



Children and Pheasant Shooting: *An Industry Dependent on Young Blood*

Every year in Britain millions of shed-reared pheasants are beaten up into the sky and shot down for pleasure. Many of the shooters are mere children, aged seven years or even younger – there being no legal restriction on the age at which a child can use a shotgun to kill animals.

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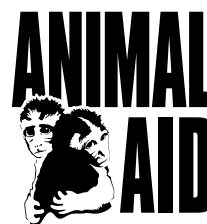
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Last April, a parliamentary select committee warned the government that this position was untenable and that an age threshold of somewhere between 12 and 14 had to be introduced. But the government buckled under pressure from a gun lobby desperate for young blood to keep alive its squalid 'sport'. It rejected the age-limit recommendation by the Home Affairs Select Committee (HAC).

Government Betrayal

In so doing, the government failed in its duty to protect the physical and psychological well-being of the most easily influenced members of society, says national campaign group Animal Aid, which in September 2000 launched a high profile exposé of the pheasant rearing and shooting industry. (See Background on the Industry.)

Another important HAC recommendation was that 18 be the minimum age for the granting of a firearms certificate. Some police forces have been granting permits to children as young as 8 or 9 years of age.





The government said it ‘wished to explore further’ this minimum age recommendation for certificates and the issue is currently in the hands of the government’s gun-lobby-friendly advisory body, the Firearms Consultative Committee. The FCC was due to report back to parliament by the end of 2001.

Dunblane Aftermath

The premium placed on young children by ‘game’ shooting interests becomes all too clear when examining their websites, magazines and club newsletters. Depressed by the downturn in the number of shotgun owners and users in England and Wales in the wake of the 1987 Hungerford shooting and the Dunblane massacre of 1996, the shooting lobby is engaging in a hard-sell strategy. Free bird-shooting days are on offer. There are

‘uplifting’ tales, for instance, of young children being smeared with the blood of animals they have helped to slaughter. Parents write enthusiastically of their young children’s interest in shotguns. And there is no shortage of photos showing children (in one instance, aged five) posing with guns amidst neatly arranged dead birds.

A special ‘New Year Fun’ feature in the February 2001 edition of *Sporting Gun* magazine displayed the results of the ‘cracking sport’ child gunmen had enjoyed shooting pigeons. One boy, gun in hand, posed with 84 dead birds spread before him. Another was pictured with 101 corpses – and a third with 104.

The more up-market *Shooting Times* magazine is the official publication of the British Association

for Shooting and Conservation, an umbrella body that claims 1600 affiliated shooting clubs and syndicates. A regular ST feature, called Next Generation, celebrates the exploits of child shooters (see below).

An October 2001 subject was a nine year old from West Sussex - shown with a shotgun and a dead animal - to whom the police had just granted a firearms certificate in his own name. Two weeks later, a six year old from Shropshire was pictured clasping a shotgun and a very large, dead Canada goose. Another October 2001 Next Generation subject was a three year old from Buckinghamshire. He was pictured holding a partridge, described as his 'favourite bird'. The bird had been shot dead on the estate where his father is headkeeper.

The determination of leading gun enthusiasts to recruit and retain fresh blood was made plain in recent comments from a firearms consultant and former West Yorkshire police superintendent, reported in the *Daily Telegraph* (July 21, 2001)

Colin Greenwood told the paper that if shooting in Britain is to have a future, young people must be encouraged into the sport. 'If we continue to lose the older generation of shooting folk without replacement, the sport is doomed', he said.

Killing for Pleasure

A letter published in Shooting Times (August 16, 2001) was both more explicit and despondent. After drawing attention to the 'worrying reduction in the numbers of sportsmen and women holding shotgun and firearms certificates', the writer went on to complain: 'Today's young seem more interested in sitting on their backsides watching television or playing with computers...' Part of the blame lay with anti-bloodsport teachers and parents. Part of the answer was to ensure that 'on every occasion one sets forth on a day's sport...one also takes along a youngster'.

Dr. Peter Squires, Reader in Criminal Justice, University of Brighton, laments the lack of serious consideration given to the consequences of encouraging young children to kill for pleasure.

