

Contents

Dedication	ii
Illustrations	vi
Foreword	ix
Preface	xiii
1. The Solway Years	1
2. Lancashire Geese	57
3. Ross & Cromarty	75
4. Greylag Country	91
5. Richard's Utopia – Ponkey's	107
6. Scottish Safaris	129
7. 'Retirement'	157
8. Back to Lytham	181
9. Ponkey's Secured	193
10. Fowling Quarters & Kindred Spirits	199
11. Goodbye Old Times	223
12. Paradise Found	239
13. The Beginner	257
14. Goose Dogs	307
Clarissa's Goose Recipe	322
The Vicar's Poem	323
Epilogue	325
Instructional Index	329
Acknowledgments	333

This was to be the format. One good day per fortnight and the birds became as educated as any duck or goose in the open season. The project was abandoned and the oyster catchers allowed to proliferate.

FORESHORE GEESE & DANGERS

It was soon after losing the Lathwaite shooting that I was fortunate to gain entry to the Fylde Wildfowlers Association which had a narrow stretch of marsh towards the southern end of the Bay. It was so narrow that the chances of getting under a flight line were slender. On each side were substantial stretches controlled by the Morecambe Bay Wildfowlers Association to the north and a private syndicate to the south.

I had been on the waiting list of both fowling clubs for some time and at last entry into the Fylde organisation gave me a slim chance of bagging a dawn pink or grey. For two years I persisted, most of the time watching helplessly as gale-lowered skeins battled their way inland on either side.

Then came the day membership of Morecambe Bay fowlers arrived closely followed by a chance to join the private syndicate. I enlisted in both for the fees were modest.

I never exceeded more than one goose on any of my outings on these patches and, without question, the most memorable was the pink killed stone dead at a prodigious height by my then 11-year-old second son William. I had been out at morning flight on the two previous mid-week dawns without firing a shot in the light winds. The third day, a Saturday with Will off school, the forecast was for a strong westerly. The birds would have the wind across their starboard beam and they could be low enough.

Will had been keen to use his Grandpa Fred's goose gun for a while. He was a lanky lad and the stock – built to fit his short forebear – was close enough in length for him to handle comfortably.

I placed him slightly ahead of me in view and to my left. The first skein came directly over my hole but I reckoned they were a touch too high. Did not want to teach the young fellow bad habits and I was pleased when he also resisted giving them a barrel.

The second lot came in at the same altitude but this time over Will. My 'Too high' shout was either unheard or went ignored and a single shot brought the third bird in line slanting out. By the time it slumped to earth it was stone dead. I sped over to check that it was going nowhere but for

the time being it was in an inaccessible spot.

The rest of the flight passed wide and Will's shot was the only one between the two of us that morning. Together we hurried over to where his first goose lay on a mud bank on the far side of a gutter. So deep was the mud that there was no reaching the bird by fording the creek and I instructed Will to tuck himself in to the bank opposite his kill while I made the mile-long trek inland and out again to retrieve the bird. It was the perfect opportunity to instruct a beginner into the perils of marsh and mud. In those times redshank were still on the shooting list and Will spent a happy 20 minutes trying vainly to bag a few with game sixes.

The goose lay in a hollow of liquid mud to one side of a hard ridge. I was able to traverse 20 feet along its upper limit and reach down to grab a wing. I pushed my stick into the ooze to demonstrate to my young charge its peril. A step onto this morass would have meant almost instant submersion.

Very soon after this outing there was a grim tragedy on the banks of this very same creek, though further out in the Bay. It outlined, in an horrific manner, the dangers awaiting the unwary on what, from a distance, appeared to be a harmless vast stretch of clean sand.

Two local teenagers were racing their trials motorcycles on the sands. The lads were both around 15 and as they were on private land they could legally ride there without breaking any highway laws. One of them strayed too close to the edge of the gutter and was thrown from his machine when the vehicle's wheels sank into the glutinous sludge.

Unfortunately the lad tried to retrieve his machine and became trapped. The rescue services, including the fire brigade, were called but nothing could be done. Frantic efforts were made to extract him but the relentless tide swept in and he was drowned next to his helpless would-be rescuers.

Since then, and as a direct result of this horrific tragedy, the local rescue services have a revolutionary system whereby the mud can be forced away from a victim by air and water pressure.

