

INTERNATIONAL BREEDING



JETSET DOGS

Delivering dogs to America is just part of the service for Charlie Thorburn and Mordor Gundogs, as Martin Puddifer discovers.



Charlie Thorburn may have been involved in gundog training for 20 of his 42 years but he talks with the enthusiasm of someone just getting started. We caught up just as he was starting an epic journey to the US with several dogs for company. The trip had started in Scotland in the early hours and would eventually take him to, amongst other places, Atlanta, Dallas, Houston and Chicago over the following nine days. On each of his stops he would either be delivering dogs bred and trained at his Mordor Kennels in Perthshire to their new homes, or pressing palms with those eager to learn more about his work.

Mordor Gundogs has built up a global reputation for quality training and breeding. Charlie, the son of a colonel who holds a degree in Agricultural Business and Economics from Edinburgh University, started training as a hobby while pursuing other interests and had been selected to attend Sandhurst, the British Army officer training course. However, he found himself becoming so busy training dogs - around 30 or so - it occurred to him that his future may lie elsewhere. Mordor Gundogs eventually moved to high-quality, purpose-built premises in 2006 and its owner has never looked back.

IN SEARCH OF SUITABLE HOMES

He specialises in breeding labradors, springers and cockers, dogs bred to enjoy a good life at home as well as in the field. Charlie takes his responsibilities towards his dogs' welfare as seriously as he does the needs of his clients; from the first phone call or email to the final handover, he is on a fact-finding mission that will continue for months, even years afterwards: "I'm quite particular about where the dogs I breed are going," he explained. "They have to go and live in a house as a family dog, not in a kennel. They have to be going to a better life than they have with me. We have indoor kennels at Mordor Gundogs and there is always someone with them for 14 hours a day. They're let out a lot, get plenty of exercise and live in an immaculately clean environment."

Experience has given Charlie the confidence to recognise when a client's mind is made up and when to suggest alternatives, especially when guiding them away from the noise and confusion (often found online) that can cloud one's judgement: "Some people are very particular and I won't try to change their mind, I will just try to assess them and pick the right dog. Others tell me they want a spaniel but we end up selling them a labrador because it's going to be more suitable."

THE PERSONAL TOUCH

Charlie holds himself to the highest standards and isn't afraid to turn people away: "We never breed dogs for competitions. If someone asks for one they're talking to the wrong person." No matter how many days a shooting client does, for the majority of the year this will be a family dog that has to be able to switch off. "Some people read about field trial dogs being the best and think that's what they want, even though it might not be suitable for them. I hope I am a reasonable judge of character. If you get a bad vibe it's better to stop the conversation before things go too far. We're keen to meet everyone who wants to take a dog from us, which is why I will be meeting friends of clients during this trip. Recommendations or talking to someone on the phone is good, but there's nothing like meeting with them face to face. I have made mistakes by not doing that in the past.

"The main challenge is persuading overseas clients that what we're doing is worth the effort. Why would someone who has never bought a dog before go to someone who is 5,000 miles away? What we do is take all of that hassle out of it, as long as they are willing to trust us. I have always said we are really lucky, but it's not luck, we work really hard with the dogs and are good at communicating with people throughout the process."

PLANNING AHEAD FOR A NEW DOG

One mistake Mordor Gundogs did not (and would never) make was to participate in the hysteria surrounding dog breeding during the pandemic when prices shot through the roof. Every enquiry Charlie's team received was answered with a polite "no" but it was not a case of fobbing people off: almost all of Mordor's dogs had been reserved months, even years in advance anyway.

Every time one of Mordor Gundogs' bitches produces a litter, Charlie will only commit to selling a few puppies immediately with the rest kept back for training. As a rule, the whole litter will have been spoken for within four months.

Clients seeking a fully trained dog might have to wait two whole years for the privilege. It's something which has put people off in the past, especially those who have a "large hole in their home and their heart" after their dog had passed away unexpectedly or through old age. But Mordor's dogs don't come off the shelf and Charlie's position is crystal clear: don't wait until you've lost a dog before coming to see us, prepare for your next dog while your current one is still working.

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Charlie encourages his clients to come and see their new additions as often as possible before collection. For him, the better acquainted they all are, the more likely they are to leave Mordor as best friends ready to enjoy a happy life together. And when a dog is delivered to the US, he won't just drop the dogs off with their new handler and leave them to it, he'll go out with the pair for a few hours' training, perhaps stay overnight or even return a few days later to check that everything is running smoothly.

PRESERVING SAINTS

There is definitely a Mordor Gundogs 'way' when it comes to breeding - a solid temperament and good looks are key - and Charlie is open about the fact he is firm but not harsh when it comes to training: "There's a fine line between fear and respect, whether it's people or animals. We don't want our dogs to be scared of us, but we want them to know when they've done wrong. I bring up my dogs the same way I bring up my children: 90 per cent of it is about encouraging them and learning the right thing from day one, preserving saints rather than reforming sinners. My preference, and the preference of those who work for me, is always to train our own puppies for people because we bring them up in a nice, friendly environment, but without the freedoms that a family dog enjoys where bad habits can arise. A common theme amongst clients of ours who come for training is an over-reliance on positive reinforcement. There comes a time when, if a dog has done wrong, they have to face the consequences."



INTER-CONTINENTAL DOGS

Mordor dogs have found a new home everywhere from, as Charlie puts it "the South Island of New Zealand to north of Fairbanks, Alaska, into the Arctic circle, with plenty of stops in between".

Despite its many challenges, Charlie was still able to deliver his dogs around the British Isles during the pandemic and even put 26 on planes to the US. His first overseas client came 16 years ago via recommendation and Jolly, a five-month old springer spaniel, was eventually taken home on a private jet. Charlie has enjoyed a long relationship with the client, supplying several other dogs to him during that time. Long relationships are key in other areas too: "We use American Airlines when transporting dogs to the US. We've got a close relationship with its cargo departments in the US and the UK. One of the reasons I deliver the dogs myself is because I am there to see them get off the plane and through customs. The process of flying to another country in the hold of a commercial aircraft does not worry our dogs, most of the time they come out of their box wagging their tail."

Wherever they are in the world, one of the biggest challenges Charlie faces is breeding fully trained dogs that exceed expectations: "When you are on your first dog with a client it's easier," he joked, "when you're on their fourth dog it's pretty bloody hard and if there's a problem with a dog you have sold, you have to fix it."

ALWAYS LEARNING

One of the reasons for Mordor Gundogs' strong reputation is its founder's growth mindset. He freely admits he'll never know everything and is open to learning from anyone, whether they be a veteran breeder or someone in his employ who is trying something different. If things are not working out with a dog he's bred then there are a number of avenues that can be taken, whether it be a full refund or finding another dog which is better suited to the client's needs. Often it's a teething problem, and a phone call or a visit will sort things out.

Charlie once had to fly to New York to help a client who was struggling to get his dog to follow his instructions. It turned out to be something that could be solved in 10 minutes. He stayed over for a few days to oversee things and the client would later become godfather to one of his two children.

Charlie will be giving gundog demonstrations all weekend at The GWCT Scottish Game Fair this July. For tickets visit scottishfair.com *Gf*