

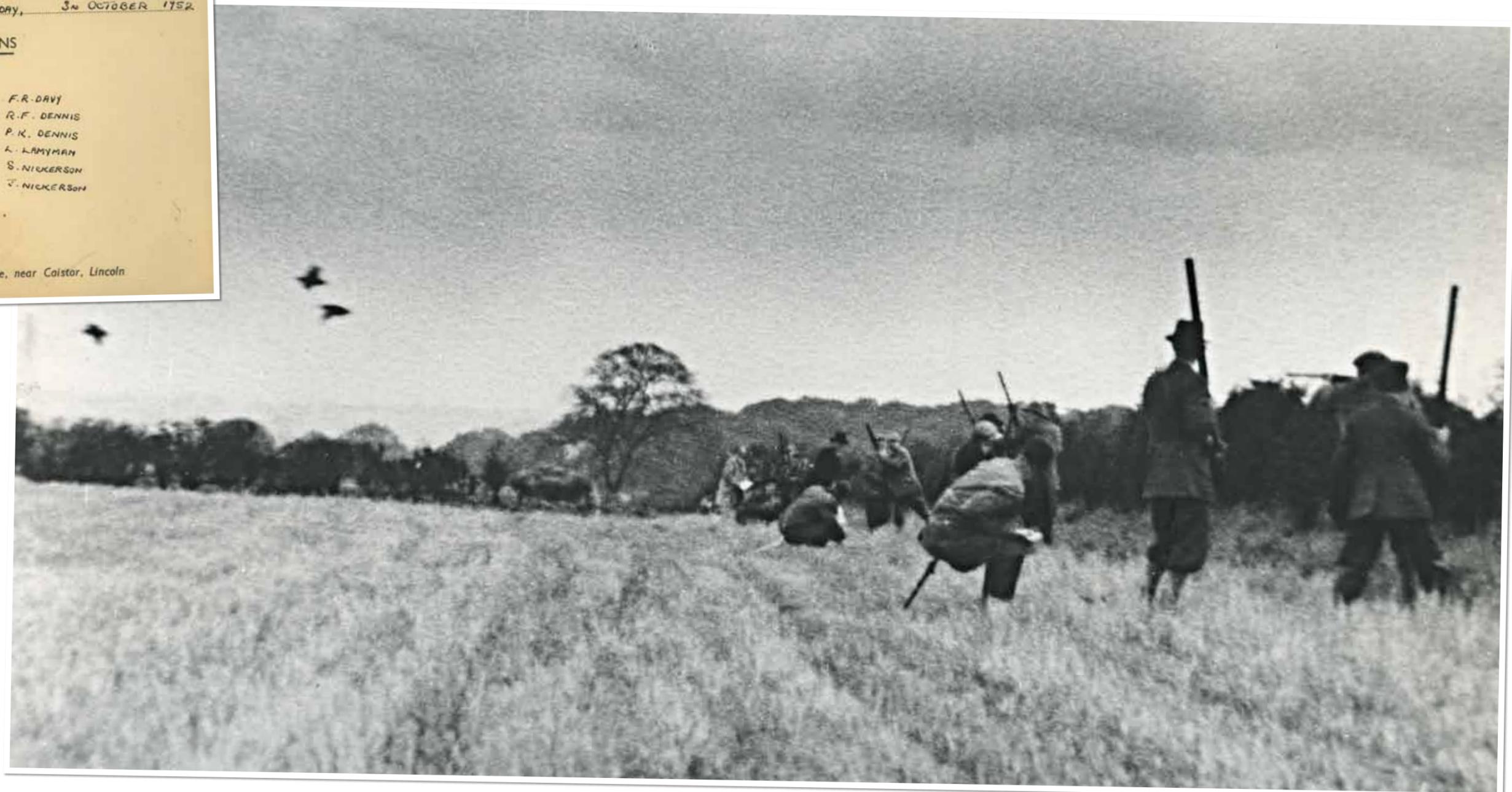
BEAT		ROTHWELL		FRIDAY, 3 <sup>rd</sup> OCTOBER 1952	
BAG		ENGLISH		FRENCH	
Partridges	old 586 young 1379	36	2015		
Pheasants	cocks 36 hens 20	56			
Hares		151			
Rabbits		11			
Woodcock		2			
Various		3			
Total			2238		
EXCLUDES: PICK UP OF 52 BRACE					
JOSEPH NICKERSON, Rothwell House, near Caistor, Lincoln					

