

AN INNOCENT ABROAD

by Barry Batagol

Some of you may be aware of the excellent monthly shoot offered by Cobaw Sporting's Jon Thomas in addition to his partridge shoots. Jon has built a very impressive facility at Cobaw with four very high towers providing a wide variety of very sporting and challenging targets.

In the past, Jon has also organized a shooting trip to North Yorkshire of about two weeks duration, shooting pheasant, partridges and grouse at many of the famous shooting estates in North Yorkshire. The party is based at the very picturesque market town of Helmsley at which shooting is a very important part of their economy. Jon invites seven guns to join him to make a total of eight guns taking up the challenge. His focus is only on very sporting birds with high pheasant and partridges being the order of the day and low birds being ignored with total disdain.

I was fortunate enough to be invited to join the party due to a vacancy occurring due to the ill health of a previous participant, so planning for the trip was well on the way one year before it was due to start. Amongst the eight guns were three Vintagers being David Hawker, John Spark and Barry Batagol. I was quietly determined to use a side by side gun and decided to take my 20 gauge Flli Piotti with me from Australia, which was surprising without any drama due to the arrangements that Jon put in place before departure by arranging all the UK paper work and permits well in advance. On arrival in Heathrow the process of clearing my gun took about 30

minutes with no concern about having a sporting firearm with me, but much interest of where I was going to shoot.

I spent a couple of days in London visiting the usual high end guns shops as well as having an afternoon at Holland and Holland's shooting school at Middlesex to get my eye in on those much talked about expected towering pheasants and of course the hoped for grouse shoot. I also managed to catch up with David and John for dinner one night at David's club which was very pleasant.

We were to all meet at Helmsley for an opening dinner and then it was to be shoot two days and then have one day off and so on for the two weeks, although we all agreed to sacrifice one of our days off when the opportunity arose to shoot at a well-known estate with a reputation for very high birds. The Yorkshire Dales in late autumn has quite striking scenery combined with rugged moors, typical rural villages and of course many grand estates and houses. For example Castle Howard is quite close to Helmsley and we drove through the expansive estate several times, (it was the setting for the well-known TV series "Brideshead Revisited").

We opened our account for a warm up at a simulated target day at Raisthorpe on the same area of hills and valleys that we were to return to later on to tackle their quite famous high partridges which did not disappoint.

We shot at pheasants and partridges at Rievaulx Abbey which is was probably the only place that we had some concerns with, Wykeham centred around the family home of the Viscount Downe, Duncombe Park which is on the outskirts of Helmsley and Bransdale Moors.

We were fortunate to have a day on the grouse at the last shoot of the season at Snilesworth and Whorlton Moors which was a fantastic experience as it is so different to anything else. The grouse day was certainly one of our highlights and although it was a very cold and windy day on the magnificent moors the birds were all hardened survivors by then and they certainly tested all of us. Grouse of course are totally wild birds and it is very difficult to predict expected numbers available for a shoot, as it depends on the season and other factors as to how many birds can be driven over the butts. For me the highlight was a day at a private local shoot at Hartoft which is run by the locals for the locals. They gave us the entire day and they beat and picked up for us as well as arranged a fine lunch in the barns. When we arrived at Hartoft we were met by forty odd people all wearing corks hanging from their hats as a welcome to the visting Ozzies – talk about taking the p*ss.

We reciprocated by taking them all to local pub for dinner and a drink or two and it was a big night. At the end of the two weeks we had a valedictory dinner to which we invited many of the locals who went out of their way to assist us wherever possible and it was the conclusion of a memorable experience for all of us.

A word on the using the 20 gauge side by side Piotti, all I can say I never felt at any stage disadvantaged to the rest of the guns using their 12 gauge over and unders, nor did I feel under-gunned with my 25gram and 28 gram loads that I used.



They stopped many high birds “dead in the air”, and missed many as well, (but that was down to me and even if I was using 36 gram of shot it would probably have made little difference).

I attach one photo of the Piotti in action at Duncombe Park on some high birds and if you look carefully I am quite proud of the fact that whilst I am in focus, the barrels are not, as they are swinging rapidly through the bird as required.

So “innocent” I am no longer, but determined I am, to repeat the exercise in 2015 when the next North Yorkshire shoot is planned.