

AND FINALLY...

MY FIRST...

... partridge, by Rosie Nickerson.

Contrary to what people may expect from a Nickerson, my first partridge wasn't an English grey. By the late 1970s, when I was learning to shoot at Rothwell, there were none left, only reared pheasants. So in fact I shot my first partridge in Spain when I was 15.

It was at Nombela, a wild partridge shoot near Escalona, in the province of Toledo, a shoot my father leased for several years in the 1980s. Nombela was around 20,000 acres and was formed as a partnership between local farmers and smallholders who all agreed to rent their land collectively. My father invited me and my sisters to join him for a few days during October half-term.

The Spanish loader and secretario allocated to me that first day could hardly hide their disappointment when they saw my 28 bore. They are a competitive bunch and enjoyed betting with

their counterparts on how many their Guns would shoot, and they couldn't believe I was realistically going to hit anything with it. Meanwhile, I was still reeling with shock that their names were Angel and Jesus respectively.

The Guns lined up among the olive trees, and clumps of dried thorny branches formed a flimsy sort of butt. The sun was starting to warm up and I remember enjoying the feeling of it on my back, taking in the stunning scenery which stretched for miles with barely a building or telegraph wire to be seen. Between the olive trees, the dry reddish soil was bare apart from a few clumps of fragrant wild thyme and rosemary. It was all so exotic and very different from North Lincolnshire where the icy wind in winter comes straight from the Steppes and you always need wellies.

Suddenly, the birds came over in a covey of about 10–15, quite



Rosie on the head keeper Santos' prized horse at lunchtime

fast, heading straight for us out of nowhere. Rather like grouse, they jinked when they saw me raise my gun. I was so surprised by the speed of them that it was a purely instinctive shot. Angel and Jesus were beside themselves, and gave me quite a shock as they yelled: "Bravo! Bravo!" and "Muerto! Muerto!" (It's dead! It's dead!). I remember feeling so happy and relieved I had actually managed to shoot my first partridge. As for them, they were ecstatic, and their high spirits continued every time I shot a bird.

I was intent on picking the bird myself after the drive, but Jesus hurled himself off the peg with the speed of a greyhound to retrieve it and the other birds I had shot. Likewise, the other secretarios. It was an odd sight to see grown

men running around like spaniels grabbing all the birds they could by hand, with no sign of any dogs at all. These apparently came much later to Hoover up any we had left behind.

In the early 1980s, Spain was suffering real economic hardship in rural areas and life was tough for the farmers, and tractors were still scarce. Mules and donkeys were commonplace and all the keeping was done on horseback, including on shoot days when the keepers would ride alongside the beaters, holding long-poled flags. At lunch, my sisters and I would beg the head keeper, Santos, to let us try out his horse, a stunning dark bay whose western saddle rested on an old piece of carpet.

The weather, the laid back atmosphere, the scenery and the local people made shooting in Spain an unforgettable experience and the memory of those October days is etched on my mind forever. I was lucky enough to return to Nombela for several years running. Occasionally, HRH King Juan Carlos came to shoot as our guest. He was placed in the middle of the line all day, with the rest of the line rotating round him. I remember feeling rather nervous of the scary looking armed guards who flanked him at all times, but I needn't have worried as they were both charming, as were his three Royal retrievers, which were all of differing shades of blonde.



On the peg with her loader, Angel



Rosie (far left) with HRH King Juan Carlos, her sister Louise and father Joseph