



ABOVE: Shooter and a flying clay. ABOVE RIGHT: Used wads and clays. BELOW: An open over-and-under shotgun.



CLAY PIGEON SHOOTING

Sport, Hobby or Art Form?

“**C**LAY pigeon shooting is a sport, a skill, perhaps even an art” – *Clay Pigeon Marksmanship*, by Percy Stanbury and GL Carlisle, 1964.

Have you ever considered taking up clay shooting? It’s affordable, exciting and accessible – most shooting clubs offer this discipline. It takes skill, yet it’s great fun for complete beginners, especially if they have a good instructor and a quick eye.

As featured in *Magnum* Nov/Dec 2023, South African clay shooters won gold at the 41st FITASC Universal Trench World Championship in 2023. Local

21-year-old Luca Peacock won the Individual World Champion title (in his first year of shooting as a senior), and the South African Protea team won the World Championship Man (Open) team award. FITASC stands for *Fédération Internationale de Tir aux Armes Sportives de Chasse*, which is an international governing body for sport shooting. Individuals from across the world compete in this discipline and, according to englishsportingclays.co.uk, FITASC is ‘considered by many as the Formula One in Clay Shooting’.

FITASC targets are not limited to



Head of shotgun at the Nottingham Road Rifle Club, Peter Ritchie, shows how it's done.



Peter Ritchie aims at an oncoming clay.

standard clays and may include battues, rockets, rabbits and minis. This diversity makes accurate reading of the target's path more difficult, and as shooting doesn't take place in a cage, the shooter has total freedom of movement.

Shotguns are used for clay pigeon shooting. These smooth-bore guns fire a

cartridge loaded with lead, steel or bismuth pellets to hit the target, unlike a rifle, the cartridge of which fires a single projectile in the form of a bullet. Participants may use either an 'over-and-under' shotgun (with one barrel positioned on top of the other), or a 'side-by-side' shotgun (where the two barrels are posi-



Range officer, Neil Botha (in the orange shirt), offers instruction to shooters. Note the plastic shooting stands or frames that help prevent movement of the shotgun to the side.

tioned alongside one-another). The use of pump-action or semi-automatic shotguns is frowned upon at certain local clay pigeon shooting venues.

Clay pigeon shooting entails shooting disk-shaped flying targets that are flung from a 'trap' at high speed. Trap shooting is where most people first try clay shooting, and it's a good way, for even those with no experience of handling a gun, to start becoming familiar with one and learning weapon safety. A frame made of plastic piping, steel or wood is often used to prevent accidental swinging of the shotgun to the side by amateurs. Proper ear and eye protection are mandatory.

The sport has a history which goes back to the late 1700s and early 1800s. It became traditional to hold shooting parties at country estates in the United Kingdom, with 'beaters' and dogs flush-

ing out game birds such as grouse and woodcock for the landowners and their wealthy guests to shoot while flying. Purpose-bred pheasants were driven towards a line of stationary sportsmen waiting in butts behind a stretch of tall trees which forced the birds to take off and fly very high over the trees, offering



A novice shooter receives instruction.

the 'guns' more challenging shots. Wild pigeon shooting was also very popular. Trap shooting is mentioned in *The Sporting Magazine* in 1793 and this activity became increasingly popular, with live pigeons or sparrows released by hand for those wanting to try shooting birds on the wing.

By the middle of the 19th century, rules were set in place to regulate these pigeon-shooting competitions, with the birds being released from collapsible boxes or 'traps', which is why the device that flings out the clays is today known as a trap machine. When ready, the shooter calls out, "Pull!" to prompt the trap operator – much as the shooter of yesteryear would have called for the trap to be opened by an assistant pulling a drawstring to release the birds.

The first non-live targets were glass balls, sometimes filled with feathers, which exploded with spectacular effect when hit. Flung out from a throwing machine, these glass balls made the sport more affordable and accessible to those who were not of the landed gentry with access to beaters and vast country estates.

