WILDFOWLING

The most westerly club in the Solent area is the Lymington and Keyhaven Marsh Users Association; they are a small club, limited by a clause in their lease that restricts membership to those who reside within a ten-mile radius of Keyhaven church. Despite the limitations, they survive to continue the tradition that was begun by Colonel Peter Hawker, that doyen of south coast wildfowling.

Punt-gunners may no longer chase the Brent geese that were once harried by Hawker, but the "shore-poppers" still achieve a measure of success when conditions are conducive on the marshes he frequented throughout a succession of winters in the early nineteenth century. Long may the tradition continue.

SOUTHAMPTON

Fawley

A continuing tradition

From Pagham Harbour in the east, to Keyhaven in the west, the southern coastline has long been haunted by the brotherhood of the big-gun and the long boot. From the days of the earliest firearms, men have pursued the wildfowl and waders that return each autumn to winter in these sheltered southern harbours.

The fowling grounds of West Sussex and Hampshire provide food and shelter for a wealth of wintering migrants that arrive each year to swell the resident populations. Brent geese and wigeon, teal and pintail – they join the locally-bred mallard and Canada geese to become a part of the winter pageant that is played out each year among the creeks and mudflats below the southern tide-line.

Brent geese were once the staple quarry for the many punt-gunners who lurked in every creek, or so it must have seemed. There is a body of evidence to suggest that punt-gunning was born on the South Coast; there are certainly historical records to prove that it once thrived in the area long before it became the sport of gentry with time on their hands. The father of modern wildfowling, Colonel Peter Hawker, launched his expeditions from Keyhaven at the western end of the Solent. Hawker's books detail his exploits in the Solent and Southampton Water. Further eastwards, at Langstone Harbour, he declared it would be the ideal punting area, were it not for the plethora of shore-gunners infesting the place!

Apart from Hawker, few writers have extolled the virtues of wildfowling on the South Coast although Noel 'Tim' Sedgewick, onetime editor of *Shooting Times*, mentions Chichester Harbour in several of his books and was a past secretary of the Chichester

THE SOLENT SHORE OF THE NEW FOREST



To the west of Southampton water, with its container port, oil refinery and visiting cruise ships, we come upon the lonely and picturesque section of shoreline that lies between the Beaulieu and Lymington rivers. With the New Forest to the north and the Isle of Wight across the Solent to the south, there can be few fowling grounds to rival the setting of this one. The local wildfowlingers enjoy the benefits of a long lease from the Crown Estate and have some cracking shooting opportunities when the conditions are suitable and the birds are "in".

Like the Langstone club, South Hants also lease a couple of areas of Forestry Commission land where their members may pursue game and pest species as an alternative to wildfowling should they wish. They also enjoy a thriving social section with a monthly programme of speakers on a variety of sporting themes. Cartridge loading, game cookery and visiting vets have all featured on the annual agenda along with their ever-popular quiz night and gun draw.



LANGSTONE HARBOUR

Hemmed in between Hayling Island and Portsmouth, this small harbour has the ability to offer top-class wildfowling when the conditions are right. The Langstone and District Wildfowling and Conservation Association have a varied portfolio of leases within the harbour, and are the largest land managers within the harbour. They enjoy access to a considerable area of foreshore, mudflats and sand bars that offer a variety of sporting opportunities to those who care to explore them.

The Langstone fowling also shoot over three islands in the harbour, whilst leaving a fourth as an un-shot refuge area. LADWACA maintain a mixture of shooting and non-shooting areas and work closely with conservation bodies that also have interests in the area.

Conservation has always been at the forefront of the association's thoughts. A gravel pit on Hayling Island was managed by LADWACA for more than 40 years and is now part of a recently designated SSSI, and the fowling assist each spring and summer with the management of the nationally important tern colonies in the harbour.

The Langstone fowling also lease two areas of Forestry Commission woodland locally for game shooting in season, and pest control throughout the year. The woodland shooting opportunities have proved a popular attraction for new and old club members alike, ideal for an "armed ramble" with dog and gun and maybe a pigeon or rabbit for the pot as a reward.