'There has been surprisingly little research looking at the impact of firearm use and ownership - including air weapons - upon young people and their broader social attitudes,' says Squires, who is a member of the Gun Control Network steering

group that was set up in the wake of the Dunblane massacre.

'Even in America', Squires told Animal Aid, 'the relatively limited research undertaken has tended to problematise the psychological impact of violent video game-playing upon juvenile attitudes and behaviour, rather than access to and use of real guns.'



Gun Culture

'On both sides of the Atlantic,' he adds, 'sports shooting enthusiasts have tended to stress the careful and responsible aspects of gun ownership - as if sports shooting were, above all, a vital form of training in self-discipline. But with the growing salience of firearms (as icons of power and excitement) within our media and cultural industries, there is an urgent need for some serious research on the ways in which the psychological, social and emotional development of children is affected by access to firearms and by living in a gun culture.'

Dr Mary L Randour, a leading US psychologist, is convinced from her own experiences that 'game shooting' has a negative impact on young children. 'Witnessing masses of birds slaughtered or being clubbed to death, can have long-lasting negative effects on children,' she told Animal Aid.

Callous Attitudes

Dr Randour gives seminars to law enforcement officials, mental health professionals, educators and other relevant community groups on the consequences of animal abuse for society at large. She adds: 'Such a wanton disregard for other lives definitely sends out the wrong message, producing a callous attitude in children towards all life - not just animals - and also deadens their empathic sensibilities.'

Whether the shooting lobbyists are selling their message through glossy periodicals that portray an image of wealth and stately homes, or through downmarket outlets that more honestly glorify the bloodlust of those who enjoy slaughtering wildlife, the same theme is repeated over and over: the future of their 'sport' is dependent upon the recruitment of children - lots of them ... and the younger the better.



Given that shooting birds for fun ranks poorly as a popular pastime for youngsters compared with football, music and video games, the active encouragement of a parent or close relative is invariably required for initiation to take place. Letters pages in shooting magazines frequently carry the testimony of proud parents describing how they facilitated their child's first kill.

Poorly Regulated

At the lower end of the market this will mean a rabbit, pigeon, fox or some other 'vermin'. Pheasant shooting, on the other hand, is expensive. Here the image is one of tweedy amateurism, good breeding and respect for the countryside. In reality, it is a poorly-regulated agribusiness that combines the worst aspects of factory farming with live-target shooting galleries. Despite its elitist profile, there are a number of entry points to the 'sport' for the less well-heeled. This might be via a family member employed as a gamekeeper or in the rearing sheds. Alternatively, a child can participate as a beater (scaring birds from their cover into the sky so that they can be shot down) and be rewarded with a day's shooting at the end of the season. The beaters used by one experienced gamekeeper writing recently in *Sporting Gun*

magazine (Aug. 2001) had an average age of 13. '[One] little character,' he reminisced, 'Joey by name, was one of the best stops I ever had. He always used to have a packet of 20 fags with him, begged matches from me and told me not to forget to bring him a bottle of beer at lunchtime. He was 12 years old.'

A leading shooting advocate, who was offering free shooting days to children through *Sporting Gun* (Nov. 2000), sought to galvanise readers for the mission to recruit and blood them young: 'We must all make the effort to teach more youngsters. Perhaps that will give us a fighting chance to save shooting for future generations. If every shotgun or firearm certificate holder encouraged just one youngster to participate in their sport, we would be a force to be reckoned with when this government considers future votes.'

In Dad's Footsteps

This writer's target group was aged 12 to 15. Often, the recruits are considerably younger. One woman sent a photo to *Sporting Gun* showing her nine-month old boy posing with a copy of the journal. The child, she declared proudly, was 'following in his dad's footsteps'. Another parent boasted in the same magazine: 'I have a four-

year-old son, James, and when my copy of your magazine arrives I have to fight him for it. Although he can't yet read the words, he loves identifying the birds in the pictures and is most interested in the New Gun and Used Gun sections. His normal comment is: "When I get a big lad, dad, I want a gun like that".'

The usual justification for conditioning young children in the way of guns is that such experiences provide a useful lesson in discipline and self-control. But this is challenged by experts in the field.

Power Symbol

'From the time kids are big enough to pick them up, for the rest of their lives, they're just fascinated with [guns]. They are a symbol of power,' says Marjorie Hardy, assistant professor of psychology at Eckerd College in St. Petersburg, Florida ('The Lure Of A Gun: Why Can't Kids Resist?' ABC-NEWS website Aug. 9, 2001).

