

The History of Bereleigh

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Good evening, everybody. I'm very impressed with the turnout tonight. I was invited two years ago, now, pre-lockdown, by Rob, and I think he said, "Please talk about the history of the Bereleigh Shoot. Then Andy phoned me up the other day and said, "Well, we're looking forward to hearing about the history of Bereleigh."

Not many people know a great lot about the history of Bereleigh, I don't think, other than the fact that it seems to have changed hands time and time again. And we arrived here in 1958. Now, prior to that, our family had lived in Buckinghamshire since 1620, so, we are really newcomers to East Meon, if you look at it like that.

Why did we leave Buckinghamshire? Well, I think over the years there have been rather a lot of death duties, and it's taken the heart out of the estate. And the big Robert Adam house had been turned over to a maternity hospital in the war by my poor old uncle, who's in a wheelchair; 2300 babies were born there, including Sir Tim Rice. So, somebody came from all that, so, that's good.

I actually should be talking about fox hunting, if I was sticking to the family tradition. All through the 1800s and 1900s, my predecessors have been masters of the Bicester Fox Hunt, the Old Berkley, the Old Berkshire, and they were fanatical foxhound people. They owned the Bicester hounds. They bred them, and they were very, very good at it. That may be one of the reasons why in the end, they had to sell the estate, but I'm not sure about that.

Anyway, my father, when he inherited, started to look round for somewhere to move to, which was quite a big thing to do. He was – what, 56 – he was 54, and suddenly inherited the Bicester estate. I've no idea what the financial situation was, but it was pretty well broken up. And he started to look around. And I was taken out of school to see one or two estates. No idea why, because I wouldn't have had a clue, at the age of 14 or 15, whether it was a good place or not.

Anyway, they eventually arrived at Bereleigh. And if you look at the particulars for Bereleigh, which I haven't got here, in 1958, it was advertised with 26 bedrooms and 2 bathrooms. So, that might have been quite good fun for a house party.

But going back to Bereleigh, according to the bit of history that Sarah gave me, I think, there was a house at Bereleigh in 1369. That's quite a long time ago. I don't think it was probably much of a house. But as I said, it changed hands for years and years and years, until I think Mr Eels arrived, in the early 19th century, and I think there were three generations of Eels there. And they built a decent house. I don't know how much of Bereleigh they built. Certainly not all of it, because we know lots were added later. But they probably put it on the map.

And I imagine it hasn't got a great history, because it didn't ever have a proper house, and that's what makes an estate interesting.

And then the Forbes, who some of you know about; they built the Almshouses here in East Meon. I think they landscaped the garden, and did all that wonderful work, water garden, and all that sort of thing. I think they spent a lot of money. I don't know anything about the Forbes family, but they certainly did a lovely job around here, and spent money very nicely. And I've got a couple of little pictures painted by one of the Forbes. One of the view of the village church, and one of the lodge at the end of the back drive. I don't know why she wanted to do that. None of them are very accurate, but they're quite nice little sketches. And they're not here tonight, I'm sorry to tell you.

And then, in, I think it was 1898, the sales particulars, and Bereleigh was described then as all sorts of things. "Exquisite, old, well-wooded grounds", "Pleasant old-fashioned mansion", and all those sorts of things. "First-class mixed shooting, especially for partridges and hares, rabbit warren and rook." I'm not sure what you did with a rook, but I know you make rook pie, but I'm not sure that's a great delicacy. Rabbit warrens were very important. Every estate had a rabbit warren, which was fenced in, because rabbits were extremely good food, and you wanted to make sure you could go out there and catch them and eat them. So, Mascombe Valley was the rabbit warren in those days.

Anyway, whoever bought it then didn't last for long, and in 1918, Bereleigh came up again. Rather a skimpy little sale particulars, but I presume, First World War was just about coming to an end, and that's when the Nicholsons got involved. And the Nicholsons had made a fortune out of gin in the 1800s; Mother's Ruin, and all that sort of thing. They made their main place at Basing Park up at Privet. They owned all the land between Privet and the A272. They owned Bordean Farm, which we now own. They owned Bentham's, and the other side of the Alton Road, I think they had 5000 acres, if not a lot more.

And some of you – if anybody's a member of the MCC here – there was a time when MCC wanted to buy Lord's Cricket Ground. The present one, not the previous one. And they were a bit short of money, the MCC, and the Nicholsons lent them the money as a bridging loan. And we now, as an MCC member, have those hideous orange and yellow ties and colours, and those were the Nicholson colours, and it's part of the deal that we would have to use them. So, we can thank the Nicholsons for more than just Lord's Cricket Ground.