CHICHESTER HARBOUR

In contrast to its close neighbour at Pagham, wildfowling thrives amongst the creeks and salt marshes of Chichester. Chichester has the largest shoreline of the southern harbours and offers a multitude of wildfowling opportunities to those who venture out upon its notorious mud flats. Local knowledge is key to negotiating the glutinous and pungent mud that exists here; no wonder mud pattens are so popular with the locals, whether their quarry is wildfowl or shellfish. Homegrown mallard and Canada geese are popular early season quarry species here, with the migratory wigeon and teal arriving in numbers from early October onwards. Pintail also arrive during the autumn and are a popular quarry, although never appearing in large numbers, something that can't be said for the brent geese that are encountered just about anywhere.

Once the protected brent arrive they soon ravage the zostera beds that are the food of choice for the wigeon flocks, then they turn their attentions to the farmers' winter wheat fields where they are harried with flags, bangers and other scaring devices with varying degrees of effectiveness. Wildfowling at Chichester have worked long and hard to secure lengthy leases from their landlords, the next best thing to freehold ownership, although that, too, has occurred with the purchase of around 70 acres of salt marsh on the eastern shore of Hayling Island. Land purchase by wildfowling certainly proves they are serious about their sport, and shows a degree of commitment that is otherwise difficult to demonstrate. The Chichester club enjoyed a formidable reputation for its conservation work over many years, during which time they managed a number of inland ponds purely for their conservation value. They were also key players in the creation of the Nutbourne Nature Reserve, and their members have served on the committee of the Friends of Chichester Harbour as well as helping with wildfowl counts and surveys.

PORTSMOUTH

PORTSMOUTH HARBOUR

Once home to a veritable fleet of punt-gunners, sadly wildfowling no longer occurs here. The Gosport and Fareham Wildfowling Association lost their 'fowling grounds' in the harbour many years back, but their spirit lives on in the shape of a local game shooting syndicate formed by ex members of the club, and likewise a clay shooting club.

LANGSTONE HARBOUR

Harbour Wildfowling Association. Sir Peter Scott and his compatriots used to punt the waters of Langstone Harbour, but it escaped the attentions of their writings.

The Southern Wildfowling and Wetlands Management Association

This is the brash new kid on the block! Brought about by the amalgamation of the Pagham and West Sussex Wildfowling and Conservation Association, the Chichester Harbour Wildfowling Association and the Emsworth and District Wildfowling and Conservation Association, it came into being on 25 April this year. The gestation period was not without its difficulties, but the birth was perhaps somewhat easier than expected.

The management teams of the three clubs had long

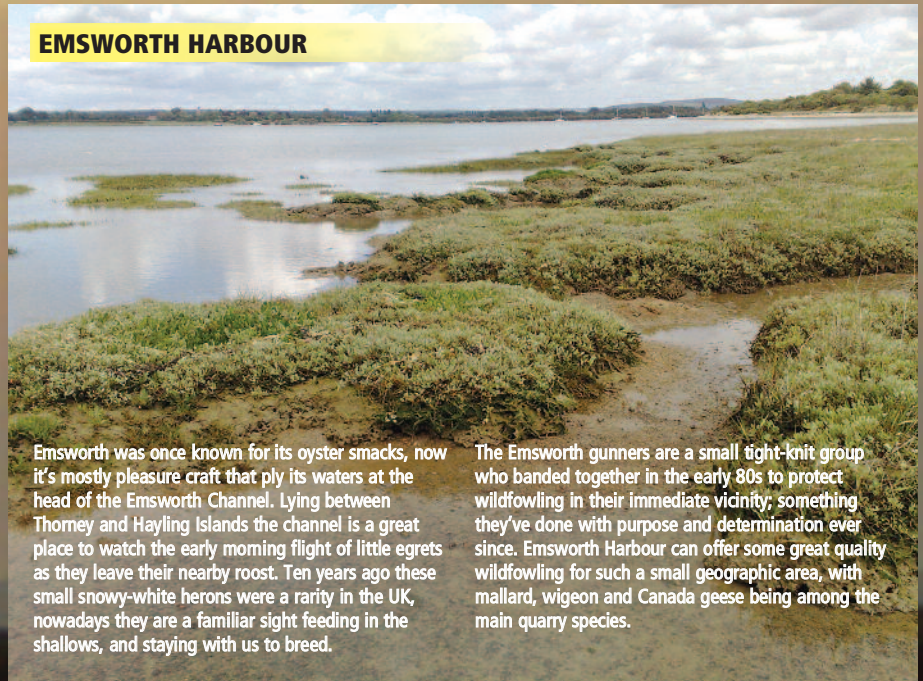
recognised the benefits of banding together to achieve common goals, and to enjoy the economies of scale that streamlining would bring. Now it's up to the newly formed management committee to ensure the fledgling association continues to enjoy the excellent reputation of its predecessors, and to achieve the recognition and respect that were enjoyed by the parent clubs that contributed to its creation.