The indoctrination and desensitisation involved in getting children to kill animals for pleasure raise a number of specific concerns, particularly in relation to youngsters who already have developmental problems.

Richard De Angelis is the director of communications of the Doris Day Animal League, a US group that has brought together social workers, police forces and community leaders to recognise the early link between children who harm animals and who then go on to harm people in later life. De Angelis told Animal Aid: 'Disturbed young people unable to control their feelings of rage and hostility might be drawn to bloodsports as a means to vent their violent desires. Whether it is the cause of hunting or the result, a diminished sense of empathy - at least towards animals - is definitely an asset when pulling the trigger aimed at a living target.'



Adds psychologist Dr Randour: 'Psychological research [in the US] clearly demonstrates that "emotional intelligence" is crucial to success in many areas of life - academic, social, and emotional. The development of empathy is an essential aspect of emotional intelligence. Pheasant shoots are antithetical to the development of empathy.'

The BASC - Young Shots

The British Association for Shooting and Conservation (BASC) presents itself as the UK's largest 'game' shooting lobby, claiming 120,000 members and 1600 affiliated clubs and syndicates. Its aim is to promote all aspects of 'live quarry' shooting and fight any proposals for tighter legislation. Founded in 1908, its patron is the Duke of Edinburgh, while the Earl of Lichfield is president.

Shooting Holidays

'Young Shots' is the BASC youth wing. Members receive a badge, together with details of competitions and specially-arranged shooting holidays for children. One such four-day trip involved introducing 12 year olds to 'grouse moor management' and deer stalking. The prize for a recent photo contest was to shoot driven pheasants on the Castle Howard Estate in Yorkshire. There was no minimum age for entry.

In autumn 2001, the Association announced a 'major initiative to introduce more young people to shooting sports'. The plan was to bring together grass roots members, the gun trade and other rural and urban sporting organisations in a 'far reaching review' of 'how youngsters can be provided with more opportunities to learn to shoot'.

Blooding Them Young

Writing recently in the BASC journal, Voice of Shooting, chief executive John Swift noted: 'We all know that the future of shooting rests with the enthusiasm of young people....'

A typically disturbing story posted on the BASC website featured eight year old Thomas, shown wearing a Mickey Mouse baseball cap and holding his 'pet' ferret. 'Young Shot' Thomas says his first experience of bloodsports came when, aged three, he used his ferret to catch a rabbit. The boy watched as his father killed the animal and 'blooded' Thomas - smearing the rabbit's blood over his face. A smiling Thomas revealed how 'proud' this made him feel.



Next Generation

Shooting Times bills itself as the BASC's 'official weekly journal'. Its Next Generation feature celebrates the exploits of children as young as three. Often they are decked out in full

camouflage gear, a shotgun in one hand and a dead bird – held by the throat – in the other.

Examples include:

- A 12 year old Buckinghamshire boy, Tom, described one outing during which he 'accounted' for 20 birds but took home just two.
- Danny, a three year old from West Sussex, was pictured clasping a dead bird; he has been going shooting since the age of six months.
- Tom, a 15 year old from East Sussex, boasted that in the first seven months of 2001 he had already killed 36 magpies, 21 crows and reared 400 pheasants for the 'big shoot down the road. It's there', he declared, 'that I also go shooting and beating.'
- Sam, an 11 year old from Somerset, was shown posing proudly with his first killed pheasant. 'When I got back to the trailer', he told the magazine, 'everyone was saying "well done Sam"', and patting me on the back. I felt so proud and think I will remember that day forever.'
- Thomas, a 16 year old from Wiltshire, regularly goes hunting with dogs, in addition to shooting pheasants. He was recently given a birthday present of a weekend's deer hunting in Ullapool. There he shot his first stag. For 'supplementary sport' he keeps a ferret.
- Tom, aged 11, from Essex, shoots on the estate where his uncle works as gamekeeper. He describes personally killing 10 pheasants before lunch on a recent shoot, during which time other shooters had downed another 160 birds. Tom claimed another nine pheasants in the afternoon. 'What a brilliant day,' he raved. 'The most pheasants I have ever shot. I hope that they never ban shooting.'
- Charlie, aged 9, from Kent, has been beating on his dad's shoot for three years. Every

season when his father buys poults for shed-rearing, dad gets some white ones for his son. Charlie then keenly watches out for them on shooting days. That's because dad has promised him £25 towards shooting lessons if anyone succeeds in downing one of Charlie's 'pets'.