**T**HE Great Day” – as my father used to refer to it – was a momentous event in his life, when he and five of his best friends broke the world record for grey partridges at Rothwell, Lincolnshire. On 3 October 1952, they achieved a bag of 2,119 wild partridges, all but 50 of them greys. This happened many years before I was born but I grew up knowing that the day was the highlight of his life, when Rothwell was put on the map for all time and his reputation as one of finest shots and shoot owners made.

The news caused a real sensation and was widely reported in the sporting press. My father was deservedly delighted; it had been a very deliberate and carefully orchestrated attempt to break the record and was the culmination of years of habitat improvement and sheer grind by his team of keepers.

When he started farming at Rothwell, in the mid-Thirties, the farm was riddled with rabbits, rooks and magpies, with barely a tree on the place. After the War, a typical bag might have yielded about 40 brace. It’s hard to believe that a few years later, in 1950, six guns shot 1,091 grey English partridges and this on a very wet and windy day. In 1957, five years after the Great Day, again with just six guns, 1,016 partridges were shot at Rothwell. The large bags continued until the mid Sixties.

In those days the grey English partridge was the main gamebird in Britain. The Eley cartridge company claimed at the time that the sale of its cartridges depended more on the partridge than any other quarry, including the rabbit. My father used to say that about two million partridges were shot each year in Britain then without any impact on future stock. Their demise was so fast that in less than 60 years since the record-breaking day, wild English partridges are now so uncommon in much of Britain that on some shoots the guns are forbidden to shoot them at all.



When my father’s friends received their invitations to shoot at Rothwell in 1952, they were in no doubt that the aim was to break the world record, because enclosed with it was a separate sheet of instructions for the day, entitled “Notes for Guns”, which went into some detail about transportation, timing and how the day would be organised. The following is an excerpt from these notes.

“Transport: Each gun will have a separate Land Rover, with his driver, spotter and two loaders. Route: The other five Land Rovers in the guns’ team will all on occasion follow JN’s Land Rover CJV 609 which will fly a green and white flag. Tow Ropes: Land Rovers CJV609, CEE105 and CEE200 will carry tow

**Broken record: the bag card for 3 October, 1952 (above left); the guns who achieved it (above). Each had three shotguns and two loaders**

ropes. Ammunition and Supplies: Please check that your own man places in your Land Rover sufficient ammunition, food, mackintoshes and all your requirements for the day.” The letter continued in this rather military vein for a whole page, concluding with, “The Ladies: The ladies are invited in time to move off from Rothwell House at 12 noon. Groom Day will be there to lead them to the scene of operations. Will they bring their own sandwich lunch and be changed in time for dinner at 7.30pm.” The language used and the ➤

# RECORD BAG

## on *the* great grey day

Sir Joseph Nickerson’s daughter **Rosie Nickerson** describes the meticulous planning and conservation work that meant he and five friends could achieve a bag of 2,119 wild partridges



lengths my father went to, to ensure success remind me of an army general preparing for battle. As in battle, lunch was clearly not the main event of the day. I doubt there was even much time for social banter among the guns, especially as each had his own Land Rover.

From my father's notes we know that all the birds were wild and all the drives downwind, with only one return drive, so the guns were shooting fresh birds almost all day. They needed two loaders because they used three guns to cope with the heat of the barrels. Those who don't know Lincolnshire might assume that the terrain is flat and the birds low and easy to shoot, but the Lincolnshire Wolds are steep and at that time Rothwell had some of the steepest land under cultivation in the UK. Even today, specialist combine harvesters are required to overcome the gradient.

One of the key reasons, I believe, for my father and his keepers managing to get the birds up so fast and so successfully was that my father had an encyclopaedic knowledge of the grey partridge. When he was eight, his father suggested he select a subject to study throughout his life, to become more knowledgeable about it than anyone else. He grew up "hedging and ditching" in the Lincolnshire Wolds and spent much of his time outdoors, so he chose the English partridge.