QUICKSAND

I was prompted to include this piece about the dangers awaiting the unwary on our marshes by an article in the 29th September 2005, edition of The Times newspaper. The headline read, 'Science sinks the myth of a slow death in quicksand.'

Lancashire Geese

However, the scientists of the Ecole Normal, in Paris, were delving up the wrong creek. There really is something called quicksand which, as its name implies, acts quickly. I suppose the scientists of that illustrious place of learning were looking at the general dictionary definition; 'A deep mass of loose wet sand that sucks anything on top of it inextricably into it.'

The scientists claimed that the object would not keep on going down. It would merely be held in its grip. Any experienced wildfowler will tell you that this is not real quicksand. In quicksand you just keep going. I could, when I was fit enough, take you to an evil patch of the stuff on the channel side of the River Ribble wall far out on the marshes off Warton in Lancashire.

My pater had warned me against setting foot on the seemingly solid surface but, one day while in a daydreaming state, aged about 16, I fell into its clutch. On the north side of this particular marsh the mud is glutinous and deadly in parts but is easily avoided. If you have any doubts while traversing such terrain, merely avoid stepping anywhere unless it bears old footprints.*

As I topped the channel wall on that day and left the thick stuff behind, there appeared to be solid clean sand at its seaward foot. I stepped boldly into the sand and, frighteningly, shot downwards almost as though in pure water.

Pivoting violently, I flung my arms back on to the substantial rocks which comprised the wall. By then I had plunged up to my waist with no

*Footnote: Paternal Grandpa Will (born 1875) one of a long line of Lytham Marsh marauders was often heard to cynically say, 'Believe nothing of what you hear and half of what you see!' Certainly the latter could have been applied to two incidents which happened to me on the Ribble. Both involved footprints in the mud.

I was fooled totally one February morning after dawn flight by the first set. They led to the main run and I stepped boldly into the racing water at low tide only to go in waist deep. The prints had been made by a fowler who was using a punt to cross the run when it was in flood!

The second set were so odd they had me totally mystified. They bore only one footprint at such a long interval that they appeared to have been created by a giant. They also stretched over what was a seemingly treacherous terrain where from time immemorial we were told not to venture.

When I recounted what I had seen to the next monthly meeting of our fowling club it caused great mirth. It transpired that one of our committee members had been caught out by an early tide and had to swim for it. The single bounding print was where he had kept thrusting a foot downwards to spring his way into a short breast stroke till he reached *terra firma!*

Geese!

sign of bottom beneath waded legs. The gun barrels were scratched, but mercifully undented, and, having successfully arrested my plummet, I laid the weapon carefully on the sloping wall. A heave had me safely back on to the security of the stones and I went about the task of brushing off the thick gritty sand. Little had entered my waders since my immersion had been but brief.

A close observation of the surface of the sand showed a distinct change in its consistency compared with the adjacent terrain. Where the greedy maw had tried to trick me it stretched for perhaps 20 yards. I hunted the wall until I found a trapped length of driftwood. It was all of 10 feet and disappeared from view as I plunged it down through its seemingly innocent surface. I somehow felt that the covert sinister mouth actually smacked its lips and the slap of an incoming roller against the wall sounded horribly like a belch!

But what to do if you do become trapped in thick mud? I am pleased to report that due, undoubtedly, to my early training, it has never happened to me. I have it on good authority, however, from one unfortunate, that your release is best secured by falling onto your back and, with gun behind elbows, easing yourself to safety.

Another peril, just as deadly to the unsuspecting, are treacherous tides particularly when combined with adverse wind and torrential rain. Many are the stories of inexperienced fowlers perishing on the marshes all round our coast line when caught in such conditions.

The simple facts are that gale force winds can stem the flow of an ebbing tide which then mixes with floodwater from inland. We have two tides in 24 hours and when the next surge occurs, the height of the combination of fresh and seawater can climb many feet above the predicted level.

Often on the Solway we were forced to go in over the tops of our waders to retrieve our anchored boat when the waters were held back. But we always had the safety route inland over the private Rockcliffe Marsh where not even the most zealous of gamekeepers would have had the temerity to effect an arrest.

Similarly we always kept a weather eye on conditions on the Ribble marshes where devastating floods in the 1920s caused such havoc. On that day the tide should have been tiny. At 22 feet it was 10 feet below a spring tide but it actually inundated the town.