So, they bought this in 1918 as an extra, I suppose an add-on to Basing Farm. And it was the Nicholsons that we eventually bought it off in 1958. I remember Reggie Nicholson and Mrs – I can't remember what she was called – at Bereleigh, when we first arrived. She had her own estate in Hertfordshire. She didn't really like Bereleigh, apparently. She was very happy in her own home place. And I understand they, sort of, came down for shoots at Christmas, and things like that. And Frank and Belinda would know much more about it than I would. And Earnest, Belinda's father, ran it for them, so he would know all about it, except sadly he's not with us to tell us. But we'll ask questions afterwards.

So, there we are. We're here with 26 bedrooms and two bathrooms. One of the previous sales particulars said one bathroom, which might have been even more exciting. I think now we have about 14 bedrooms and ten bathrooms, so, things have changed a bit. And the same sewage works at the back, same septic tank. It's coping with everything. But then they did it properly in those days.

Anyway, when this little boy of 16 arrives at Bereleigh, it was quite obvious to my parents, or my father, before that, growing up, that foxhunting was not going to be my game. And whenever I was

allowed to go out and load for my father, I absolutely loved it. And in the garden, before we moved here, any starling that flew over was risking a 410 barrel. And I remember shooting my first pigeon in a tree, stationary, bang, with the old hammer gun 410. And it must – I'm sure you're going to be very impressed – I think the first book my father ever bought me was 'Game Shooting' by Robert Churchill, 1957. So, I was 15 at the time, and my father must have realised that this was going to be the way forward.

Anyway, we got to Bereleigh. I didn't know anything about sorting out a shoot. I knew that game had to be fed, and I think we persuaded one or two people on the farm to put some food out. I'm not sure that hoppers had been invented then. And I then had my Christmas shoot when I got back from school.

"21st December '59: ten pheasants, eight hares, three rabbits, two woodcock. Total: 23. Abundance of hares, needed another one or two guns; there were only four of us. First day of fine weather." And that's how this book goes on. All through the end of the '50, '60s, "Big day", there you are. "Ten guns, 1960, 28 pheasants."

So, you can see that there was room for improvement. And I really didn't know how this improvement was going to be. But in 1965, Ralph and Maureen Baker, who was farm manager raised 500 pheasants, and lived in the granary, outside the back of their house, and released them. I think they put them in the wood above Mascombe, which we did call the Rearing Wood, until the last year, I renamed it.

Male Voice: We still call it the Rearing Wood.

I won't cause controversy in the family. And we put them up on the top of the hill. But for some reason, when the beaters came to drive them, they didn't want to go across the other side of the valley, they were quite happy staying where they were; they just went back. And I had not learned how you manage pheasants. Pheasants are really rather like us. They like a nice, comfortable place to sleep, which means a nice, warm wood, with fir trees. And they like somewhere else to go and have their breakfast and their lunch. And that needs to be a nice place too.

And we were obviously feeding them and releasing them in the same wood, and they didn't want to leave it; they had their reasons. And that is the whole theory of how you make pheasants work. You release them in one wood, and you feed them up there, and you put your beaters in and drive them back, and they want to go home to where they sleep. It's very simple.

Anyway, it carried on through the '60s; in 1968, I employed my first gamekeeper, Hammond, who I think was probably a pretty good chap, and worked very hard. And the first couple of shoots every season, we shot 70 or 80, even 100, maybe. But by Christmas, it all finished. They disappeared. I mean, we put quite a lot of birds out, more and more, and it didn't work. And by the end of the '60s, I'd fallen out with Hammond, because we weren't getting the goods, and I really didn't know what the problem was.

The problem was the environment. The trees at Bereleigh, the woods; they hadn't been thinned. The Nicholsons refused to have a tree cut down to stand for 50 years, which is why the front drive was all wonderful beeches, and they all blew down, because they were so close together, and they'd all

fought for daylight, and they just died. So, the place was an environmental disaster for pheasants; it was awful.

Can I have a glass of water? That would be good.

Anyway, I think we'll move by decades. We move on to the '70s. And 1970 was a really, really good beginning for Bereleigh. The first thing that happened to me was that Ron Patrick, who I'm surprised is not here tonight – and Carol – but Ron, whose father had worked at Bereleigh for years, arrived one morning and said, "Your woods are a mess. I've been working for the Electricity Board, but I want to come and be your forester, and I want to put your woods right." And I thought, "Well, this is very good indeed."