My father's in-depth knowledge of the bird not only helped with increasing the stock, by providing exactly the right habitat, it also helped him understand how the birds reacted and why. This awareness was essential for deciding exactly how to drive the birds and where to line up the guns. It was a serious skill and on those big-bag days, the coordinated

**Joseph Nickerson with headkeeper Archie Jacob (above left); with loader Ben Jacob (above). Below: the convoy of Land Rovers**

work of the keepers, how they managed their two teams of beaters and how they drove the birds towards the guns (with no radio communication) was a major part of the success of the day. The flankers were taught their skills directly by my father who oversaw it all and orchestrated it with his right-hand man, headkeeper Archie Jacob.

In *A Shooting Man's Creed*, my father writes about the work done to create such huge numbers of wild partridges and I can't help thinking that despite the vast changes in farming which caused the decline of this wonderful gamebird, many of the strategies and techniques he and his team employed are just as

“ LUNCH WAS NOT A BIG EVENT. I DOUBT THERE WAS EVEN TIME FOR SOCIAL BANTER AS EACH GUN HAD HIS OWN LAND ROVER ”



relevant today. In just a few years, Rothwell was transformed into a paradise where partridges thrived. The main ingredient for a wild-bird shoot is intensive keeping to carry out vermin control. At the time of the record, 14 keepers were employed. "Dusting shelters" were constructed every 100yd. Grit, vital to partridges' digestion, was shovelled along farm roads into hedge bottoms, a favourite place for the birds. Kale was planted in long, narrow strips and left for two years, to provide much-needed cover. Additional feed was scattered into cover by hand, from mid September to mid April. Every nest was marked by a discreet white peg 12ft away and noted on a master list. This was so the keepers could keep an eye on it from afar to ensure no predators could stalk the hen, and if she deserted her eggs they would be incubated.

My father planted many thousands of yards of hedgerow and in the course of his life planted over 250,000 trees. However, if the weather in mid June, when the broods hatch, is too cold and wet, partridge chicks will die, no matter how plush their surroundings, so June 1952 must have been particularly clement.

People might assume that Rothwell was purely a wild-partridge shoot in the Fifties, but it was a commercial working farm, and in the year of the world record received 5,000 visitors as it was regarded as a model. As many as 600 casual labourers were needed to bring in the pea harvest. My father turned

**Checking the game larder (above). All the birds are wild partridges. Joseph Nickerson (right) in 1952, the year of his world record**

having so many people traipsing about the place to his advantage. This is an excerpt from a letter placed in the wage packet of every farm worker in May 1952: "The British record partridge bag stands at 835 and a half brace in one day. It was achieved in 1905 in Norfolk on the estate of Lord Leicester, who had forty-two gamekeepers. We are going to beat it if we can so I am going to make you all keepers for a few minutes each week. I want you to help me by regarding the game on the property as a crop. When working in the fields during the next



eight weeks, you can be of enormous help by being careful where you sit down to lunch, so as not to disturb nesting birds. Choose bare ground when possible. Go through recognized gateways, stick to tracks and do not cut corners. Please report all the nests you may spot. Two shillings will be paid for every nest found which was previously unknown to us... If you see any traces of rats, let us know. Do not leave bits of paper in the hedge bottom. When blown about they can disturb sitting birds." This level of detail was typical of my father, who was an absolute perfectionist.

The whole farm and village were in on the project, everyone wanted him to succeed and the publicity which followed gave them all a huge surge in morale, which in the austerity in that post-War period was much needed. It also really put Rothwell on the map, and meant that when my father wrote to HRH Prince Philip, inviting him to shoot, that his invitation was enthusiastically received. He became a regular guest, as did other members of his family. One cannot underestimate the uplifting effect a royal visit had on everyone involved with the shoot and farm.

My father's love of the English partridge was simply a part of him. It made him the person he was. As a child I never questioned why his blazer buttons and ours, too, had partridge motifs on them, or why his favourite cars each had discreet, exquisitely painted partridge motifs on its passenger doors. When he was knighted in 1982, it was no surprise that he chose the partridge to form the main image of his armorial crest. ■