



# A GOOD EGG

Even if you haven't shot on one of Bettws Hall's six estates, there is a good chance you have raised your gun to a bird reared at its game farm. We find out how the Powys-based operation ensures they tick every box possible when it comes to quality

*Author* MARTIN PUDDIFER / *Photographer* JONATHAN MCGEE

As a founder member of British Game Assurance (BGA) Bettws Hall's management of its game farm, whose hatchery has the ability to produce 8,000,000 eggs each year, has to be above and beyond outstanding. From the traceability of its eggs to biosecurity and the welfare of its poults, the Powys-based operation must hold itself to the highest standards, no matter what challenges it is facing both inside and outside game shooting.

“There’s been a lot of volatility in recent years, between Brexit, the pandemic and the rising cost of fuel, and we’ve had to make some key decisions,” says Marc Brown of Bettws Hall. “These issues have affected us as much as anyone else because we’re all subject to the same pressures as an industry. The margins can be very fine irrespective of the size of your operation. Now more than ever highlights the importance of knowing where your stock is coming from, whether chick or poult.”

Bettws Hall's game-rearing operation comprises a cutting-edge hatchery and over 60 rearing sites. Eggs come from Bettws Hall's own laying stock and mainland Europe, with overseas suppliers subject to constant assessment to ensure quality levels are maintained. The BGA audited both the game farm and Bettws Hall's six shoots in 2022, with its biosecurity, traceability and processes commended by poultry industry leaders and the Animal and Plant Health Agency. For Marc, this is no accident given the amount of scrutiny Bettws Hall puts itself under to ensure it always remains a market leader.

“Our contract rearing programme is a tried-and-tested process that allows us to effectively rear and over-winter stock yet keep the attention to detail and welfare of a smaller operation. We are able to spread our rearing over the season and over a wide geographical area, which not only has biosecurity benefits but also allows us to closely monitor and manage each site.

“Our rearing managers oversee the implementation of our rearing guidelines and site biosecurity, as well as its feed and gas usage. They are on-call 24/7 during the season for any assistance the rearer needs, along with our own dedicated poultry vet to ensure the stock is in the best condition. Plus, with a performance-based pay scheme in place, it is within the very best interests of the rearers to produce healthy pheasant and partridge poults, whilst providing a valuable source of income to them.

Traceability is a keyword in the Bettws Hall lexicon, crucial given that its stock finds new homes across the

UK and Ireland. Chicks are transported in purpose-built, temperature-controlled vans where they can be monitored in real time by both the driver and the main office. Poults are transported in spacious crates and only travel once they have been assessed by the vet. All travel takes place overnight to keep journey time and disruption down.

Even if you haven't shot on one of its six estates, there is a good chance you have raised your gun to a bird reared at its game farm, a bird which, in Bettws Hall's eyes, has been given the best possible care. And it all starts with the egg.

“When importing our eggs, we will only work with suppliers and farms that have a strong reputation for producing healthy, high-fertile eggs and who adhere to strict biosecurity and national guidelines on poultry,” says Marc. “Once in our hatchery, we utilise the most cutting-edge technology to monitor the egg through its 20- or 21-day incubation, handling and hatching. From egg to embryo to chick, quality checks are met at every step which enables us to ensure full traceability throughout. Our poults follow a fixed diet plan to keep growth consistent and healthy.”

For Marc, Bettws Hall's whole game-rearing operation is based on trust and transparency with its customers, noting that both parties have had to work more closely than ever to navigate the challenges which have swept through game shooting in recent years.

“The foundation of our chicks and poults is ensuring each one has come from a quality source, has been hatched in a market-leading hatchery and has been reared to the strictest guidelines that centralise the welfare of the bird. That's got to be the key message and we've got to illustrate this. These stages can only be maintained if we are able to track the quality throughout the whole process, which is why traceability is paramount. If there is ever an issue it can be realised, traced back and corrected in as little time as possible.”

Illustrating the work that goes into rearing quality game birds feeds directly into Bettws Hall's involvement with the BGA, whose badge it is proud to wear both online and through its correspondence with its clients. Guns visiting its shoots are asked to donate 50p per bird booked to the BGA and are presented with dressed game and further information on the BGA's work upon their departure. Marc is frank about the BGA's importance in securing a future for game shooting, and the need for everyone to support it, not least because of the cast iron certainty that if the sport cannot regulate itself it will be regulated by an outside source. ➔





“As a founding member, we are committed to working with the BGA in ensuring shooting is seen as a positive industry,” explains Marc, adding that anyone is welcome to receive a tour of the game farm or the estates to learn more about the work that goes on there.

With 100 full-time staff and an extra 150 involved during peak times across the game farm, the shoots and associated hospitality, Bettws Hall is an important local employer. No one, regardless of their qualification or time at the company, is above filling the most minor of roles if the need arises to deliver what Marc calls “The Bettws Hall Experience”. Along with the personnel at the hatchery and rearing sites, there are the 50 gamekeepers working tirelessly to monitor their stock and conduct conservation projects to the benefit of myriad species.

“We must keep the focus on the wider, bigger picture of what shooting brings to the economy, ecology and demography,” says Marc. “A shoot day is just a snippet of the work involved in the year-round task of managing staggering amounts of

acres of woodland, wetlands, bogs and mountains that would otherwise be left unmanaged or, at best, funded through the public purse. Game shooting directly supplements a huge number of ecological and conservation projects all over the country whilst bringing employment, and tax income, to areas that may otherwise have few job opportunities.

“By assisting in research, supporting the BGA in self-assurance, undertaking land management and conservation projects and promoting the good that our sport brings to local and national economies, we do everything that we can to keep the incredible benefits of shooting and gamekeeping not just in the spotlight but in the front-row centre. We are a resilient industry and are not strangers to challenges.”

Marc’s final message to those shoots who have yet to join the BGA is one which is beginning to sound more familiar with each season that it grows in strength and reputation.

“Quality and assurance is an investment in your future and the future of game shooting,” he says. “Do not hesitate to sign up.” *FJ*