And then Hammond, the keeper, had left, and I employed a young chap, 21-year-old, called Chris North. And all through the '70s, tree planting went on all over the place. All of the woods had been planted, pretty well all of them. And your little maps, there, will show you – those of you who've got them – the bits that are outlined in dark green are all absolutely new woods. They were virgin farmlands. But by some coincidence, they all seemed to be on the top of a hill. And there is a reason for that, because obviously, we want the birds to get off their roost and go to the top of the hill, and then fly back to their roost down below. And I think you'll find there are about ten new woods on Bereleigh, planted in the '70s and '80s.

And of course, in those days, you had to put a big wire fence all the way around these plantations. Rabbit wire there, deer fencing up here. Because you couldn't put thousands of trees without rabbits, which we don't have them at the moment, but there were lots of rabbits. We didn't have many hares, but now there are lots of hares. And of course, deer are absolutely crucifying young trees.

And in the course of the '70s and, I suppose, the early '80s, Ron and Melvin Balland who lots of you know here in the village, because he was a great cricketer; he was a forester with Ron. And at one rare moment, we actually had a third. So, it was a pretty serious tree-planting operation going on.

And of course, with a wire fence around, the woods weren't much good for game, because they don't really fly over fences very well. So, it was some years, end of the '80s, when these new young plantations started to come onstream. And it was wonderful. And the great moment was when we could get the digger in and dig all the fences out, and suddenly there was a natural, what looked like a natural wood that the game could get into, they could live in there, and it was nice low trees, that had nice, warm cover. And gradually, the shoot transformed.

Chris North started off, as I say, as a 21-year-old. He was learning how to do it. And he was learning at the same time as the trees were growing, and Ron was maintaining the trees, and they all have to be trimmed down and thinned. I mean, it's a massive amount of hard physical work. But somehow, we did it. And if you drive round Bereleigh now, these woods look as if they'd been there almost forever. And the beaters who are in our party tonight know them a lot more intimately than I do.

So, that was a great, great time for Bereleigh, through the '70s and into the '80s. And everything started to really work. In 1984, we'd let the first day shooting to Nigel Brookes, who is not here tonight, I don't think. He wanted a little day, boys' day, and I think Nigel will tell you that we shot 90 birds. And that his was the actual first day. And I had an old schoolfriend of mine who took two days

a year for a number of years. But we didn't do any more than that. We just did these two let days, because Nigel only had the one. And I was then spoiling myself by having 12, 14 private days. The bags were rising, the environment was getting better. And I had a really, really nice shoot at last.

And then, in the '90s, again, it was time for a change. We got to the stage when I was having more shooting than I needed. It was obviously getting more and more expensive. And we had to make a decision. Did we cut back to one keeper and carry on as a gentleman's shoot? By then we'd got a student keeper, and just do ten days a year, and invite my friends, and do the job very nicely? Or did we do something else?

And in those days, I think there were three types of shooting. There was the old-fashioned syndicate. And there aren't many these days. But after the war, after all the big places had fallen apart during the war, it was a syndicate for a shoot. Eight people coughed up for the season, met every week or every fortnight, the same people. And I remember shooting with a syndicate in Amersham, and it was interesting. Because you drew a number. "Oh, yes, he always gets that number, the best peg of the day. This sort of thing. And syndicates are not the nicer form of shooting, I don't think. The best form, obviously, is private shooting, but that's only for very rich people.

But the third one that came in, and I think has transformed shooting, was giving people the opportunity to take a day. It might be a syndicate, going to a new place. It might be one rich person inviting his friends. It might be a couple of people sharing a day. And there are people in this room who know all about it, because they're the people who write the cheques, so, that's very good.

But that, for me, has transformed shooting. So, if I wanted to go and – well, Blenheim house is probably not a good example – but if there's somewhere grand I wanted to go to, I could probably go, if I got my chequebook out and found somebody with a contact there. It absolutely broadens the scope of the whole shooting world. And I think it's been for the good.

So, that was the '90s. and I think it's worth talking about what they're actually trying to provide on a day shoot. I mean, I think I know, because I've been doing it for a long time. But from the point of view of a person who is spending a lot of money, what are they actually looking for? They're looking for something more than just targets. Like in the olden days, when they used to shoot thousands, and all they wanted to do was kill the numbers, and they didn't mind how they flew. Nowadays, it's moved to quality.

