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**Why the clay-busting business
is booming at your local ground**

GUNDOGS

**Reliable
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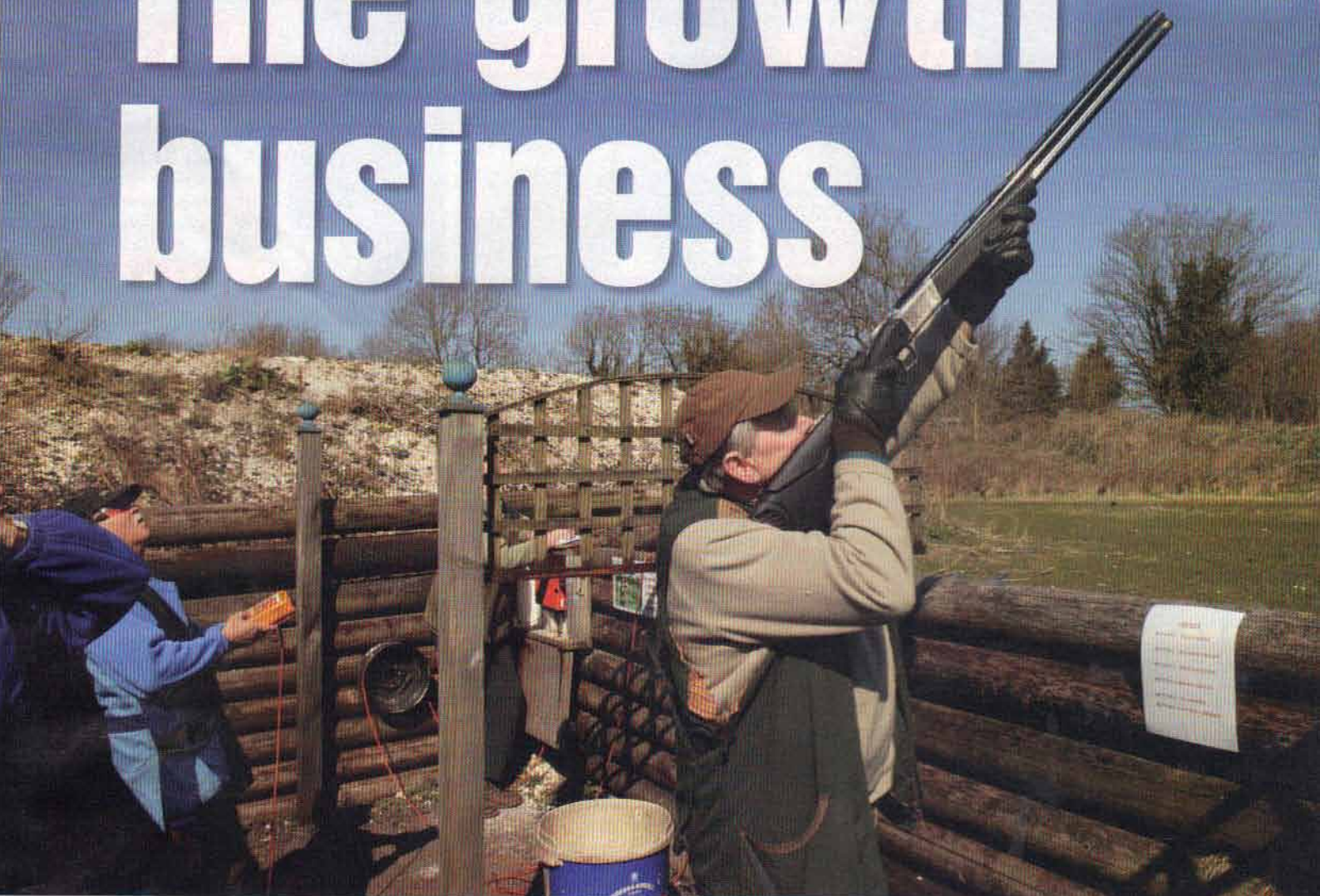
What makes them
so indispensable
on shoot days



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The growth business



Recognised nationally as an outstanding traditional business, the Lains Shooting School, in Hampshire, illustrates how good local clay grounds can be.

Alastair Balmain visits an award-winning set-up

The default view many gameshooters hold of their local clay ground is that it provides a useful, if somewhat functional, place to practise when you can't target something feathered. The attitude is misplaced since, in reality, the nature of many local clay grounds has been transformed dramatically in the past decade or so.

While there are still dedicated competition grounds serving the passionate clay-buster who has eyes only for small flying discs, and it is still possible to find straw bales and a rudimentary

find grounds today put the emphasis on better facilities and the provision of family entertainment in welcoming surroundings.

One such shining example that typifies this trend is Lains Shooting School and Mullenscote Gundogs, near Andover, in Hampshire. In March, the ground, which successfully combines clayshooting and dog training on the same site, was the highly commended national runner-up in the best traditional business category of the Countryside Alliance Awards. Increasingly viewed as the "Rural Oscars", the annual





▲ James Bowden, employed as a professional trainer, came to the role after work experience
 ◀ Lains has a loyal body of shooters, many of whom nominated the ground for its award

a huge range of sectors against each other. To reach the top of the pile, Lains, which was established 20 years ago by Howard Kirby, a former pig farmer, has to be a bit special.

