

# THE NUT BEHIND THE BUTT

Andrew Venables, Director of WMS Firearms Training, explains his vision for the future of sporting rifle shooting to Helena Douglas

ANDREW VENABLES ENJOYS being outspoken – especially when talking about shooting. The 53-year-old hands-on director of WMS Firearms Training – and self-styled ‘nut behind the butt’ – believes that the shooting industry can be its own worst enemy and needs to be far more proactive in building a positive image of the sport.

“Napoleon observed that the inevitable consequence of a continuously defensive strategy is defeat,” he says. “Country sports and shooting types generally maintain public silence unless they are attacked, and only then do they make an attempt at defence. To ensure shooting has a future, the industry needs to start putting adverts and articles into the mainstream press, on the internet and TV. Celebrities that enjoy shooting should come out and say so; we need to educate the public about the benefits; and the shooting bodies need to stop arguing and work together.”

Fighting talk indeed. But given his passion, it is unlikely Andrew will accept the current status quo. He believes that rifle shooting is a poor relation within an under-represented family, “because of the backward thinking of the institutions responsible for it.” This has not only inspired the development of WMS but also his future plans, thanks to his belief that sporting rifle shooting needs extensive facilities run along the same lines

as the shotgun shooting schools that attract large numbers of private and corporate clients, “some of whom go on to take up shooting on a regular basis.”

WMS Firearms Training, which is based in Powys, Wales, provides firearms training and courses, shooting experience days, sniper days and bespoke training on 5,000 acres leased under a land diversification agreement with a farming

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estate. Shooters can test their skills against a range of steel reactive targets from 50-1,700 metres over a 400-metre incline, with courses and training enjoyed by first-time rifle shooters through to experienced hunters, police firearms officers and military personnel. In addition, WMS provides firearms and large mammal humane destruction training for zoos, wildlife parks and the British police; manufactures

and sells steel rifle targets to the military; and provides maritime security training.

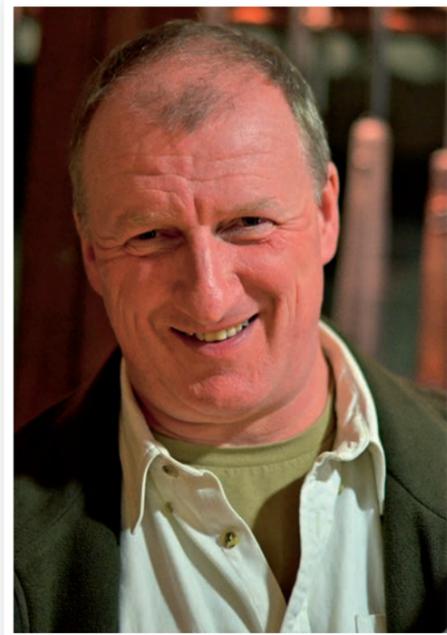
The company, Andrew explains, came into being in 1985 when he became bored running the farm contracting business he had set up after leaving Aberystwyth Agricultural College. “I was mostly doing fencing and I got an enquiry from a zoo that had just set up a new chimp enclosure. They were concerned

because the people landscaping the enclosure were getting out of it by jumping over the boundary walls. So we went in and not only designed and installed a virtually invisible power fence system on the wall, but also trained the chimps to learn to avoid it before they were put in the enclosure. After that, I realised I could have more fun and make more money specialising in wildlife management, so I started doing that for zoos, wildlife parks and golf courses all over the UK and Europe. We kept things in, kept things out and arranged culls when required.”

As his business evolved, Andrew became involved with training zoo and park staff to use firearms. “I had grown up shooting, was a keen stalker and knew a fair bit about rifle shooting. When I realised that zoos were required by law to have a firearm commensurate with the problems their animals may produce, it occurred to me that there was an opportunity to provide training as most of the biologists and zoologists running the zoos had no shooting experience. After all, if you have an escaped tiger to deal with, there is no point getting a high-powered rifle out if no one knows how to use it safely and humanely.”

Andrew focused on this business for more than 15 years and soon built a name. “It was great and I was making money. But I was working every hour of the day and every day of the week. After all those years it started to catch up with me, and when I counted nearly 100 boarding card stubs in my travel bag in just one year, I realised it was time to change focus.”

Next on the cards was a stint running the Litts Gunshop at



the Royal Berkshire Shooting School, while still running zoo and police firearms training in his scant spare time. After three years Andrew moved at the request of Litts to run its new gunshop in Savile Row, London. “Sadly, Litts was heading for a spot of bother and was unable to capitalise the London shop as projected.” When that shut, Andrew decided to get back into the firearms training and wildlife management business, and also began acting as an agent for Diana and Limpopo Hunting Tours of Denmark.

After travelling to Arizona in 2006 to do some training with Colonel Jeff Cooper’s legendary GunSite academy, Andrew then came back to Wales to reinvent WMS as the company it is today. In addition to providing firearms training days, WMS provides consultancy to several zoos, has trained 20 UK constabularies in large mammal destruction, and provides wildlife management services to a few big name clients overseas.

“The core business today is firearms training in Wales,” Andrew explains. “And that is growing fast. We have doubled our turnover each year for the past four years and gone from a one-man-band to a full-time staff of four and several part-time instructors. Now we need to up the game to attract more corporate and private clients, which feeds new people into rifle shooting.”

This growth is driving Andrew’s ambitious plans for the future. “Because the organisations supposedly running the sport don’t seem able to promote sporting rifle shooting, I believe the only way forward is to build commercial, privately run rifle-shooting centres of excellence around the country, which would benefit the local economy and raise the profile of the sport.

“That is what I am looking to do. WMS is eminently franchiseable, and our success in Wales shows there is a big demand from people who want to enjoy the challenges of rifle shooting in a safe, responsibly managed environment.

“It is very sad that people who live in say, Kent, will bypass Bisle to come shooting in Wales. But that is what is happening and so it will be commercial organisations that end up bringing rifle shooting to a wider audience.” **GTN**