So, the first thing we're trying to do is find and provide game that actually flies high, if possible. And living on the South Downs as we do, and putting the woods on top of the hills, just gives the opportunity for birds to really show themselves in a wonderful way. And it's very exciting sometimes, watching a bird get up. Whether you're a beater watching it get up, or the gun at the other end, looking a bit frightened that it might go overhead, and he might make a fool of himself.

So, that's what you're trying to do. But you're also trying to do it in a very convivial atmosphere. It's a social thing. It's meant to be light-hearted, to a certain extent. The hospitality has to be good. And we're very lucky, because we've got a nice house, a nice dining room, and people enjoy that. And of course, now, people staying the night. We started that, I suppose, in the '80s, a bit in the '90s. Now we have captains of industry coming to shoot. We have all sorts of people. And 12 or 14 nights a season, we have a full party.

One party every year comes, and eight guns all bring their wives. We know them well, and we're very lucky. It's great fun having them. And others; we have some of the banking people in London. And they're probably only eight people, and all they want to do is talk business. And shooting is purely an opportunity to get them together so they can talk, get to know each other. Shooting is just a vehicle that provides the environment to do this.

And I remember, we had a chap who ran Citibank Europe, and he came to Bereleigh for 14 years, twice a year. And he always said – he brought super people – he always said, "I will never bring anybody you don't like." And he brought their wives as well. All senior people in the business world that you read about in the financial pages. He said, "I can justify bringing my business friends to a shoot more than I can to a yachting day or a golf day, or any other corporate day you can think of." He was absolutely convinced that a) they all got to know each other, and b) it was good for his business. So, it's quite interesting, and I think people still think that today.

So, where are we now? '90s. Partridges. We started doing partridges in '94. I have some Essex friends, and they were actually quite interesting, because they're a couple of brothers, and they got a contract with the supermarkets to produce big baked potatoes in vast quantities. And to produce a big baked potato, apparently you have to have a ridge about this deep to grow them. And I remember going to shoot there, and that was frightening enough as it was, because they really knew how to party after a shoot. They stopped- they started at lunchtime, they stopped at 6 o'clock, and they all sat down, and they didn't get up until midnight. And I soon went, because I'd get on the train at 6:30, and I'd come through London, and I'd have a little bit of fish in Bentley's, and get the train home, and be home by 10:30. And that worked very well indeed, and I wasn't frightened at all.

But these huge potato ridges seemed to be wonderful for partridges. And I was invited down there two or three times. And I thought, "These look really quite fun." So, they encouraged me to do them at Bereleigh. I remember one of them gave me a bag of maize, and told me how to plant it, and that was one drive next to Tom's copse, we have this bit of maize, and we started putting partridges out.

And for me, partridges have been the greatest asset to low shooting in our lifetime. They've transformed shooting. Not only partridge days, but mixed days as well. They're the most sporting little bird. They're reasonably easy to manage. And for me, they've really made a difference. Really, really made a difference.

Now, what happened? We bought some land gradually. As you know, we started in '58 in Bereleigh. We managed to buy Bordean in 1965. And the following spring, Garston Farm here, in East Meon. I think it was 1980, Riplington came onstream as well.

And then I had this huge bit of luck in '95, to rent the whole of Hen Wood. And you all know Hen Wood, I'm sure. I started off leasing a little bit on the side of Hen Wood by Garston Farm, and then eventually, I was able to lease it all. And the great day came when we were able to buy it. And I think Hen Wood is a wonderful asset. It's the most beautiful woodland. It's got lovely valleys, which we cleared out, and all the old wildflowers are coming back. Because it was the parkland for Westbury till the war, and is a great, great piece of woodland, and we all love it.

99 season, Chris North actually left, and he was trying to leave for a couple of years, and the Duke of Norfolk was very keen for him to go and work in Arundel. And in the end, I lost out to the Duke of Norfolk.

Anyway, that happened. And of course, things always move in ways that you don't quite know. But Nick came, Nick Canter, as a lot of you know, and he's turned out to be fantastic. He came in 2000, so he's now in his 12th – what are we talking about? 22nd year. Amazing.

