

The Folly

SHOOT

LEICESTERSHIRE

The low winter sun halted neither the birds nor the guns on The Urn.

The kind of shoot you'd want to say you'd been to before everybody else knew about it.

WORDS: MARTIN PUDDIFER | PHOTOGRAPHY: BOB ATKINS

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aking on a new position is always daunting, especially when the success of the previous incumbent has left you with big shoes to fill. In *Wall Street* villain Gordon Gekko's book you either do it right or you get eliminated, and that same sentiment (and pressure) applies to those throughout the various leagues of commercial shooting, all of whom live and die by the strength of their last day.

In all my years at *Shooting Gazette* it has always been a great pleasure to meet young people who are charting their own course, be they a fledgling sporting agent, apprentice gunsmith or gamekeeper – each and every one respectful of the past but also brimming with new ideas. All have had that mixture of ambition and fearlessness which comes with youth, the fire in their hearts fuelled by a desire to show passive detractors, those who might refer to them as “young man” or “young lady”, that they really are the future of our sport and therefore command a certain degree of respect for

taking the baton in an increasingly uncertain world.

I had a lot of respect for James Herrick even before we met on a decidedly crisp Saturday morning in Leicestershire last November. The way he had written to *Shooting Gazette* to present both himself and

“Owner James’ formative years were spent surrounded by partridge feathers, panting dogs and damp tweed.”

The Folly gave more than a hint he was confident his shoot would be the kind readers such as yourself would want to visit. There were no platitudes in his pitch. Here was a 20-something with heaps of measured confidence keen to share

his shoot with a wider audience, and in only his second full season there, too.

The series of events that led to The Folly's creation are a case of James being in the right place early. The Herricks have had a farm close to the shoot near Kirkby Mallory in Leicestershire since 1961 and so James' formative years were naturally spent surrounded by beating sticks, panting dogs, partridge feathers and damp tweeds. The Folly is made up of some of the ground from The Cadeby shoot, which had previously been a private affair run by Christmas tree dealer Alex Theobald, and ground close to the Herrick family farm. The story of James's entry into shoot management might be familiar to many in his position.

“When I was 16 or so I wanted to leave school and go off to college to train to be a gamekeeper,” he explained. “Sadly, circumstances didn't allow that to happen. I was beating on the shoot next door to what is now part of The Folly

The day closed on Willies and showed a mixture of challenging sport.



Posh & Becks is the kind of drive which really shows off the potential of The Folly.

and Alex, who could see what my ambitions were, took me under his wing. But rather than just putting me in the beating line he got me involved with the hospitality at elevenses, pegging guns out and helping with feeding and lamping with the then part-time gamekeeper. Alex would often have to go up to Scotland at a moment's notice as Christmas approached, which left him needing someone to fill in on shoot day...and eventually that someone was me.

“I was 22 when Alex decided to retire from running Cadeby but he wanted somebody to take it on rather than have to close it down. He asked me would I consider it, and after a period of reflection I came to the conclusion that if I didn't take my opportunity to do what I've always wanted to do it wouldn't come round again. Alex knew how keen I was and I submitted a 10-page plan detailing what I would create with the land



Every job counts up to the hilt at The Folly and everyone knows their role.

available to me (which included some on the neighbouring shoot, which they accepted) and we started from there.”

By the time you read this the now 26-year-old James will be in his third season at The Folly. We visited half way through his

second, and there was a smile on his face when he described his very first shoot days, a relieved laugh suggesting that he'd been on a steep learning curve and that there may have been the odd time when he'd had a word with himself in the bathroom mirror about persisting because things were eventually going to come right.

I have learnt recently that things are proceeding as planned. The client base, which was built from scratch, now enjoys an impressive mix of four 75-bird syndicate days and 150-bird let days each week from October.

There are few opportunities to pause for breath when you consider James also runs The Folly's modest game farm, which appears to be growing in reputation with each passing month. James reared 1,600 of his own partridges ahead of that first season, and this has now spread to provide local syndicate shoots with partridge, pheasant and duck. ▶



Please excuse the formalities

They keep things in-house at The Folly. James is aided in his endeavours by father Eddie, who acts as shoot host assisted by James' girlfriend Kate. His brother Tom runs the beating line, uncle Dave drives the gunbus and James' mother Joanne leads the charge to get everybody fed and watered throughout the day, assisted by Tom's girlfriend Rachel.

Don't be fooled into thinking James and others don't have their game faces on when guns come to call, though. Each visiting team receives a welcome pack ahead of the day's shooting, laying out what they can expect from the day...and what's expected of them. "Please excuse the formalities" sits atop an A4 page explaining the layout of the day and the rules which should be taken as gospel, but as someone who prides himself on running a tight and tidy ship – the gunbus is cleaned once a week regardless of its condition – James would rather guns know the form so they can just get on and enjoy themselves once they arrive. That cleaning of the gunbus each week isn't a case of OCD taking over. No, it comes down to one thing and one good old-fashioned thing alone: pride.

Buckaroo was one of the best on this five-drive day.

"I want every team that comes to The Folly, whether it's the first day of our season or the last, to feel like they're the only ones to have been to the shoot," James explained. "I've been on shoots where the gunbus is filled with six inches of mud from the previous season and I feel that given the money that's being spent, everyone should feel

"I want every team that comes to The Folly to feel like they're the only ones to have been on the shoot."

like they're being looked after and that the hosts are grateful that they are coming."

