

# DAUGHTERS IN THE LINE

Men usually want their sons to follow them into the field, but what of their female offspring? **Rosie Nickerson** says girls need more support

**I**T is still a comparatively rare sight to see a female shot under 20 utterly at home on the field, wielding her shotgun with confidence, despatching high birds with ease. It says so much about her determination and enthusiasm that she has managed to succeed in a sport that is still perceived by many to be a male preserve. Just the other night I suggested to a keen shooting friend that his 12-year-old daughter might like to take up shooting. In return I received a look of absolute dumbfounded amazement; it simply hadn't occurred to him. It is so sad that in the 21st century, daughters of shooting fathers are still being sidelined and left at home.



DANIEL CLARKE/REPLAZ

To meet a confident and competent female shot under the age of 20 speaks volumes about her family, in particular, her father. He is normally the one who has encouraged and supported her from a young age to become the shot she is. However, it is not unknown to hear of a mother who is behind this success story, as we shall see later.

When I was a child, it never occurred to me that shooting was a male-dominated activity as my two sisters and my stepmother usually outnumbered the male shots at Rothwell. I was nine and my sisters 11 and 12 when we each received our very own .410 AyA. My father could not have been more encouraging.

I spoke to female shots and their parents about their love of the sport and who inspired and encouraged them.

The Duchess of Northumberland, one of the UK's best lady shots, says, "The children all learned at 10 or 12. They started on clays and we never differentiated between the boys and the girls and we never pushed it. Because they saw Ralph and me shooting and they saw what fun we were having, they wanted to join us. We never forced them to come out. If it was a cold, wintry day, they would often sit out a drive and get warm in the Land Rover, drinking hot chocolate and eating sweets." Now in their twenties and early thirties, the children all shoot whenever they can.

"I think there are still so few lady guns because men usually have plenty of friends to invite so they don't encourage their daughters as they need space in the line for guests," the duchess continues. "Almost all our days are family days, six of us in the line plus two or three guests. About once a year my children get a chance to wipe their father's eye and that is a very proud moment. Our youngest daughter, Melissa, managed it aged about 12. Maybe it was a fluke but it was a great moment." ➤

Seeing Elizabeth Hurley shoot inspired Lady Alice Manners (left). Edward Hoare (right with daughter Tortie) encourages youngsters



LEWIS LOM







“I was thrilled when Annabel started to shoot. She'd been obsessed with ponies”

Lady Melissa Percy, or Missy as she is known, is 26, works as a tennis coach at Queen's and is engaged to marry another keen shot, Thomas van Straubenzee, this summer. “Dad will always correct us and tell us if he sees us doing anything wrong. When we were learning we used to go at the end of the line or behind the line and get the wounded ones or the lower birds. As to who encouraged me, both my parents were my inspiration; I have never seen a woman shot like my mother nor a male shot like my father.

“I get invited to shoot elsewhere about five times a season and unless I'm with my sister, I'm usually the only girl there. Sometimes one of the guns will assume I've just taken it up and start to tell me how to hold the gun and so on. I just go along with it and say, 'Oh, thank you.' Then the first bird comes over and, hopefully, I nail it!”

Dr Jim Hay is a keen shot and has reinstated the shoot at his estate, Birch Grove in Sussex, formerly Harold Macmillan's home. Hay shoots as often as he can in the UK, clocking up some 80 days per season. He has two daughters, Jasmine and Catriona, aged 15 and 10 respectively, and Catriona will start shooting this season.

“We are measuring her up this week and we are going to modify the stock of her gun to make sure it fits her. She will be using a .410 and John Ward of the Ray Ward gunshop, which we own, will be on hand to teach her. He has very special attributes; he's very good at shooting and teaching. Catriona's older sister, Jasmine, used to be a keen shot but unfortunately she was badly put off when someone who should have known better used too heavy a load for her 28-bore and she cut her lip and hurt her jaw from the recoil. It's so important to get the right cartridge for these youngsters. It was all such a shame as she was becoming a very good shot,” Hay says.

Catriona says, “I'm just really excited about starting to shoot. I have a .410 over-and-under. I like being out with my dad. The first few times I came shooting, I used to stand with him and I collected the birds. But then I found out about what beating was and I used to go with my best friend. We got £5 for beating. Now my friend is learning to shoot as well. I can't wait to start.”



Left: Mary Clare Rodwell with her daughter, Annabel Vetch. Above: the Duchess of Northumberland and Lady Melissa Percy. Right: Dr Jim Hay and his daughter Catriona, who will be well taught

Annabel Vetch is now 25. "I was 17 or 18 when I first started shooting," she says, "but I had grown up with my mother and stepfather both shooting and we had a shoot at home, so I used to come out

Mary-Clare Rodwell, based in Somerset, learnt to shoot on the Cheshire/Staffordshire borders in the early Seventies. "My father, Derek Johnson, was the sort of person who was very keen on equality between girls and boys in every aspect of life. My older brother was five years older than me and when I was 12, I started shooting, too."