So, onto the 2000s. As I say, we bought Hen Wood with a swap. Up in our old family home, we had 900 acres of woodland that had been let to the Forestry Commission on a 999-year lease. So, you can imagine, it wasn't very valuable. But they were very keen to have the freehold of it, because, I suppose, they were thinking of log cabins and public right of way and all that sort of thing. And it is serious suburbia, so you can understand why they wouldn't want it. Anyway, we did a pretty good deal; they allowed us so much for that, and we coughed up the rest, and finished up with Hen Wood. So, that was wonderful.

And then, one day in 2012, I heard Hall Place was coming on the market. I managed to get a set of rather skimpy particulars, and I remember going along to the Whitewall hunt meet because my good friend in Hambledon, I felt, needed to upgrade to a larger house, and a few acres of land there. And so, I handed this brown envelope to him, and said, "I think you need to look at it."

And he did. And luckily, his wife was wildly enthusiastic to be living in Hall Place. And so, luckily, Michael and Claudia bought Hall Place, which has been a great asset to Bereleigh. Thank you, Michael and Claudia.

So, that produced a new shoot, because we could join Hen Wood to Hall Place, which is a wonderful bank. And we're now doing Hall Place days, which are five drives, three on Hall Place and two in Hen Wood. And they're very popular, and people love them. So, we've got that little extra over there on the boundary, and we're able to really use Hen Wood properly. We use it for Garston, but we can now use it with Hall Place as well. So, that was a little bonus as well.

Where have we got to, now? So, everything appeared to be going wonderfully well. We were doing 30 let days, 12 partridges and 18 mixed pheasant and partridge days. We were having a dozen or 14 teams staying overnight. We had 15 family days, for the boys and myself, mostly myself.

And we were really making Bereleigh shoot work well on every run. And then suddenly, in 2016, as you well remember, this hideous court case arrived, and my neighbour decided to take out a criminal private prosecution against me for noise caused by shooting. And I know lots of you supported us, and we're incredibly grateful for the moral support we had, and everything else, as well as financial too, because it was a horrendous experience.

And that actually went on for probably three or four years, altogether. We think we actually got the verdict in December 2018. Do you think that's right, Don? We worked that out. And one of the main reasons that we won handsomely was because of these books. Now, at the end of every day shooting, I write out the bag and the guns, and a description of the day. And we were being accused of increasing the shooting at Bereleigh over the years, and making more noise round Mascombe, using it more often, and drives across the valley. And somehow, we had proved that that wasn't the case.

And the year before, when the court case was going on, we got Chris Kingham, who always does the clicker, counting the partridges, we gave him a stopwatch as well, and a notebook, and every single drive for that season, he measured the length of time from the first shot to the last. And I think a lot of us were pretty staggered, that we think we're standing there for half an hour banging away, when actually it's very seldom more than 15 minutes.

Well, we went to the court, and we had every drive since 1958, pretty well, is in these four books. And we were able to prove how often we were shooting these drives, and actually, the number of times had reduced, because Bereleigh was being spread all over. And we were able to show the length of time that the actual noise was going on.

And the judge took the view that if you took the length of time that we were doing a drive in a season and divided it into all the minutes of the year, it was infinitesimal. It was absolutely nothing. And therefore, there was no case to answer. And I think without the game books there, with all the drives – and luckily, they believed that I didn't actually put them together the month before the court case.

They did the job. And that wasn't my reason for keeping them; it's my reason for remembering the day's shooting. And I'd rather those of you shoot at Bereleigh don't read them, because there might be some rude comments in them.

Anyway, that was a hideous time, but December 2018, when we got the verdict, we were over the moon. Because we'd been back to the courts at Portsmouth Crown Court. Some days, we got there and it was cancelled. Some days, we sat there for hours and they deliberated. Some days- and it went on. The odd day here, the odd day there, the odd day there. It went on for two or three months. It was not very good for sleeping at night.

So, that's the end of that. So, where are we now? Here we have a super shoot. We have- there is a thing called signature drives, which I think is a most awful expression, but I don't know what a better one is. And shoots are always proud of their signature drives; the names of the drives the people really want to shoot. And some shoots have one signature drive, some have two or three, and we think we've got about ten, in actual fact. Ten really good drives, that birds fly well, and people are very happy to be there. So, we're in a great situation now.

But we have to think about the future. We have to think about the justification of game shooting, putting birds down, killing them, some are wounded, obviously, although we have all the dogs in the world to pick them up. And of course, we all know the animal rights people really don't like our way of doing things. And I remember, probably back in the '80s, I was asked by the chief executive of BAC, the big shooting organisation, if I would host the chief executive of the RSPCA and see if we could persuade her that what we were doing was producing healthy food, pheasants were living in the wild, and all that sort of thing. And I said, "Yes, let's have a go."

