



Youngest *in the field*

The future of shooting is in their hands but at what age should youngsters join the line? **Rosie Nickerson** canvasses opinion

SHOOTING needs and deserves a long apprenticeship; if you don't involve your children until they reach their teens, chances are they will already have found some other hobby, probably one that involves blasting on-screen killer-zombies. However, they may not be overly keen on standing in the cold and wet for long periods of time to shoot one pheasant.

Like most sports, the earlier you start a youngster off, the more likely he or she will be to develop enthusiasm and stick at it. This may sound controversial but if you are a keen shot and hoping your children will follow in your footsteps, I would suggest taking them out shooting at three or four. Obviously they won't be shooting at this age but it is the perfect time to get them interested and involved. They will adore the fun of bouncing along in the shoot wagon, jumping in puddles or watching the dogs working. If you give them something useful to do, they will feel they are taking an active part. By age five or six, they could sit at your peg and hold the dog, pick up your spent cartridges or count the birds you shoot. At eight or nine, they could join the beaters or flankers, even just for part of the day, so they can see what goes on behind the scenes. By the time they are 10 or 11, they will have accumulated a lot of knowledge and learned real respect for the quarry; they are ready for their first clay lesson with a light cartridge using a short-stocked gun, such as a .410 or a 28-bore.

Enthusiasm and encouraging youngsters to become responsible and safe shots is the ultimate aim of any keen shooting family. If you ask a registered shooting school what is a good age for a child to start, you will be told 12 years plus. However, I spoke to four families whose youngsters started shooting with a shotgun at nine or 10 years of age, and one at just seven. This may sound surprisingly young but each child is constantly supervised and never left unaccompanied with the shotgun.

Speaking to both the children and the parents, it's clear that if managed correctly with appropriate adult supervision, there is no

reason to wait any longer. The benefits for a young child of spending quality time with mum or dad (or any other relative) in a grown-up setting that is not centred solely around them, are limitless. I started shooting aged nine and, as a result, all our children started young, too. We didn't force them, they had already spent years in the field watching, loading, picking-up and beating and were naturally keen to start. A young child given responsibility often rises to the challenge and his sense of self esteem soars as a result. No surprise then that prep schools across the country are adding clay-shooting to their list of extracurricular activities and shoots are becoming generally more welcoming to youngsters. Some will lay on beaters days to include younger helpers. As a result, more youngsters than ever are becoming interested in shooting. Boys' days and Young Shot courses held in the holidays are proliferating. Teaching a child to shoot is starting to be seen as an essential accomplishment, even for non-shooting families.

"It's vital to get children out into the field as early as possible," Liam Stokes of the Countryside Alliance tells me. "Getting children into the countryside teaches all sorts of vital life lessons, like respect for firearms, and sows a love for wildlife and conservation. A great way to get children started on the right path is a season's beating, which is accessible to almost everyone. Coupled with a session or two of clay pigeon-shooting and some supervised drives on beaters' day is enough to spark a passion that will last a lifetime."

Shooting instructor Simon Ward agrees: "Providing the child is robust enough and sensible enough to absorb information regarding safe gun handling, I see no reason why a child aged nine or 10 can't start learning to shoot with professional shooting instruction. All children develop at a different rate, it's how the child has developed mentally and physically that dictates when is a good time to start."

Camilla Corrie from Shropshire is a mother of four, aged nine to 17: "They have all been >



Left: Henry Regis, who had his first day aged 11
From top: Casimira Corrie, 15; Jack Buchan, 11;
and Tom Regis, 15, from Lincolnshire



beating since they could walk, they are really keen. Hector, the youngest, is nine and is still on his rite of passage in the beating line. He spent 60% of half term with a pellet gun in his hand, he is mad keen. Now our eldest, Archie, is 17 all four go off together and the younger ones beat for the older ones.”

Daughter Casimira, 15, says: “I started shooting clays at 10 years old, then at 11 and 12 I was allowed to go with Archie round the back of the wood on a shoot day, with one cartridge in my 28-bore. We have the River Severn really close by and two years ago I shot my first goose. I shot it with a 28-bore and it landed really close by in the river, practically one inch from where I was standing.”

Younger sister Eliza, 13, says: “I like pigeon-shooting in the hide with Archie in the summer; it’s so exciting when the birds start coming over, your heart starts really racing. I shot my first bird when I was 12. It was a walk-around day at home. I was told to hold the 28-bore for a short while and then I shot my first pheasant, I was so excited and so happy.”

“I haven’t started shooting with a shotgun yet but I started using a pellet gun when I was seven years old,” says Hector. “I will start on clays when I’m 10 and then I will start shooting in the line when I’m around 13 or 14. I have

shot mainly rooks, squirrels and rats with my pellet gun. I had a friend over for the weekend and we shot 20 to 25 rats in the farmyard. I like going beating, too.”

“I started shooting at 10 and I love it so much I taught my younger brother and sisters how to shoot,” says Archie. “Now, when they

“ I like being outside and it’s something that Daddy and I enjoy doing together’ ”

are not hunting, they like to come out, too. I shoot about 12 to 15 driven days a year, some are Boys’ Days but we also have a shoot at school and four days a year I get to go on a Saturday and we shoot around 20 to 40 birds. We help run the shoot at school; I incubated 80 pheasant chicks in my bedroom.”

