

# GROUSE IN THE ROYAL PURPLE

The king of gamebirds is undergoing a renaissance on moorland leased from the Duchy of Lancaster. **Jonathan Young** enjoys the spoils. Photographs by **Ann Curtis**



**I**T would be dismissed by modern art critics as Victorian whimsy, but it's hard to find a sportsman who doesn't adore George Earl's *Going North, King's Cross Station*, painted in 1893. It depicts a sporting party waiting to board the 10 o'clock north, the platform crowded with gentlemen, ladies and their servants. Minor mountains of cane rods and gaffs, creels and oak-and-leather gun cases are guarded carefully by the keepers while they control their leashes of Gordon setters.

Much of the painting's appeal lies in its promise of time unhurried. Today, helicopters,

light planes and squadrons of Range Rovers hurtle northwards, ferrying guns from city to moor, but then the leisured classes truly deserved their adjective; and that comfortable position lasted well into the 20th century. Eric Parker, an Editor of *The Field*, could still put this poser to readers in 1918; five invitations arrive simultaneously in the post – which would they choose: three days' partridge driving; a week's grouse-driving; 10 days on the sea coast of the west of Scotland; a fortnight in Ireland, with miles of snipe-bog and “pike as big as donkeys”; or a fortnight of Tweed, “the cauld furrowed with running fish”?

That spaciousness seems almost as impossible as boarding the London train with guns, setters and clad in full tweeds. Yet, for one brief moment last season, a century disappeared into a golden past, thanks to Her Majesty, the Duchy of Lancaster and Andrew Pindar.

A party of guns, 12-bores in slips, gundogs in tow, strolled down the high street of Pickering, North Yorkshire. Heads were slightly muzzy after a dinner verging on a banquet at the White Swan Inn. The owner, Victor Buchanan, had created the menu around a slab of longhorn beef, given by Tim Wilson, of The Ginger Pig, accompanied by a



battery of champagne, burgundy and cognac courtesy of Royal Warrant Holder Pol Roger.

They stopped at Orvis, to be welcomed with a kick-starter of Glenmorangie, before proceeding down the hill to Pickering station, run by the North Yorkshire Moors Railway. Steaming gently between Pickering and Whitby, its train runs via Goathland, familiar to Harry Potter fans as Hogsmeade Station, the terminus for Hogwarts. And as a sporting experience it was indeed wizard.

Pindar had booked his party into two Pullman carriages, including the Great Western Observation Saloon Car, built in the Thirties.

Favoured recently by The Prince of Wales as a quiet spot for a cucumber sandwich, it added a suitably gilded touch to a rather regal affair.

For Wheeldale & Goathland West are no ordinary moors. “In one sense they’ve been in the same family for about 740 years,” says Pindar, who was awarded the lease by the Duchy of Lancaster five years ago, following a rigorous bid and interview process conducted by Smiths Gore and the Duchy of Lancaster Council, advised by George Winn-Darley. Three years later, Pindar and his keeper, Iain Fruish, were called upon to present their progress to The Queen and the Duke of Edinburgh.

**Above: Nick James and Paul Graham of Pol Roger on Wheeldale. James once caught a 50lb salmon but didn’t manage to photograph it**

“I believe they’re the Duchy’s only English moors,” says Pindar. “We have 6,500 acres split pretty much 50/50 between Wheeldale and Goathland West. Besides the moorland we have Hunt House Valley, where we have a small pheasant-shoot, which also has a tremendous woodcock flight-line, plus a tarn and a lot of wetland that attracts wildfowl. Snipe are numerous, particularly on the intake ground. ➤

## “ He saw how once-great moors can be returned to their former bird variety and population ”

“Our neighbour to the north is Simon Foster at Egton, which, like its neighbour Danby to its north and west, is enjoying a cracking year,” he continues. “To our west is Rosedale and Westerdale, owned by David Ross. To our east is Goathland East, which is leased to Robert Adare and marches with him at Sleights Moor, above Sleights and Grosmont. To our south is Cropton Forest and I lease 1,500 acres of it for a pheasant-shoot and vermin access. It would be one hell of a lot more valuable if it returned to being a grouse moor instead of being forested – and the campaign can start here!”

Prior to Pindar taking the tenancy, the moors had been under-funded, a situation Pindar has resolved with some assistance from Kevin Mayes, “who’s a local chap, living in Goathland who made his money in information technology and recently fell in love with shooting,” explains Pindar. “Also involved in the project are the headkeeper, Iain Fruish, who came to me from Millden five years ago to take on the challenge of bringing the moors back. He has had previous stints on the North Yorkshire moors, including Snilesworth, where he saw how once-great moors can be returned to their former bird variety and population. Iain is 32 and his number two is 17-year-old Connor Fruish, who came down from the Borders during the holidays to help his uncle and earned himself a job. And keeping us all in line is Alan Richmond, my part-time assistant.”