And this lady had been a Member of Parliament down in the West Country. And the fox hunting fraternity had actually got her thrown out of parliament. She'd lost her seat, because she was anti-hunting down on Exmoor, well, or Taunton, or somewhere, which is not actually a very good thing to be.

Anyway, I remember she arrived at Bereleigh, and it was sheeting with rain. She arrived with her nice little white welly-boots, with no waterproofs at all, and Philippa kitted her out with all the stuff. And we went out, and it wasn't a very nice day, it was hideous. And we thought, "We'll see whether we can persuade her that the life of a pheasant, compared with the life of a broiler chicken at Brockham, those two big poultry houses, which I hadn't actually bought by then; we might be able to convince her.

And we were standing there, and rain was pouring down, these lovely pheasants flying off the pylon drive as they do. And we were all shooting away. And of course, every time one of us hit, she said, "That's wounded. That's wounded. That's wounded." And we said, "Yes, but the dogs are back there and they'll pick them up."

And when the drive was over, I said to her, "Look, here we are. We're shooting these wild birds. They've been out for several months. They're living in the wild. They're perfectly happy with life until that nasty moment. You've got 75,000 broiler chickens in there. Can you really say that this is worse than those?" She said, "No." She said, "When we've stopped shooting, we'll get rid of those too." So, there you are.

So, we learned the lesson that you cannot win, on that argument, anything logically. But I'd hope – obviously, because I've invested a huge amount of time and thought and money into the Bereleigh shoot – I very much hope we can justify producing a low-cholesterol, healthy bird, that anybody can buy, anybody can buy. And this winter, we have been letting the Gurkhas – and there are 30,000 that live around Hampshire, left over from when they were welcomed to fight for us – and all their families, and they've been collecting 100 pheasants after each shoot. And in the feather, which is what they want, because pheasants came from Nepal, where they came from, and next season, they're going to take even more, and they might even pay for them apparently, too. Which will be very exciting.

And Nick told me the other day that so far, they've taken 1000 pigeon that had been shot, because the gamekeeper- game dealers are not interested in pigeon, because so many have been shot on the rape and everywhere this winter. So, that is fantastic; there are people that really appreciate this game. And little, tiny pigeons, which I didn't think they'd want to fiddle with, but they've got into those as well.

So, that's where we are now, as a shoot. I can't think of anywhere else I could plant a wood that would produce a good bird. I don't know whether Tom can, or the family; they're very welcome to come up with suggestions. We have a very good reputation, and of course, I'm sure lots of you read the article in *The Field*, that we had turned into a glossy magazine. And I think we're in a good place. We're fully booked. We don't advertise. We've been very lucky to have people coming word of mouth, and that's how it seems to carry on. And I hope we will be doing this for years to come.

So, that's been my enjoyment for the last 50, 60 years, and I'm sorry I couldn't tell you a lot about Bereleigh.

Are there any beaters who've got any burning questions to answer? Oh, there's one.

Question: The argument against lead shot, as opposed to steel.

Oh my God, we have to start on that one? I frankly believe there is no argument against lead shot. I do not believe we have been spoiling the countryside. I don't believe that other birds are suffering from it. Although there was a Cambridge University produced something the other day, saying they had.

But at the same time, we are being persuaded by lots of people, who do understand it, that steel shot actually is working, and my good friend Jason Abbot, who is a very well-known gunsmith in English guns only, and a very, very good shot, went out one day to shoot some pigeon with steel shot, phoned me up afterwards, to tell me that much to his surprise, he seemed to be killing these pigeons just as well with steel shot.

So, I think next season is going to be interesting, because we're being encouraged to use it. The supermarkets say they won't take game with lead shot. But don't forget, supermarkets only take 5% of the game that is actually shot. So, you could say they're not big consumers, compared with the other 95%, which are probably Europe, who are still taking them, and everywhere else. And heaven knows where they do all go.

Question: London Guns; would that affect the steel? Can you use it?

Well, they say that some are fine, and some are not. And I don't know; I haven't looked at mine yet, but they're alright. But no, it is a worry. It really is. And it's more of a worry because a) we doubt that we're going to be able to get enough steel shot, and if the lead people decide they're not going to make lead shot, we might find ourselves, you know, in a real muddle. Yes, it is a muddle, I'm afraid.