You can add passion to that list too, especially when it comes to making The Folly a hub for game and other wildlife. "I'm not a fan of big blocks of maize everywhere. I don't think it's the best game crop out there," James explained. "You've got to use a mixture. We tried kale mixtures for the first

season and as the kale took over in the second season that meant more seeds and the amount of wildlife – especially yellowhammers – you'd see in that area was amazing. It exploded. We try and work it so every game crop has a mixture of bi-annual kale mixture and an annual crop which is suited to partridge like linseed, triticale and a perennial cover around the outside. This will last for between five to 10 years and means there is always a windbreak and a nesting cover, feeding any birds that are left over well into the spring.

While he knows his limitations James is not scared to try new things. Though something seemingly overtly simple like deciding the order of drives can be a "challenge", he studies each one's performance carefully. It will be interesting to see what a day at The Folly will look like in 10 years' time, even if the ground itself hasn't undergone any massive transformation. His short-term ambitions are big too, and why not?

"I want to get to the stage where we've increased the number of drives (15 at the time of writing) and also the number of days," James explained. With a 1,200-acre shoot made up of two 600-acre blocks, a mixture of flat and rolling farmland,



Birds got the attention of the guns on Howdens.

belts of cover crops and woodland, there is plenty of room to play with on land that is used to showing a lot of birds. James also knows who his customer is. "I don't want The Folly to be out of reach of those who want to be out as much as possible in these turbulent times. It's nice to be able to go somewhere and feel that even though you're not spending a lot of money on a day's shooting you're still going to get that feeling like you're at a shoot that's well thought out and aspires to the highest standards."

No young pretender

Watching how James was with beaters, pickers-up and guns during and between drives throughout our visit reminded me of a story one of my old tutors – a former political correspondent – once told us about how years before Tony Blair, a then prime minister in waiting, would behave when faced with a series of press interviews over a short period. If my memory serves, during an interview he was rigidly on message, his demeanour calm and collected.

There was no muttering or stumbling over answers. Once the interview was over it was like he was a different person for the

next couple of minutes – walking around, joking, talking about anything other than politics and then taking time to collect himself before instantly switching back to interview mode once he was called.

James was the same in many ways. If a drive was a little light on birds there was no flapping because the press were in attendance. Sometimes it really is just one of those things. He still had time to share a joke with us about how the drive Posh & Becks got its name in what I sensed was his regular brand of self-deprecating humour. If the wind changed, or the guns had to criss-cross the estate and then wait a while because drives close to one another can't be shot on the same day and beaters had to get into the right position, so be it – they were the ones who'd benefit in the long run. And so it proved. James wasn't chained to his radio during drives or close to fainting if a sloegasm accidentally foamed onto anybody's sleeve. Although he was amongst friends on this particular day you



Hosts Eddie Herrick (left) with Kate Smith and The Folly's owner and headkeeper James Herrick.



On the shoot



The enthusiasm of the guns on their pegs was matched by the dogs on their retrieves.

wouldn't have guessed that not too insignificant sums of money had changed hands for a season's shooting. After all, these guns can say they were here at the start.

It occurred to me while doing my research for this article what Alex Theobald would make of what James has achieved. I learnt from James recently that last season had thrown up some challenges – step forward the “boring, still weather” and “skittish” early-

season partridge which called for a rethink on beating tactics – but they certainly didn't fall over the finishing line on February 1, with plenty of sport still to be had during the closing weeks of the season. James is excited about having secured the rights to a new patch of ground that was part of an old quarry and which once landscaped will form part of the rebirth of a “fantastic” old partridge drive in a valley.



The Folly's refreshments were well timed and worth the wait.

That will certainly be a thing to see on what is anything other than a farm shoot with ideas above its station. 🦋

For more information on shooting opportunities at The Folly, message James Herrick via [facebook.com/thefollysporting](https://www.facebook.com/thefollysporting), contact 07516 479366 or email: jamesherrick@hotmail.co.uk

The area guide

How to get there, where to stay and what you'll eat.



TRAVEL

The Folly sits to the west of Leicester between Kirkby Mallory and Earl Shilton near the M69, and is therefore within easy reach of visiting parties heading there from the likes of Birmingham, Coventry, Derby, Nottingham or Peterborough. Signs for the famous Mallory Park Racing Circuit will get you near but not to the door, as will the sound of buzzing superbike engines.

STAY

James recommends the 10-bedroom Kirkby House, a licensed guesthouse situated less than one mile away from the shoot yard in the village of Kirkby Mallory (kirkby-house.com). A little farther afield is the Badgers Mount Hotel in Elmesthorpe, a boutique hotel with uninterrupted views of the countryside (badgersmount.com). Also nearby is the grand Bosworth Hall Hotel in Market Bosworth (britanniahotels.com).

CATERING

The day begins with refreshments in the shoot room. Elevenses are taken in the field aside the shoot's custom-made gunbus. Guns return to the yard for a lunch that usually consists of hot sausages, cakes, tea and coffee. At the day's end the guns retire to the shoot room for a two-course meal. These alter weekly but are always made using game from the shoot. Guns are always offered game, dressed or in the feather, to take home.