SWAWMA now controls the shooting over the three harbours of Pagham, Chichester and Emsworth, along with inland shooting over freshwater marshes in the Rother Valley in East Sussex. It also enjoys shooting over farmland and forestry for both game and pest species. SWAWMA continues the excellent working relationship that CHWA forged with the Kent Wildfowling Association, with whom it jointly owns and leases some of its inland sporting opportunities.



EMSWORTH HARBOUR

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Emsworth was once known for its oyster smacks, now it's mostly pleasure craft that ply its waters at the head of the Emsworth Channel. Lying between Thorney and Hayling Islands the channel is a great place to watch the early morning flight of little egrets as they leave their nearby roost. Ten years ago these small snowy-white herons were a rarity in the UK, nowadays they are a familiar sight feeding in the shallows, and staying with us to breed.

The Emsworth gunners are a small tight-knit group who banded together in the early 80s to protect wildfowling in their immediate vicinity; something they've done with purpose and determination ever since. Emsworth Harbour can offer some great quality wildfowling for such a small geographic area, with mallard, wigeon and Canada geese being among the main quarry species.

PAGHAM HARBOUR



This, the smallest of the southern harbours, was once home to a thriving wildfowling club who were proud of their long-standing conservation work and were instrumental in the creation of the Pagham Harbour LNR. Sadly, this record of achievement was totally ignored in 1991 when their lease renewal was refused and they lost the vast majority of their shooting. Their exemplary record of conservation and wardening achievements were brushed aside by the Coast and Countryside committee of West

Sussex County Council, and their long-standing tenure in the harbour was terminated at a stroke. Limited fowling opportunities now exist on a small acreage of Crown Foreshore – a pale shadow of the sport that was previously available in this gem of a harbour, and a harsh reminder to those clubs who don't own the freehold of their wildfowling grounds. Pagham's downfall sends a stark message to wildfowling clubs around the country, one that many clubs would pay to heed.

CHICHESTER HARBOUR

In conclusion

Wildfowling on the south coast may not offer the remoteness of other areas around the country. It may not offer the battalions of grey geese that frequent our more northerly wildfowling grounds, and it may not transport us far from civilisation and the modern rat race; but it can offer some remarkable sporting opportunities for those who care to seek them out.

With a gale blowing and the wigeon flighting, it's easy to forget there are several thousand fellow human beings tucked-up in bed in close proximity – the hustle and bustle of the commuters, and the traffic jams that you may have to endure on the way home are all pushed to the back of the mind – for a short time, it's only the sport that counts.

PAGHAM

HOW TO CONTACT SOUTH COAST CLUBS

Southern Wildfowlers' and Wetland Management Association
All enquiries via the club website at www.swawma.org

Langstone and District Wildfowlers' and Conservation Association
All enquiries via the club website at www.ladwaca.com

South Hampshire Wildfowlers' Association
Contact Hon. Secretary, Sue Maidment – 02380 879380