Question: How would the landscape look if you weren't shooting?

Well, I mean, Bereleigh would not be as wooded, as you can see from the map. That's straightforward. We're probably not very proud sometimes of our game covers. They are rather intrusive, and they don't- you know, they stick out. But I think most of them are probably reasonably out of sight behind woods and things.

Question: I was thinking more of the management of the landscape, which goes hand-in-hand with the forestry and pheasants as well.

Yes, it does. I mean, we manage our farmland. So, hopefully the game don't eat all the rape, which is always a complication. But I mean, the woodland is maintained for shooting. I would not have employed two foresters to plant trees for my love of trees. I really wouldn't have done. We had the woodlands, and they were fine, and we might have managed them properly. But to produce more woods, which we have done, wouldn't have happened without whether now with the incentives to plant more trees, it's going to be interesting. I mean, up in Scotland, of course, they're planting millions of trees for environmental reasons, or all the rest of it. And whether that happens down here, I don't know.

Question: But in the sense it's symbiotic, it is possible.

Yes, it is. Yes, of course it is. Yes, it is. Yes.

Question: What about duck?

Well, do you know, we don't shoot duck as well as we used to. It's quite interesting. I did put the duck flights in the game books years ago. But now we hardly ever see a duck flight. We probably have a couple after Christmas, and that's about all. But there was a year when I think on the three or four ponds, we shot about 100 duck altogether, I think. Well, now, I doubt that we'd shoot 20, within a season, I doubt.

Question: I think that's laziness, rather than anything.

I couldn't agree more, it is. It used to be a lovely Sunday evening entertainment, about 4 o'clock, to go out and spend about half an hour on a pond, shoot half a dozen duck, come in, and just have a glass of whiskey. It worked very well indeed.

Question: When did you give up shooting hare?

I don't- I mean, we did shoot hares in the very early days. But, I think, once they got scarce – which, of course, they're not now, here – but you probably only have to go two miles away and you will probably have places that don't have hares. We, as you know, you know perfectly, well, you've seen them, we've got hundreds and hundreds of hares. And we have the beagles here on Saturday, around the back of Bereleigh. I don't know how much good they do, because a hare gets up everywhere they go, and they don't know what to hunt. I mean, it's chaos.

But it is wonderful to see them. I think everybody now understands that if you control the foxes, you have a chance of having hares. Because the Game Conservancy did research, and they found a certain time of year, hare was the main part of a fox's diet. And if you see a leveret this big, you can catch it yourself. You don't need to be a great big speedy fox to grab it. But why aren't these buzzards and kites picking off all these little leverets?

I mean, who saw some? You saw some the other day, Tom?

Tom: The first leverets I saw this season was in mid-February. And I had to get out of my tractor and move them out of the way before I squashed them. But if you watch the mothers, they will go for a kite or a buzzard if they go towards their leverets. They will punch- I've seen a mother hare punch a kite. And it was soon chased off by me as well, so it didn't have much chance. But the hedges that you planted in the '70s, small plantations, they are rammed with hares, and the kites and buzzards can't go into there.

And the hares have moved into the woods; there's no doubt about it. If you walk through the woods, or drive through the woods on a quadbike or something, you see hares, which I'm sure you never used to do. They were purely a grass crop, arable animal, and now they've really got into the woods. But no, it's great to see them. And it is shoot management that does it.

Question: What's the raptor population changed? Obviously, kites have appeared, but the rest of the raptors; have you seen significant changes?

I'm not very good on recognising all these wonderful falcon and things. I mean, all we see, frankly, are kites and buzzards, in vast quantities. And I'm not going to be controversial about whether they're good for the other birds in the world.

Question: How many pheasants and partridge do you put down?

Enough to get us through the season.

Question: And what about deer? We see a huge number of deer on the farmland; much more now than we did 10 or 15 years ago. Have you thought about shooting more of the deer?

I think the last two years have been a problem, because COVID made it very difficult for people to come out. We've had some Belgians who used to come and make a very good job of it. And I used to have a pair of Belgians who used to come over every now and again for a week, and really enjoyed it. They're really good at it. But I think it's all gone a bit quiet. We are shooting deer for pot, because some of our people who stay the night absolutely adore a loin of roe deer, or one of them. And it's absolutely delicious food.