When *Shooting Times* visited last month, a week or two after the glossy awards ceremony at the House of Lords, Howard explained that, because entries are made directly by customers rather than the business, the first he knew about even being on the shortlist for the finals was when the local newspaper, the *Andover Advertiser*, rang him up to cover the story. He was justifiably proud of his ground and his team of six full-time and eight part-time staff. This includes seven members of his family and two youngsters on work experience from nearby Sparsholt College. "We've had some wonderful cards from all over to congratulate us," said Howard, riding high on the win, "and the press spin-off has been fantastic." Naturally the high profile the award has given the business has been a boost, with coverage nationally in *The Daily Telegraph* as well as regional coverage, but what is it that makes the business such a worthy winner?

For a start, the judges can't fail to have noticed that Lains puts a lot back into both

◀ The school was national runner-up in the traditional business category of the CA Awards

the local community and the world of shooting and gundogs. Throughout the year, Howard and his team run events such as police seminars, charity shoots for local parish councils, Young Guns initiatives for local children and gundog demonstrations at numerous local fetes and fundraising events. In addition, they host children's countryside activity days and place their emphasis on teaching traditional shooting skills, safety, good manners and respect for the wildlife, the countryside and the people in it.

During the summer, Howard and his crew

"The judges can't fail to have noticed that Lains puts a lot back into both the local community and the world of shooting and gundogs"

can be found demonstrating their gundog skills at events up and down the UK, running the Working Dog arenas sponsored by Richa at Countryman Fairs. But more is planned all the time: "We're hoping to host a youngsters' career workshop in association with the Countryside Alliance," said Howard. "We're going to draft in dog wardens, the police, hearing dogs and so on so that the children can see the sorts of careers that you can get into with dogs." The team at Lains certainly does its bit.

▲ Senior gundog trainer Annie Buckley watches as a novice handler and dog show their skills

No doubt the friendly character of the ground is also what struck the judges. Immediately upon arrival, things are going on around you. Out on the training field, dogs and their owners are being put through their paces, while small groups of shooters chat good-naturedly as they head out to the Sporting layout.

A small track leads invitingly down to a welcoming clubhouse/café/shop (filled with trophies, taxidermy and a good selection of shooting and gundog accessories). Here, over a welcome (locally sourced) bacon butty, Howard explained that it was a conscious decision to target gameshooters and more leisure-oriented shooters: "A while back we moved from being a competition-only ground to one where the focus is on tuition and practice. For us that was certainly the right thing to do."

Equally, pay-per-clay technology has assisted in creating the atmosphere: "We've used the Claymate system here for around 10 years and it has revolutionised the way people use this ground and the way we work. When shooters head out we give them a digital counter, which allows them to wander around and shoot solo or as teams and tracks the number of clays they use. It also means we don't have to send out staff to go round with them to operate the traps — the shooter does that for themselves."

The effect has been profound: "We now see large groups, family groups and teams of local Guns all going around without any



SHOOTING

Lains Shooting School

◀ interference. It means people can genuinely enjoy a family day out."

Like many grounds, Lains has had difficulties with a noise-sensitive neighbour, but as befits a forward-thinking business, it has turned this to its advantage. A single complaint was made four years ago by an incomer to the nearby village. Located next to the busy A303, only a few miles from the MOD's helicopter base at Middle Wallop and half a mile from Thruxton motor racing circuit, Quarley is not the obvious choice for those seeking tranquility, but it was the first complaint made in 20 years of business and the planners had to react. The solution cost £40,000 to redesign the layout and 18 months' business was lost. As Howard explains, the planning office was at pains to keep disruption and cost to the minimum and happy only to get the noise to the required level, but he wanted no comeback: "We redesigned our Sporting layout and dug our stands into the ground to form high-sided shooting pits — the plan was so

successful that the village assumed initially that we had shut down." The upshot is that the ground now sits in a very compact area with shooting stands dotted around. The nature of them is such that large groups cannot crowd in, meaning the shooter and the trap operator can concentrate on the shooting while friends watch on from a waiting gallery.

Equally successful is the encouragement of youngsters, which is key to the business. One of the recent developments is a covered field target airgun range alongside the clubhouse. With pride, Howard says that it attracts parents and children regularly to the ground: "We have children as young as five or six plinking away at targets here with their parents. On a Saturday, you look down the bench and its father, son, father, son the whole way down. It's fantastic."

Identifying growth areas is what led to the foundation of Mullenscote Gundogs at the ground — it is a second aspect of the business that focuses on provision of training for all

manner of dogs, not only traditional shooting breeds. Indeed, on the day of *ST*'s visit, senior trainer Annie Buckley was out doing obedience work with a very fox-like Japanese shiba inu. On looks alone, it was certainly not suitable as a keeper's dog, but it did serve to illustrate the manner in which Mullenscote is open to all. A covered classroom next to the training field, a large rabbit pen and a high-tech PA system allowing owners to watch on from a distance mean customers come from a wide area. Indeed, why stop at dogs? Howard demonstrated his training ability with Lottie, a pig kept together with geese to teach security with livestock. She happily sat and fetched, performing as well as any spaniel. "She is quite bombproof with dogs," said Howard, "She's a Kunkune and, while I have to admit that she's bigger than expected, she's phased by nothing."

Lains Shooting School neatly illustrates the way clayshooting grounds are going in this country. In order for business to grow there is an appreciation that the customer base must also grow. Howard and his team do everything possible to make their venue interesting, modern and entertaining to traditional shooters and newcomers alike. But above all it is the passion behind the business which is what keeps the customers coming back. ■

▼ The Claymate system has revolutionised the way in which grounds such as Lains operate



▲ Inside the clubhouse: a cup of coffee, a chat and the latest clothing ranges are all available

◀ To counter potential noise complaints, many