Pindar’s ambition is to restore the moors’ pre-war bags of 2,000 brace per season and for the present he is eschewing medicated grit as the means to achieve that. “We have other priorities,” he says. “Such as a proper burning regime, better tick treatment of sheep and effective vermin control. Also, Iain is worried that the treatment will create a new raft of problems ranging from unforeseen new illnesses in birds through to excessive bag numbers damaging the mystique and exclusivity of grouse. Working ever more closely with the sheep farmers – not always the easiest thing – is helping, and our environmental scheme grant support has helped sweeten the pill of change for them, resulting in far better biodiversity and environmental improvement.”

Pindar’s enthusiasm underlines that the key to successful upland restoration is an individual’s drive, a quality common to all moors undergoing the modern renaissance. He’s well known in the yachting world for his dynamism, having sponsored competitors in the

Around Alone and Vendée Globe races, in which competitors sail round the world, as well as backing charitable projects such as quadriplegic sailor Hilary Lister’s record-breaking English Channel crossing. Today he’s at the helm of a new sailing company, GAC Pindar, which provides logistical support for ocean races and super-yachts.

Yachting at this level is possibly the only interest that’s more expensive than grouse. And it takes determination, a quality displayed by Pindar in his ambition for the moors and in his business life. For many years he was chairman of GA Pindar & Son, a fourth-generation, family-owned print and publishing business based in Scarborough. He’s also co-owner of Barnard & Westwood, fine printers and bookbinders, which holds both HM The Queen’s and the Prince of Wales’s Royal Warrants.

**Right: Andrew Pindar watches Richard Peck on Goathland. Below: champagne *en route*; the steam train; Andrew Pindar and station master**



**Picker-up Jackie Simpson. Below: Daryl Greatrex of H&H on Wheeldale Moor**





**Left: David Bontoft of Hull Cartridge Company. Below left: keeper Iain Fruish was pleased with the bag, 73 brace after five years' work**

"I'm extremely proud to be associated with the Royal Warrants, which, together, both reinforce the role of Her Majesty in this country and act as a showcase for what really is the best of British," says Pindar. "So, when drawing up the list of guns and guests for our inaugural shoot on the Duchy of Lancaster's moors, I thought it would be fun to invite those connected with supplying the Royal household."

His choice of guns included Nick James of Pol Roger, David Bontoft of Hull Cartridges, James Longbottom of Land Rover and Daryl Greatrex of Holland & Holland, with Richard Peck, secretary of the Royal Warrant Holders Association, and Nigel Musto of Musto acting as cheerleaders, the latter sporting a Highland bonnet. Had we shot a day earlier, a scuba mask might have been more appropriate. The north-east had suffered the worst storm for 30 years, with 2in of rain falling in a day, creating widespread flooding and closing 30 miles of the A1. But God loves a grouse-shooter and as the train pulled into Goathland station the weather cleared as quickly as a roué's conscience. "We're hoping for 40 brace," said Fruish, "though the birds have had a bit of a soaking from the night before."

Grouse, however, can handle the wet stuff and coveys were peeling off as we squelched to

the line for the first drive at Wheeldale Moor. They returned rather faster, making some of the guns wish they had paid less attention to Nick James's liquid lecture on fine wines the previous evening. "Some people say that the North Yorkshire grouse are softer than the Pennine ones," said Pindar, "but they don't seem too soft today, do they?"

Even with some slightly ragged artillery, there was a steady stream of grouse, more than enough to leave the guns scuttling to refill cartridge belts for the second drive.

The fog had by then lifted in the guns' heads and some pretty shooting ensued, with Nick James claiming he'd dropped three out of a pack. And this time he had witnesses, unlike his sporting triumph earlier in the year, when he was fishing alone on the Scholbach Pool on the Balmoral beat of the Dee and a salmon took his size 14 Cascade double and bored upstream. Forty-five minutes later, he landed the fish of a lifetime, running well into the 40s and perhaps weighing as much as 50lb. The exact weight will never be known, as James returned it to the river having measured it at 50in from nose to tail. "Unfortunately, I couldn't get a photo, as I'd left my mobile phone in the car for fear of falling in," he lamented to anyone who'd listen.

Alas, most of his audience had bolted in the direction of the picnic, eaten from the tailgates as we enjoyed this rare blast of sunshine.

"We would have eaten inside if the weather had been poor," said Pindar, "but for me this seems right. We don't want Wheeldale & Goathland West to be deadly serious grouse moors, where we use all the devices available to maximise the bag and then call in the 'professional' grouse-shots to achieve it. Yes, we want some good days' grouse-shooting but if we can get back to the sort of numbers we know the moors can do, say a couple of thousand brace, and have them shot by our friends and guests, then we'll be happy."

After coffee, Pindar bundled us into the Land Rover for the short hop to Goathland West for two of the most productive drives of the day, Daryl Greatrex showing that he does not just sell Holland & Hollands, he can use them pretty effectively, too.

After the last shot had rolled down the valleys and the light had faded from gold to lemon, Fruish stood by the barn, waiting for the pickers-up to empty their game bags, inspecting their contents with the enthusiasm of a child with a Christmas stocking. "Well, we've got 73 brace on our first day, after five years' work. Not bad," he added, in the time-honoured tradition of gamekeeperly understatement before breaking into a grin and trotting off for a cuppa with the guns. ■