And we should all be eating venison. It's wonderful food, absolutely delicious. But you're right, we have lots of them. But, well, it's one of the problems now; when we've grown trees, they were a problem. As soon as we dropped the fences down, they were still barking, and all the rest of it. So, we kept on top of the deer population. But now, apart from disturbing game when beaters are coming through, they're not a problem.

Question: If you go back to when you were started, were the deer then you were shooting- was- that deer population's gone up?

Well, we were really controlling deer then. Everybody was. We had to. But now, they're not being controlled as much as they should be.

Question: But back then, they were more valuable, weren't they? As meat.

Yes, they were valuable, yes.

Question: Before you had farmed deer and things, it was a valuable- you'd sell them to the butcher. Well, you see the deer farm near the other side of Petersfield just started up with some huge deer in it. So, there's a market for commercial deer meat.

Yes, I think it's crazy. We have so many wild deer, so many roe deer. And there shouldn't be a need to rear them. There really shouldn't.

Question: But there's the difference between what a supermarket wants, which is the standard red deer carcass, and what the European market used to want, which were much more the roe deer, fallow deer.

Fallow deer.

Female: And a lot of the game dealers are virtually not buying deer, particularly with problems exporting, shall we say?

Yes, quiet.

Question:: And so, there isn't the market for people to then go out to harvest the wild game.

No. I'm sure that's true.

Question: Bill, I was just going to say that around here, people are asking about deer control – there's certainly far more than there ever used to be. The big issue here is we've got a lot of public access. It's not something you just go, "Oh, let's go and pick up a rifle and go and shoot something." One, it's very, very licenced, very controlled. And of course, with a lot of public access, footpaths, rights of way, it's a very difficult landscape to stalk deer.

So, you know, that is a big issue. So, you know, there probably should be less. I'm not advocating bringing back wolves or things like that, though they are in some parts. But I think they have a little bit of a part to play.

Yes. I'm sure you're right.

Question: You give us permissive access to some of your lovely area. But is that a problem? Does that give you a problem? Do people misuse the wonderful permissive access you allow us?

It's fine in the summer. You know, it's not a problem. The problem starts in about September, October time, and then we really would like people to stick to footpaths. And funnily enough, we've got a forestry chap trying to do something with our dead ash trees over by the A272. And I went to see him this morning, to see how he was getting on, and he wasn't, because he'd broken down.

But he said, "Are people allowed to run their dogs through?" And I said, "Well, no, they're meant to be on a lead." He said, "Well, there's one lady who always has her dog on a lead. But there's another one who comes over there somewhere – and he was pointed at Bordean House – she was up there the other day, and the dog was down there. And every morning, it's the same", you know? So, you've got these people who've just come out and let their dogs run, and they are a menace, a real menace, for a keeper who's trying to keep birds in the wood, and keep them somewhere quiet, and there's a dog running wild all over the place.

Question: And there's also the wild birds that we're meant to be encouraging; the skylarks and leverets, or anything else that's nesting on the ground. It's all very well us putting all these wild bird covers and encouraging them, but if somebody lets their dog go, they haven't got a hope in hell. And pussycats too; they're not great.

Facilitator: Well, if there are no more questions, it was a good idea getting Bill to come and talk about the history and the shooting. We didn't know quite which he was going to focus on, but hoping he was going to do both. It's also a real pleasure to see some of you here. I'm just saying thank you very much, this is our biggest audience we've had of History Group for a number of years, so thank you very much. And David Lewin was telling me that we've got more than the Garden Club.

Certainly we will be dining out on that for a while. So, thank you all very much for coming. But most of all, thanks for Bill to coming and giving a fascinating talk. For those of us, like myself, who don't know much about shooting, I'm delighted to live in an environment where the landscape is suitable for it. It's a real pleasure to live where we do on top of the downs and be surrounded by people who are going out and enjoying it. And it's a joy to see the way the land is used, to see the trees.

So, I'm just really grateful for Bill coming and talking to us tonight about the history, particularly of shooting, but also a little bit about the history of Bereleigh.

If you're interested in the history of Bereleigh, there is some more on the East Meon History Group website about the history of Bereleigh over the last couple hundreds of years. Michael Blackstad particularly, did lots of work on it. But actually, there's nothing really about the shooting.

I'm hoping we've taped the talk tonight. We'll get that transcribed. We'll put it on the website. So, if you want to read what Bill actually had to say, we'll put it on there for posterity.

So, thank you all very much for coming, and particularly thanks to Bill.