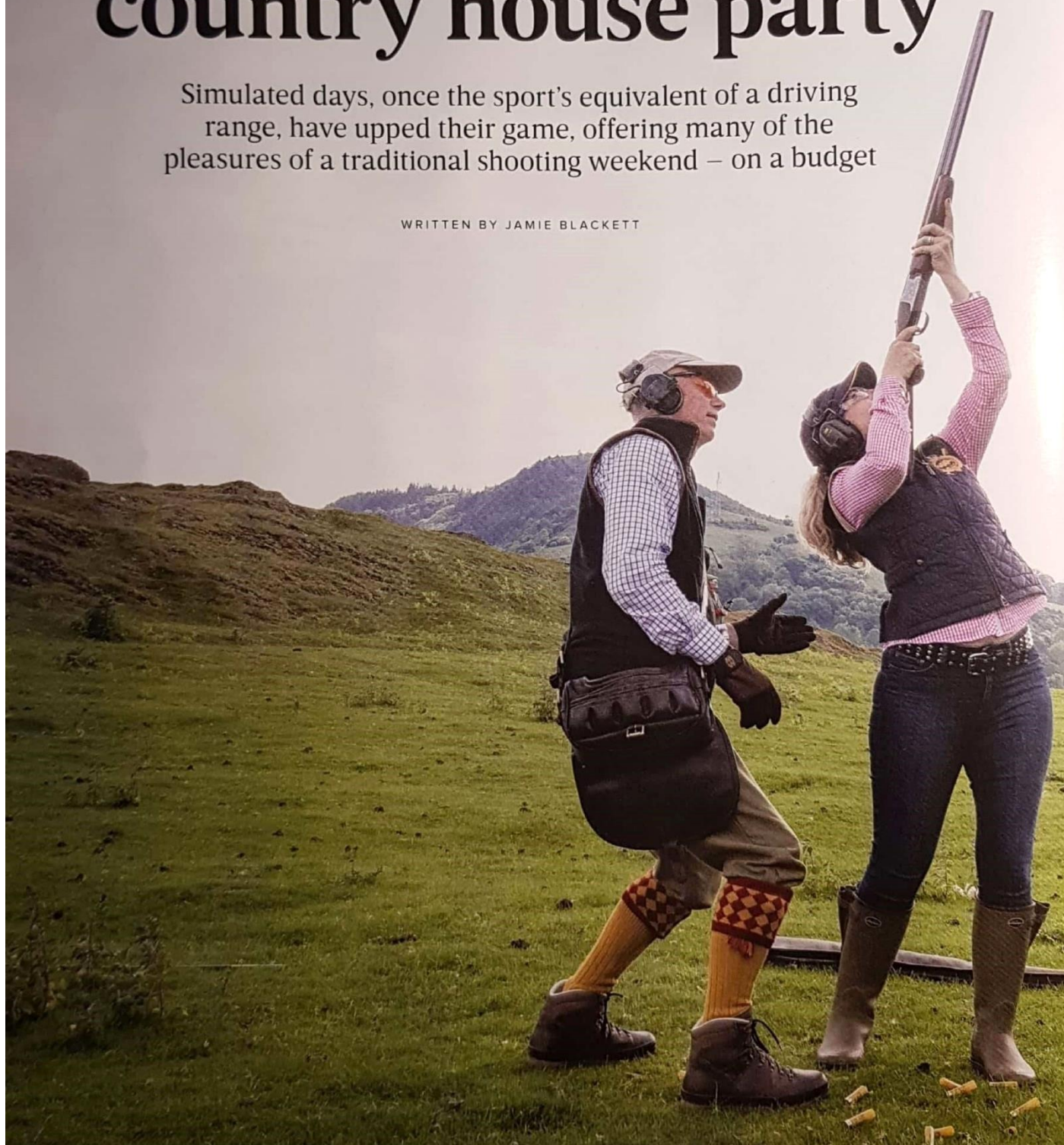


The simulated country house party

Simulated days, once the sport's equivalent of a driving range, have upped their game, offering many of the pleasures of a traditional shooting weekend – on a budget

WRITTEN BY JAMIE BLACKETT



H

ow to repay hospitality? It is a perennial question for most guns and a nagging, guilt-laden one for the impecunious town gun trying to balance the mortgage and family commitments against a chronic shooting habit. "Budget = x; better make that x-y if we are going to take the children skiing. That might give me eight guns staying in the Pig & Whistle in Lower Dripping in the Marsh, provided we have the set menu for dinner and a 50-bird day at Hedg-eskimmer Hall. Mmm, risk of being all over by elevenses if they give us bag-filler drives too early in the day. Better not invite Greedy Gus and the Low Bird Specialist just in case..."