“We hadn’t planned to start them so young but they started getting invitations to boys’ days at nine, as they were at prep school in Yorkshire where a lot of their friends are from shooting families,” says mother-of-three Jessica Regis from Lincolnshire. “Looking

back, we actually feel it’s easier to teach a younger child to shoot as they are still really listening to what you are saying, they are not going to mess about or show off to the girls, which they might do at 14 or 15.”

Tom Regis, 15, says: “My best friend’s dad is a really keen shot and he invited me to a boys’ day when I was nine. I had never shot before so we suddenly needed to go and buy a gun. I get about two or three invitations to shoot a year; two of my best friends are really good shots, one is training to shoot for Team GB. Last year I spent three days beating on the Yorkshire Dales at Swinton and Bolton. I went on the train with my labrador. It was the best fun and I got paid £120.”

“I had my own day last year,” Tom’s younger brother, Henry, 11, tells me. “It was very windy but we got about 20 in total. My best day was at my friend Alex Macdonald’s shoot. There were three adults and the rest of us were under 12. It was a big day and I got 20 birds with my .410.”

“Teddy was seven when he shot his first pheasant,” says Sarah Hutchison from Somerset, the mother of two boys. “We started him young because he was very keen. We’re a very outdoorsy family and he wanted to have a go and shoot a pheasant. His daddy is in the

Army, he's a weapons expert, so safety is paramount. Now Teddy's 10 he shoots clays regularly with his .410 and his success at being a good shot is a huge boost to his self esteem."

"What I like most about shooting is the challenge," Teddy tells me. "It's being outside and it's something that Daddy and I enjoy doing together. I tried a 20-bore last season at a shoot in Wales [Vaynor Park]. I was meant to be sharing a peg with my dad but in the end someone didn't turn up so I got my own peg. I was so happy. I got six birds but it was heavy by the end of the day and the kick was too much, so I like my .410 best."

Jack Buchan, who's aged 11 and from Wiltshire, started shooting aged nine. Sadly, Jack's father, Tom, died when he was aged just seven. The family organised a memorial shoot in 2013/14 at the family home, Auchmacoy in Scotland, for all the grandchildren. Retired head keeper George Barclay, who spent many years with Tom Buchan, came back specially to load for Jack.

"It was a howling gale and I didn't think Jack would be able shoot anything as he was borrowing a .410 with quite a long stock," his

Left: Hector, Archie, Casimira and Eliza Corrie setting decoys. Below: Teddy Hutchinson, aged 10, receives instruction

mother, Vanessa, tells me. "He was the youngest of all the cousins. I was amazed when the first bird came down."

Jack remembers the day clearly: "We went into lots of different fields and had lots of drives. I got six pheasants and a duck, I was really pleased. I now use a 28-bore, which my Dad bought for his godson, Angus, when he was my age and he's lent it back to me. I go shooting about two or three times a year with different friends of my dad's and I love hearing all the funny stories about him."

The future of shooting and conservation rests with the next generation, who will undoubtedly come under a lot more scrutiny from many quarters. Having spoken to these and many other delightful young shots, I am reassured that our sport is in good hands. If those of us who are able to can make shooting more accessible to youngsters and foster in them an enthusiasm and understanding for the sport, then we will be doing our bit for the future of fieldsports. With the increasing commercialisation of shooting, it is hard for youngsters to get much experience, so why not make it your mission, this season, to invite at least one youngster who hasn't got much access to shooting to come pigeon-shooting or duck-flighting – or even offer to let them share your peg. ■



YOUNG GUNS GO FOR IT

Drill safety into them: guns aren't toys. Approach it sensibly without frightening them. Never leave a child under 15 unaccompanied with a shotgun.

Teach youngsters the ropes with a pellet gun at home; stalk rabbits, rats or pigeon together to reinforce gun safety.

Buy or borrow a short-stocked, lightweight .410 or 28-bore for your child's first few seasons and choose a light cartridge, maximum 21 grams. Don't be tempted to let a youngster "have a go" with your 12-bore.

Take your child to a recommended shooting school; ensure they check his master eye and mounting technique. Get a gun expertly fitted once he has stopped growing.

At your peg, make sure they stand behind you and tell them to watch for falling birds, which can cause serious injury. Ear and eye protection and cap/hat are also essential kit.

Let your child bring a replica shotgun or empty .410 onto your peg so they learn to pick out the birds and swing through; this is the perfect exercise for instilling safety and teaching them which birds are in range.

Where possible, encourage your child to get involved in a local shoot, as a beater or helping the keeper feed poults in summer. Facebook has useful pages for prospective beaters – check out a group called Beaters and Pickers Up, which has 16,647 members.

Plenty of practice during the year can be had with pigeon; this also teaches youngsters patience and fieldcraft.

It's worth applying for a licence as soon as your child starts shooting game as current law dictates that if you are not the occupier of the land over which you are shooting, you cannot lend a gun to a non-licence holder. There is no lower age limit for applying.

Join the Countryside Alliance/BASC: membership offers many benefits and includes insurance; family membership includes under 18s.

Any adult supervising a child (or transporting a child and his gun) needs to have their own shotgun licence; only over 21s can supervise a child under 15.