- 10 year old David, from West Sussex, has been shooting for two years - claiming dozens of rabbits, rooks and mallards. This year, he was particularly excited to have shot his first fox cub.
- 12 year old James, from Wiltshire, 'recently got the surprise of my life when my dad got me a 12-bore shotgun'. His 'best outing so far' climaxed with the shooting of a fox. 'As I looked up, half expecting to have missed, there in the morning dew was a pile of red fur. I was shaking all over, I don't know whether from shock or happiness. We put the fox in the car and headed up the hill with the ferrets for some more fun.'

Non-participants are asked to believe by advocates of such activities that they amount to wholesome 'land management'. Yet, study the shooting lobby's own publications and you see little discussion of conservation but plenty of evidence of the lascivious delight taken in the termination of these small lives – a delight which adult enthusiasts are keen to transmit to the very young.



Background on the Pheasant Shooting Industry

Last September, Animal Aid produced an in-depth report on the pheasant industry, called *The Killing Fields*, backed by shocking undercover footage.

The industry claims to be practising responsible 'custodianship' of the countryside. But rather than 'harvesting' a natural resource, it mass produces its quarry inside industrial hatcheries and rearing sheds. From the sheds, the birds are moved to fattening pens before being released to serve as feathered targets for the men and women in wax jackets and plus fours.



Every year in Britain, this is the fate of some 35 million pheasants. Because of the enfeeblement that results from their 'institutionalised' upbringing, about half of the released birds die before they can be gunned down. They perish from exposure, starvation, disease, predation, or under the wheels of motor vehicles.

Evidence Buried

Of the roughly 16 million birds who are shot, only about eight million are eaten. Millions are left to rot where they fall or they are buried in specially dug holes – an attempt to conceal the evidence of excess. These details are acknowledged by leading gun lobbyists, writing in British magazines for fellow enthusiasts, such as *Country Life*, *Countryman's Weekly*, *Shooting Times* and *The Field*. (See Animal Aid's report 'Greed and Excess . . .')

Production levels, it is admitted, are geared towards serving the vanity of 'instant shooting man', who imagines that blasting birds out of the sky will enhance his social

standing and who likes to boast in the office about the size of his weekend bag. These shooters might be responsible for personally downing dozens of barely air-borne birds. But they often don't bother taking home for consumption any of their quarry.

The consequences of such over-production include 'crop damage, soil erosion around release pens and a greatly increased risk of disease' within the rearing sheds, according to an editorial in *Country Life* magazine (Feb. 1, 2001).

Snares, Poisons and Traps

But the welfare burdens and environmental dislocation imposed by the pheasant industry go further. Animal Aid has documented how the self-appointed guardians of the countryside annually kill around five million wild birds and mammals with snares, poison and body-crushing traps in predator control programmes. Gamekeepers deliberately target foxes, stoats and weasels, because they are attracted to the unnaturally large number of semi-domesticated pheasants. But species ranging from badgers to cats – even protected birds of prey like owls and kestrels – are also caught and killed. Animal Aid undercover videos show a number of animals dying in traps – as well as downed birds flailing on the ground whilst unconcerned shooters line up their next feathered target.

Restraints and Mutilations

Even before they become target practice, the shed-reared birds suffer serious privations. In an attempt to eliminate aggression caused by the crowded conditions in the rearing sheds and release pens, the pheasants are subjected to painful restraints and mutilations. These include:

- Beaks being partially amputated with a red-hot blade
- Blinker-like 'spectacles' fixed in place – sometimes by pins driven through the nasal septum
- The fitting of plastic or metal 'bits' to prevent closure of the beak
- The tying of one wing to prevent escape prior to release



Firearms Legislation and Children

The main control on firearms in England, Wales and Scotland is the Firearms Act 1968. Despite unending complaints by shooting lobbyists that this legislation – together with subsequent amendments – seriously infringes their liberties, the law offers considerable lassitude – not least to the young.