Or perhaps you are the best man trying to organise a stag party without leaving all the groom's friends in debt. Or the office junior tasked with organising a bonding weekend for the team within a tight budget. It is a calculation fraught with unknowns. However, for some time there has been the

opportunity to balance the option of a day's game shooting against the more predictable but less sporting alternative of simulated game shooting, availability having grown rapidly of late. This used to be a 'turn up and pay' arrangement, a dubious substitute for a weekend's pheasant shooting, but as demand has grown, particularly in the corporate entertainment market, simulated shooting has become more sophisticated. Now, the opportunities to buy hospitality and shooting that are much closer to the real thing at an affordable price have developed.

Simulated game still lacks the excitement of pitting one's skills against wild birds, the unpredictability of driving game and the deep satisfaction of working with dogs. Yet there is no denying that it is becoming more popular as modern clay traps allow ever more exciting 'drives'. And with many rightly examining their consciences over big pheasant bags and the mountains of uneaten game, some are suggesting that it would be better for the sport if those who want to fire off industrial quantities of cartridges do so on clay shoots, while game shooting reverts to traditional days and smaller bags. →

Bryngwyn estate, a leading exponent of the simulated game country house weekend



On the supply side, for the modern-day Baron Hard-up grafting to keep the roof on the ancestral pile by offering hospitality on the back of a shoot (which may be run as a loss leader in order to profit by wining and dining guests), there are clear benefits from diversifying into the simulated market. It can help to spread fixed costs by extending the season by several months and guns who are new to the sport may trade up to the real thing after gaining confidence shooting clays in the seductive atmosphere and idyllic scenery of a well-run estate. For the host, there is the advantage that, barring mechanical breakdowns, clays don't refuse to fly into the sun, baulk at taking on a cold north wind or tip out of the back of the drive when a fox shows up. You know that on every drive

Above: a drive at Coombe End, near Cheltenham
Below: enjoying dinner and elevenses at Bryngwyn, where the hospitality is "fantastic"

“I have been four or five times. It feels as if you are on a pheasant shoot all day”

every gun is going to fire lots of cartridges at 'birds' that are neither too high nor too low. Until recently, the received wisdom has been that, as one shoot owner puts it, "Died-in-the-wool game shots won't shoot clays and clay shooters want a hundred clays for 30 quid." But the signs are that up-market simulated game shooting is gathering momentum in the shooting zeitgeist.

It is no surprise that two of the leading exponents of simulated game country house weekends are charismatic landowners who have brought ancient estates back from the brink with grit, determination and a distinctive entrepreneurial flair: Auriol, Marchioness of Linlithgow, chatelaine of Bryngwyn in the Welsh Marches;

Robert Everitt of Hull Cartridge takes teams to Bryngwyn two or three times a year for game and simulated days. "There are lots of places offering simulated game these days but few offer accommodation. What Auriol does is absolutely brilliant. She is a consummate hostess and a very interesting person and she definitely knows how to throw a party. Staying at Bryngwyn is really good fun and the breakfasts are superb. It is very good value for entertaining friends or paying people back, up to 16 at a time. It is a great way of getting more shooting for very little money."

Most estates offer simulated game out of season but, unusually, Lady Linlithgow offers combined packages. She says, "It is good for teams practising in our grouse butts with their loaders before big game days."



Everitt confirms this: "The option of a simulated day at Bryngwyn beforehand is a must, especially for teams coming from abroad. Guns not ready for the quality of birds in Wales can practise standing in the right terrain with clays coming at a realistic height. It also steadies the team down, they can ease their blood lust on the clays on day one and if they party too hard on the first night they can get rid of their hangovers on the simulated day. As a result, the guns appreciate the game shooting that much more."

Chris Watts is another fan of Bryngwyn. He runs a roving syndicate and says, "Bryngwyn is very, very good hospitality, it just keeps coming. Dinner is fantastic, the roast beef is just superb. We like the simulated day at Bryngwyn on the hill and in the valleys. The Home Counties can't compete with the terrain, it is very hard to make clays look like something they are not on flat ground."

The simulated game-shooting weekend looks as if it is here to stay. And maybe it will help to ease concerns about the game mountain by giving an outlet for their enthusiasm to those who want numbers above all else, helping the industry to rebalance itself and focus on quality and the ineffable pleasures of traditional game shooting. ■