The clay target we know today was developed in 1880 by George Ligowsky in the USA. Ligowsky was inspired to create a saucer-shaped clay disk by watching youngsters skimming clam shells across the water, and he experimented

with baking the clay shapes in brick kilns to make them hard enough to resist the 1.25 ounce shot commonly used at the time. In 1884, this concept was taken a step further by Fred Kimble, whose 'Peoria Blackbirds' were made from black asphaltum material that was lighter and more brittle than the common clay target so that they flew faster and higher, and broke apart more easily when hit. In 1927, a French inventor, Emile Laporte, developed a hand-operated throwing device, consisting of a spring and a metal throwing arm. By this time there was extensive interest in clay shooting and the first-ever British Open Championship was held.

Over the next few decades, hardly any changes were made to the equipment used in clay pigeon shooting until the 1980s, when automatic traps were developed that could be operated by 12-volt batteries. This enabled clubs to position traps in several locations and gave rise to the discipline known as sporting clays. Instructors use a ghillie (also spelled gillie) to operate a hand-operated trap machine or use remotely-operated or voice-activated models.

Clays are released in front of the shooter and head away within an arc of about 60 degrees. The clays are shot as they rise upwards, and a trap gun is configured so that it shoots slightly high to allow the shooter to fire at the target as



A side-by-side shotgun in the open position.



Three types of shotguns: over-and-under (top), side-by-side (middle) and a pump-action (bottom).

it comes into view just above the muzzle end of the rib, aiming to hit it in the middle of the action. Shooters need to shoot where the clay is going, not where it actually is.

A shotgun cartridge is made up of five components: the casing, primer, propellant powder, wad and shot. Traditional cartridge shot sizes for clay pigeon shooting are 7, 8 and 9, the pellets of which are smaller in diameter than those used for gamebird shooting.

A clay pigeon is a fast-moving disk made of various materials including a mixture of lime and pitch. There is an assortment of circular targets that vary in diameter and thickness, with names such as minis, midis, battues, rabbits and chandelles, either imported or locally produced. Locally, great success has been had with making biodegradable clays using vegetable extract according to a closely-guarded formula.

Way back when the sport started, the gunpowder was covered with wadding made of cardboard, topped with felt, paper or cork to keep the powder and shot separate. Today, a single plastic wad provides the cushion needed to start the shot moving away under pressure from the expanding gases of the burning propellant on discharge.

Many experienced shooters reload their own cartridges by recycling previously-fired cases. Biodegradable wadding

is available (especially overseas), with manufacturers having reverted to original materials such as paper, felt and cardboard. However, plastic wads are generally cheaper and conducive to superior performance. Certain biodegradable wads make relatively poor gas seals and don't protect the barrels from steel shot or lead deposits (bore fouling). When using plastic wadding, it is environmentally-friendly (and more considerate to the landowner) to collect the wadding after a shoot, as well as any unbroken (missed) clays.

There are three distinct categories of competitive clay shooting.

Firstly: Sporting clays. This is highly challenging, with between ten to fifteen launch points set across a complex course on natural terrain, designed to match the unpredictable nature of shooting live quarry. The different types of clays all travel at different speeds and trajectories with myriad variations.

Secondly: Skeet shooting. This involves shooting at relatively close-range crossing targets, presented from a high tower on the left of the range and a low tower on the right. There are several types of skeet shooting, including a version that is recognised as an Olympic sport, known as Olympic or international skeet.

Thirdly: Trap shooting. This involves shooting at clays from a single trap or machine. There are different disciplines

that vary slightly in terms of target presentation and they have different rules. However, in every discipline, the targets head away from the firing position.

Most participants start on DTL (Down the Line), which scores three points for a kill, two for a second barrel kill, and zero for lost. The angles of the targets are slightly different from ATA Trap. In ATA (American Trapshooting Association) a single trap is used to release the clays, with five shooters standing in a line behind the trap and each taking a turn to shoot at a target. Each shooter will eventually shoot at five targets from each position. The universal trench layout consists of five traps placed in a trench, fitted with a fixed or hinged roof. The five traps are arranged in a straight line on firmly-supported bases at the same level, numbered 1 to 5 from left to right.

Clay shooting is both a hobby and a sport, and can be pursued as both. It's a great way to get your eye in for shooting on the wing and to sharpen your reflexes. Some wedding organisers arrange a morning clay shoot before the event, often for both the men and women. As shooters may not consume alcohol, it's an entertaining way to ensure that the bridal party arrives at the church in sober spirits!

Contact your local range for details or use Google to find your nearest clay shooting instructor. //