

# The life and times of a retired moorkeeper

The remarkable story of one man's passion for gamekeeping and fieldsports. By **Martin Puddifer**.

**S**eventy-eight-year-old Douglas Morrison looks out of the study window on the ground floor of his small gamekeepers' cottage through a monocular, scrutinising the sights before him with an inquiring eye. The fragile optic offers an enhanced view across the Vale of York, separating the Yorkshire Dales and the North York Moors; on a clear day, one can see the Kilburn White Horse that has guarded Sutton Bank since the mid 1850s. Though out of sight, mere seconds from his driveway around to the left of his position, a winding, tree sheltered B-road takes you to the front gates of Swinton Park, Douglas's former home from home where he was employed as its head moorkeeper for 30 years.

Though Douglas, Swinton Park, gamekeeping and grouse shooting have witnessed a good deal of change since he secured "the top job" back on 12 April, 1976, the septuagenarian had already been involved with the profession for over 20 years prior to that in Weardale, County Durham. It was here Douglas would watch and later assist his father William going about his business as the gamekeeper for the Fenwicks on the moors at Wolsingham, developing a passion for the countryside and gamekeeping, which has remained to this day, in the process.

As someone who had wanted to be a gamekeeper since his school days, Douglas had the perfect mentor in the form of his father, a former Scottish shipyard worker,

and the perfect arena in which to learn and hone his fieldcrafting skills on grouse. Despite having spent almost half of his years in North Yorkshire, Douglas's allophones have retained a Northumbrian burr. There are plenty of memories of a lifetime spent in the company of shooting folk and his family scattered around the cottage, from countless stuffed game birds in the kitchen rafters to sporting portraits on the walls, including one of grouse he was presented with on his retirement from Swinton Park.

During a fascinating couple of hours with Douglas, exploring the newspaper clippings, dairies and other items arranged in chaotic neatness around his study – the monocular was a gift to William from the Fenwicks and dates back ➤



Douglas surveys the Vale of York through his father's monocular.



Douglas and his team enjoyed numerous successes at Swinton Park during his 30-year tenure.



Look up for good sport.

to the First World War - I was shown a souvenir pull out from *The Weardale Gazette*. It features the life and times of Douglas himself, his family and the residents of their home valley of Tunstall, as well as treasured shoot days at Wolsingham. There are grainy black and white photographs of the harsh winters of 1947 and 1963 in the pull out, of shooting

“It was difficult leaving Wolsingham as you felt very well looked after by the Fenwicks. It had a wonderful community spirit.”

parties where men in flatcaps and midweight tweeds survey the day’s bag of grouse, and of Guns, beaters and dogs taking a moment to recuperate during a day on pheasants. A particularly striking photograph illustrates the conclusion of a day’s shooting on Wolsingham North Moor where William, bottled refreshment in hand and flanked by a 20-something Douglas, are in concert with a Colonel Stobart. There is what appears to be a very well kept Rover P5 in the background waiting to take the colonel home. Magic.

While the memorabilia at Douglas’s cottage might illustrate a

bygone era, the memories of those days are still clear in his mind. He reminisces about his father being immaculately turned out on shoot day, his Army background meaning he was always highly organised.

The challenges of life as a gamekeeper in the mid- to late-1950s might see alien to many in the profession nowadays but they are badges of honour Douglas wears proudly. There was a great deal of travel on foot and in Douglas’s view, modern gamekeepers would do well to get out of their vehicles more, if only to learn how to use their eyes and ears more effectively when managing the land around them. There are pressures modern gamekeepers face which wouldn’t have applied back when Douglas was just starting out, though.

That said, then, as now, the working environment is one where collective efforts reap collective rewards.

“I would start by biking to the beaters at the big house to head off on the first drive,” Douglas told me in the weeks after our visit. “We would walk to every drive, as there were no vehicles to take us in those days. We worked out we would roughly do 15-20 miles a day easily. There would be four drives during a Wolsingham shoot day and after counting up after the last drive, Dad would go to the big house to tell Mr Fenwick the bag and assess how it had all gone. The day would end with us all having and drink together.”

### South to North Yorkshire

In 1958, after two years working as an underkeeper at Wolsingham, Douglas’s life and career took an unexpected, though not unwelcome turn, which would set him up for a future career years later.

“We’d had a poor season on the grouse at Wolsingham and a Mr Lydiate, who was our area’s



A lifetime of sporting memories resides in the albums at Douglas’s home near Swinton Park.

animal feeds representative, said they wanted a young lad down at Swinton Park with the pheasant men,” explains Douglas “That was my first move away from home. It was difficult leaving Wolsingham as you felt very well looked after by the Fenwicks. It had a wonderful community spirit...”

Douglas would serve Swinton Park and its pheasants for two seasons before returning to County Durham and Wolsingham 50 miles to the north to resume his former role. With the team back together the grouse moor flourished.



A variety of correspondence has been retained for the records.

“Dad and I broke records together on grouse,” recalls Douglas. “The best day of our recording-breaking season we shot 300 brace and the first six days of that season saw an average of 220-brace...with single guns too.”

