

The Cutting Grass drive was a particular highlight of this shoot day at Mornacott.

Mornacott, Devon

A young shoot with strong financial backing and ambition in the county's commercial shooting heartland. **Robert Cuthbert** reports.

Photography: **Chris Warren**





Opposite page: Andrew Blowers prefers to treat his guns as guests rather than customers who come and go.
 Left: Picker-up Denise Gutteridge is one of the shoot's stalwarts, and is known for her sense of humour.
 Below: A classic example of Andrew's attention to detail is the pegs at Mornacott; each is a foot-tall log with a brass number.



I can pinpoint my first-ever meeting with Andrew Blowers down to the day – January 25, 2008. He was one of eight guests on a day I had arranged in Kent. During the course of said day, Andrew happened to mention he'd bought a place in Devon and planned to shoot over his recent acquisition.

We bounced ideas and preferences around between drives. As the light faded, we ruminated over our discussions, sipped tea and swapped numbers. Little did I know that in a few years, after an almost implausible effort and considerable outlay by Andrew, I'd be facing his birds at Mornacott.

With a glittering business career behind him, Andrew has absolutely nothing to prove, and yet, with Mornacott, he has everything to prove in a highly-competitive market and see-sawing financial climate. Although the plan is for his family shoot to be helped along by paying guests, somehow, speaking to him at length, he still manages to keep forceful business imperatives out of our conversation.

In around four years, the Blowers family have turned a tumbled-down farmhouse with a considerable acreage into a comfortable, unstuffy home and estate. During the colossal renovation project, the softwood timber, cement-based mortar and the unattractive concrete blocks used to make good the buildings over the years were replaced with



more natural materials, including oak sourced the from the previously neglected and overcrowded woodland, together with ultra-traditional lime mortar and cob. Most of the stone used in these renovations came from the quarry on their land, an asset that had lain idle for decades. A custom-built lodge to accommodate visiting parties is now on the agenda too.

Although located in the West Country's commercial shooting heartland – Mornacott is flanked by North Molton, South Molton and Molland – Andrew made clear his shoot's position in this realm whilst maintaining respect and circumspection when discussing his neighbouring venues. "A 250 bird day is where we're comfortable; that suits us – everyone's been busy enough and that sort of figure is easily managed."

Although there are a few drives on the estate that lend themselves to a warm-up or work well for the rising novice, they do have some pretty inviting contours here. Following

“Like so many other guns, the first drive is key for me; if I start with the wheels hanging off, I rarely get them back on.”

a solid breakfast and the briefing in the shoot dining room we made our way down towards the pegs at Beasley; that wonderful feeling of anticipation was blooming as the guns whispered away during our descent.

Our respective pegs were marked with easily spotted logs, a foot above the turf, with the peg number in brass. Attention to detail is important, but I must confess to having felt rather too organised and marshalled on other estates run by those who've been very successful in other spheres. Everything is taken care of, but you never feel too handled or corralled here. If Andrew looked at his watch a thousand times, I never saw it happen once.

Like so many other guns, the first drive is key for me; if I start with the wheels hanging off, I rarely get them back on. You'll no doubt agree that gratuitous, exuberant and obvious celebrations after clawing down a few corks have no real place on the British shooting field, but I allowed myself a small celebration behind some trees after the drive had finished.

Shoot owner Andrew Blowers has devoted vast amounts of time and money in his new venture.



Pausing after Beasley to compare notes and to catch our breath, looking north from the top of Clover Down, one of the signature drives, where one can see the dazzling backdrop of Exmoor and Dartmoor National Park to the south, I stood shoulder to shoulder with fellow gun Simon Hopkin. Surveying the enthralling vista and the last one or two birds coming to hand, thin wreaths of gun smoke still hung in the stillness of the valley floor as Simon leaned in and said, "Andrew really is the archetypal host, isn't he?"

As Charles Owen, the markedly youthful headkeeper at 25, chivvied his beating team into the transport, I quizzed him on how it all began for him.

"I came to Mornacott two years ago, before that I was keepering at Buriton, near Petersfield in Hampshire. I got to know Andrew through my dad, who was Garrison Commander at Bordon and a big part of the Garrison shoot where Andrew was a gun."

I suggested that Charles's career had taken a rather atypical path; it's certainly a far cry from his degree in three-dimensional design at Surrey University. "Yes, they couldn't be more different," Charles agreed. "This is where my heart is though. I've known Andrew for years and I've always been impressed with his passion. When this opportunity came to help Andrew establish a shoot here I leapt at it – not only for the challenges it posed, but

ON THE SHOOT



There were few chances for the picking-up team, led by Richard and Toby Penton, to rest during the day.

Right: Gun Stephen Mulliner tackles one of Mornacott's high birds.

to work alongside someone whose vision for the future of driven game shooting really does mirror my own.”

I suggested that having a boss with such a keen eye for detail really must keep him on his mettle.

“Andrew and I work very closely together to develop Mornacott; we don't always see eye-to-eye, but we really do trust each other's judgement and areas of expertise. Our philosophy here means that we are always striving for perfection and to welcome all-comers.”

Despite the sun hanging high and bright, the birds on Lower Cleeve did exactly as instructed and powered skywards, up and over to the dense wood behind us. My position on the left of the dog leg afforded me a superb view of the birds heading over the other guns. With the bag edging towards the 270 mark, Charles's mournful horn silenced the final drive.

Despite only 40 birds or so folding in the finale, the drive sounded like a battle. As the headkeeper emerged and mingled with the guns and the pickers-up, headed by father and son team Richard and Toby Penton, and the delightful Denise, I congratulated him on a cracking day.

As we made our way back to the gun bus, hooting at some of the oddments that made the bag, I recounted the various drives we took in during the day. If you're looking for four drives of birds resembling bees flitting above insanely high trees, forget it; it's not that type of estate. Mornacott offers shooting over 1,100 acres or so with over 20 drives to call upon, from the stunners of Lower Cleeve to the snap shooting of Hare's

Charles Owen, the young and ambitious headkeeper at Mornacott, shares his boss's vision for the shoot.



“Locally sourced-food is a huge thing with Andrew; even the sloe gin is made from Mornacott sloes.”

Holt. If you're looking for challenge and variety it's all that and more. The day I experienced was one of measured diversity and texture, and credit must go to Charles for his maturity in this area.

Guns also have praise for the food prepared by Dawn Blowers, Andrew's wife. “Locally-sourced food is a huge thing with Andrew; even the sloe gin is made from Mornacott sloes,” said one gun. Having taken substantial elevenses after the second of our five drives, we shot through, taking our main meal of ruby red beef at the end of the day - truly magnificent.

One detail from the information which Andrew sends out to guns who've taken a day with him really made an impact on me. The wine cellar at Mornacott is formidable, with prices to suit all, but what I respected was the fact that if you do choose something a little special, then the price of the perfectly respectable claret you would have been drinking is knocked off the bill. Would the average punter, shoot captain or the wielder of the biro in 'events budgets' have noticed? Unlikely - but Andrew would have. It's giving that little bit back, not kicking the back-side out of a deal, which stamped their pedigree in bold for me. 🦋