Another regular, more justified complaint by the shooting lobby is that the law is complex and even incomprehensible.

The Firearms Act, it can be confidently stated, allows a child of any age to possess a shotgun – known as a Section 2 weapon – and use it to kill animals, so long as (s)he is 'under the supervision of someone 21 years or over'.

There is no minimum age for the granting of a shotgun certificate – although, according to a Home Office spokesman, 'most police forces will expect most applicants to have reached their teens'. Some forces, however, have granted 8 and 9 year olds certificates – and a certificate holder of that age was recently featured in *Shooting Times*. The police, says the HO spokesman, only grant licenses to such young children, with a demand for firm parental supervision



The law becomes increasingly liberal as a child passes through the threshold years of 15, 17 and 18.

- Fifteen year olds can use a rifle, muzzle-loading pistol and a pump action shotgun to kill animals – unsupervised.
- Seventeen year olds can purchase firearms and ammunition. By the age of 18, most restraints not applicable to adults are lifted.

The Home Affairs Committee Recommendations

In July 1997, the newly elected Labour Government announced a fresh review of the existing gun control measures, to follow on from the curb on handguns that came in the wake of Dunblane. Children and firearms was a key area that would receive special consideration.

The job of reviewing the evidence and producing recommendations went to the parliamentary Home Affairs Select Committee (HAC). Its first hearings were held in December 1999. Those who gave evidence included the main police representative organisations, the British Shooting Sports Council, the National Farmers' Union and the Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals. A further consultative session in January 2000 heard from the government's own 'independent' statutory advisory body, the Firearms Consultative Committee.

The Government's Response

A series of recommendations relating to young people and guns came forward in April 2000, to which the government responded but on which it has yet to take action.

The government accepted that the lowest age at which a young person may have unsupervised use of any lethal firearm on private land should be 16.

It 'wished to explore further' the recommendation that 18 be the minimum age for the possession of a lethal firearm and the granting of a firearm certificate.

This further exploration was to be the task of the FCC, which was originally due to report back with its final recommendations in October 2001.

The government rejected outright the Home Affairs Committee recommendation that 'at least 12 and possibly 14' should be the minimum age below which a child should be barred from handling a lethal firearm, even under supervision.

A key intervention on behalf of the gun lobby had been by the then Sports Minister, Kate Hoey, a vociferous supporter of bloodsports. In an interview in *Sporting Gun* magazine (January 2000), Hoey gloated: 'Our department put forward a case against a minimum age of 14 before you could handle a weapon, and that was completely thrown out. Quite a number of the Home Affairs Select Committee reports were not acted on...and all the other bits are subject to negotiation. It's going to be some time before the legislation will come through.'

The Firearms Consultative Committee

As indicated, a number of the issues dealt with by the HAC were subsequently handed over to the Firearms Consultative Committee for further consideration. As this Animal Aid

report goes to press, the FCC was trying to agree a package of recommendations for the government to consider prior to the current legislative session ending – probably in December 2001. It is for the government then to decide which of the FCC recommendations should be returned to the HAC, with any proposed change in the law being implemented through a Ministerial Order rather than by a vote of the whole House. The proposed timetable, however, is likely to be disrupted because of the pressure of work arising from the crisis in Afghanistan.

The FCC had not come to a decision, as we went to press, about the HAC recommendation that 'at least 12 and possibly 14' should be the minimum age below which a child should be barred from handling a lethal firearm, even under supervision.

It was also struggling to reach agreement on the HAC recommendation that the lowest age at which a young person may have unsupervised use of any lethal firearm on private land should be 16 – an HAC recommendation already accepted by government. Some FCC members actually wanted the age threshold lowered to 14 or 12.



Animal Aid abhors the shooting of any animal for 'sport'. We especially condemn the present legal position which allows a child of any age to use a firearm for 'game' shooting, and to become a target of the shooting lobby's hard-sell recruitment tactics. The government was urged by the parliamentary Home Affairs Select Committee last April to set a minimum age of somewhere between 12 and 14 before a child can use a lethal firearm. The government rejected even this modest proposed reform. Animal Aid calls upon the government to reconsider and to act promptly and decisively to keep firearms out of the hands of children.



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