

Wildfowling memories - Coffins and Huts - Wildfowling at Lindisfarne

I didn't come from a shooting family. I started as a young lad with air rifles and then moved on to shotguns. When I began working at the pit, money was limited, and there weren't many opportunities for sport. Wildfowling was the one kind of shooting I could afford, so that's what I did. I got my first permit for Lindisfarne when I was about 18, and I've been coming here ever since, often every Sunday during the season, from first light until dark.

In those days, access was different. You could shoot areas that are now restricted. Over time, concerns about declining bird numbers, particularly wigeon, led to surveys and eventually the creation of reserve areas. Parts of the marsh where we used to shoot were closed off, based on decisions about feeding grounds and disturbance.

At that time, there was more access to the marsh than there is now. You could shoot over wider areas, including parts that are now restricted. Over the years, changes were introduced. After that, decisions were made to create reserve areas where shooting was no longer allowed.

When I was involved in management discussions, there were often experienced wildfowlers at the table with many years of knowledge between them. It was sometimes a point of discussion that decisions were also being influenced by people without direct wildfowling experience

The marsh is known through its place names, and each one has a meaning or a story behind it. There's a spot called the Old Man's Chair, which is close enough for older fowlers to reach without going too far out. Harvey's Island is named after a wildfowler from Belford who used to go there all the time; after he died, others started calling it by his name. There are the Dolphin Stones, which I was told got their name from a barge called the Dolphin that broke its moorings in rough weather and was wrecked there, leaving its ballast stones behind. There's also Teal Hole, which used to be a place where teal gathered in numbers, though not so much now. These names are how we refer to the ground and understand it.

When I started, we used fairly simple equipment. We made hides using whatever we could. I used a galvanised water tank as a box. You would drag it out onto the mud using boards, dig a hole, and sink it into place so only a small part showed above the surface. Then you would build mud up around it so it blended in. Some people used wooden boxes, we called them coffins, in the same way burying them into the mud to create a low hide.

We would also stay out on the marsh for longer periods. There was an old hut we used, originally something left from wartime use. It didn't have electricity or running water. We used gas for cooking and lamps for light. We would stay there for days at a time, especially around the moon periods in October and November, when we thought the conditions would be right. Sometimes we didn't even wash the dishes properly—just left them out, and by morning they'd been cleaned off by mice. There was another shed we used that the farmer had built for his wife, she was an artist she used to paint and she would sit out there, you can see at the front of the hut. That's where he put French windows. She used to sit in there and look out and pain.

From the hut, you could watch the marsh and the birds moving. I remember sitting there and seeing wigeon flying past at close range as the tide moved. Timing everything around the tide and light was important. We would go out onto the mud before dawn, lie up, and wait. The shooting itself was never about big numbers. A good outing might be four or five birds. You had to know where to be and when, and even then there was no guarantee. The weather could make it difficult. I remember days in winter with strong winds and snow blowing in, where you could hardly see, and your hands would go so cold you couldn't hold the gun properly.

There were also changes in what you saw over time. When I first knew the area, wintering wigeon numbers could be very high, tens of thousands. Later on, those numbers dropped, and that was part of the reason for the restrictions that came in.

Wildfowling here has always depended on local knowledge. People who had spent years on the marsh built up an understanding of the tides, flightlines, and feeding areas. That knowledge was often shared among those involved, especially when discussing how the marsh should be managed.

I've shot in other places as well—different estuaries in Scotland and Ireland—but Lindisfarne has been the main place I've returned to over the years. The way we worked the marsh, the places we used, and the knowledge passed between fowlers have stayed consistent, even as access and conditions have changed.