When Rodwell had a daughter, naturally she wanted her to learn to shoot. "I was thrilled when Annabel started. She'd always been obsessed with ponies and was hunting mad but it took up so much of her time that she gave it up after her GCSEs and started shooting. She was taught by an old keeper here at Lamyatt called John Bradman, who was an exceptional clay-shot. When Annabel shot her first bird it was wonderful to see the look on her face. I wish I'd had a camera at that moment. There's nothing more gratifying for a parent than to see their child looking so happy and so proud of themselves, and rightly so."

as a child." Vetch's stepfather died when she was 12, so it was her mother who encouraged her.

"She didn't teach me herself," says Vetch. "The keeper at Lamyatt started me off. My mother made a real point of *not* teaching me herself. And she never stands with me on my peg. We never share a peg as it would probably end up in an argument because I'm really reluctant to take advice from her. When we go clay-shooting we get quite competitive with each other. I was given a day for my 21st birthday at a small shoot in Somerset called Cucklington, where you walk everywhere. I invited all my friends who shoot. It was a great day; we shot about 70 birds. I would definitely encourage any daughter of mine to shoot."

Edward Hoare started taking his daughter, Tortie, out shooting when she was a small girl. "I wanted all our children to be interested >



“ ‘I was very excited when I shot my first bird. I was 10. Dad was screaming in my ear. I love everything about shooting, being part of the day’ ”

in things and I wanted my daughter to learn to shoot in the same way as I wanted my two sons to. I am delighted to say that all three of my children shoot. We have a tiny shoot and the purpose of it is to bring young people on. We must have had at least 20 youngsters who have shot their first bird at Gasper,” he says.

“I have been standing next to my dad out shooting practically since I could walk,” Tortie Hoare says, “but I didn’t start shooting until I was about 16. My dad would always stand with me on the shoot or we’d share a peg. He would make up rules, like if I missed three in a row he’d grab the gun back, or he’d suddenly

want to have a go at any high ones coming over us. I love shooting. It seems a very natural thing to do; I grew up in the country. I shoot about five or six days a year. I am quite competitive out shooting, I definitely don’t like to let girls down, I like to hold the side up.”

The Duchess of Rutland is equally blind to gender difference in the field. “All five of our children were introduced to shooting very young,” she says. “Violet, my eldest, first came out aged just two. I went beating and used to carry her on my shoulders.” But they were not pushed. Seeing other women shoot seems to be hugely encouraging, as third daughter, Lady Eliza Manners, now 15, explains. “I started shooting two years ago. I saw my friends starting to shoot and my sister was already shooting and one day I thought ‘I’ll have a go.’ Likewise, Lady Alice: “I had seen Elizabeth Hurley shoot. She was the only girl in the line, and I thought, ‘Why don’t I have a go?’ I’d been too busy with ponies before.”

Tim Eliot-Cohen from Wiltshire has a son and a daughter aged 10 and 13 respectively. Both shot their first bird at the age of 10 on the family shoot.

“Flora has always shown an interest in shooting, and has been coming out on our small family shoot from the age of about six. When she was 10 we had a few shots at clay pigeon before the shoot. Initially, I thought she might carry a gun and then have the odd shot with her A10. But she just got it and actually shot seven or eight. I was amazed, euphoric, actually!”

Hilldrop Farm, the Eliot-Cohen shoot, is probably best known for its charity shoots and simulated game days. In May the UK’s largest-ever charity clay day was staged there, with more than 400 guns and a neon-themed after party; more than £300,000 was raised for Sight Savers. Eliot-Cohen runs five charity days and has raised £1 million-plus.

“This is the 18th consecutive year that we have had people shooting their first pheasant



at Hilldrop. At October half-term, we had our annual children’s shoot. There were 12 guns, 32 for lunch and 1,200 shots for a bag of 75. Three guns shot their first bird, including my son, Arthur. Nowadays I much prefer watching my children shoot than to have a shot myself.

“I’m hugely enthusiastic about anybody who wants to do anything outside, so I have always really encouraged the children to do all sports but it’s really lovely that both children seem to share my passion for shooting and love of the countryside,” Eliot-Cohen says.

Flora, spoke to me from boarding school. “I was very excited when I shot my first bird, I was 10. Dad got very excited and was screaming in my ear. I love everything about shooting, I like watching everything, being part of the day. At half-term it was really cold and very windy but I shot five pheasants with my A10. I had Mark, Dad’s underkeeper, standing with me. There were loads of guns and there was one other girl my age and we were having a mini competition about who could shoot one first. I much prefer shooting with other girls but not many of my friends shoot, only one.”

What is clear from all the female guns I spoke to is that their love of the sport was nurtured from a young age and they had a lot of family encouragement. Shooting is, after all, not a sport that girls take to naturally: the loud bangs, heavy gun with its sometimes painful recoil, inclement weather and all-male banter can deter a lot of girls. Far more than boys, a girl needs a supportive father or mother, preferably both, to make her feel she belongs on the field and to break the cycle of male domination of the sport.

Left: Lady Eliza Manners took up shooting two years ago. Above right: Tim Eliot-Cohen with Flora, then 10, when she shot her first bird