While Douglas didn’t manage to get up onto the moors during his first spell in North Yorkshire, he “got to know a lot of people” and these contacts must surely have had a hand in his being approached for the position of head moorkeeper when it became vacant in 1976. The now 35-year-old gamekeeper ▶

thus had the opportunity to oversee 8,000 acres of North Yorkshire moorland across three beats with the help of two underkeepers.

“By 1976, I wasn’t getting where I wanted to be at Wolsingham. The owners were focusing mainly on farming and forestry, which they were entitled to do, but that meant the shoot was more of a by-product of the estate. Taking on the head moorkeeper’s job at Swinton Park felt like a natural step forward in my career as a gamekeeper. I grabbed the opportunity with both hands,” he says.

Despite an elevation in status and responsibilities, Douglas did not forget his roots and he was happy to start down in the engine room at Swinton Park, learning from the bottom up from those who knew the ground well.

“I remember having to learn a lot early on, going out with the older lads and underkeepers, who were there before me, in the line of beaters to learn the drives,” he says. “Typically, shoot days would begin



Going over old game cards...

by me ringing Lord Swinton at 8am to report the weather conditions and the plan for the day ahead. I would meet everyone in the yard, Lord Swinton would head off to lead the first drive and I’d be the last person to leave the yard to lock up. I can’t remember exact numbers for the first days/season, but it certainly felt like a good season and it was great being on a new estate and part of a new team.”

Listening to the pride in Douglas’s voice when reflecting on his time at Swinton Park, I wondered if he had felt any increase in pressure, given he had a much larger area of moorland to manage and that now British and European nobility, as well as business and political figures would be in the line on shoot day. As it turns out, having an employer sympathetic to his needs was a real bonus.

“We all worked together,” he says. “The late Lord Swinton was really interested in what you did. He used to come out when you were burning heather to see how things were coming along. If there were any squabbles between tenant farmers over whatever he’d always sort it. He really ruled everything that was going on across the moor.”

### Records are there to be broken

In 1980, Doug and his team broke a grouse record that he stood since 1928, a feat recognised by the then Home Secretary Willy Whitelaw,



Douglas being presented with his retirement gift.

#### From The Right Honourable William Whitelaw CH MC DL MP

The full letter from Willy Whitelaw to Doug Morrison illustrated on pages 6 to 7 of this issue reads as follows:

*Dear Douglas,  
First I must congratulate you on your remarkable success in achieving the record ever grouse bag at Swinton. This owes at great deal to your own skill and hard work. Personally I enjoyed enormously the five days I was able to come, they really were marvellous. I am enclosing a present for you with my very best wishes and most grateful thanks to you. My best wishes also to your wife and family.*

*Sincerely yours  
Willy Whitelaw  
November 24th, 1980.*

who was a regular at Swinton Park. The team broke the record again on three more occasions, including in 1992 when 5,508-and-a-half brace were shot during the season. These highs – including the moors being declared a SSSI, a Special Protection Area and a Special Area of Conservation under Douglas’s watch – were naturally accompanied by occasional lows, but it seems he took it in his stride.

“The record years were great achievements in my career and felt like our hard work at the start had paid off. It didn’t feel like pressure for the following year after a great season, as each season was taken one at a time – unless it was a bad year and we’d have to reduce days to

help the following season. It felt like there was understanding that there would be bad years along with the good years,” he says.

There were also some cracking perks of the job too.

“Lord Swinton was a good Shot and he got invited everywhere. He asked me to go with him as his loader. It was an easy job. I remember one day he’d injured his shoulder and when we got to the last drive he said “here you go, have my gun”, so I got a few shots while he sat and watched!”

By the time of that first record-breaking season in 1980, Douglas and wife Marguerite were raising a young family. Despite the huge responsibility and the joys it

brought, Douglas still could not afford to take his Swinton Park responsibilities for granted.

“Once the Glorious Twelfth came along that was it,” he says. “We were doing three days a week, but it felt like much longer”.

Daughter Charlotte explains how she, Marguerite and brothers Gordon and Ian “all fitted in with the gamekeeping way of life” and how it helped their mother had come from a farming background. Everyone pitched in when and where they could, collecting spent cartridges and clearing up in the shoot lodge. Sunday was a day of rest of sorts, either spent with Douglas on the moor or him taking them all out to visit family.

Though he admits he “wasn’t ready”, Douglas retired in 2006, receiving a commendation from CLA president Henry Aubrey-Fletcher for his 30 years’ service two years later. Rather than dwell on things he could be doing at Swinton Park, Douglas put his skills and knowledge and good use by helping his nephew who was an underkeeper on another estate, as well as working as a freelance pest controller. Douglas still misses the moors, and although he hints he’d have been a stalker if he could have his time again, I sense he’d grab the chance to have one more day’s grouse shooting with the old team in a heartbeat. As he put it...

“When you’ve grown up with the moors, from being born into gamekeeping and working with the wildlife for so long, you become connected to the landscape and its natural wildlife around you.”

Do you or does someone you know in game shooting have a story similar to Douglas Morrison's that you'd like to share with Shooting Gazette? Email details to: martin.puddifer@ti-media.com



Douglas (second left) enjoying refreshment following a shoot day in December 1991.