

Still Waters

Deep in the heart of the South Hams perched on the shoulder of a small hill is a large farmhouse with views over copse and coombe towards Loddiswell Village. Visitors who manage to make their way up an unmade lane that winds its leisurely way into the yard will be greeted by a polite Devonian of few words. He might not thank me for saying this but this man has a quietness about him that tends to lead you to overlook the fact that he actually quite a passionate and determined individual.

Graham Mulligan, a joiner by trade from Salcombe has lived at Heath farm with Ann his wife and their family for 32 years. Graham is a well known trainer and breeder of the English Springer Spaniel, the versatile working dog and consummate all rounder of the shooting world.

To say that Graham seems at ease in the South Hams countryside is an understatement because when you watch him working his dogs in the fields that surround his farm you can't help but get the feeling that you're actually watching something that is somehow *not on* the landscape but is *part of* it. It seems as if it is entirely natural that he and his dogs should be there.

Graham was introduced to shooting in his early teens and remembers 'going across the Kingsbidge estuary in a boat to go rabbiting with my Dad and Uncle in the summer, returning at dusk after a great day out with a string of Rabbits over my arm' such memories must be very precious to Graham because his Dad sadly

died of Leukaemia when he was just 14-year-old.

When he was 15 he started an apprenticeship as a joiner 'for a great local firm J.C. Murch and sons' which eventually led to him setting up a small building business which has provided him with a good living all his life.



It was his wife (they have been together now for 45 years) Ann who suggested that he take up shooting again when he had to give up playing Rugby because of all the injuries he had collected. Not long after that he 'bought his first Springer Spaniel after seeing an advert in the Western Morning News and with some knowledge gleaned from visits to the West Dartmoor Working Gundog Club trained it on Salcombe football pitch'.

Graham was encouraged by a growing fascination with the challenges of moulding a young and lively Springer into something that's biddable but he wasn't truly smitten with the 'training bug' until he observed the skill exhibited by the experienced

trainer and breeder Rupert Hill one-day on Dartmoor.

Graham was spellbound by how well trainer and dog worked together, the control of the trainer and urgency and speed of the dog's response deeply impressed him. You could say that this moment changed his life because he has dedicated a large part of the rest of it to perfecting the art of breeding and training working dogs. In doing so he has earned the respect of all who know him and his work.

Shortly after seeing Rupert Hill working with his dogs Graham went to his first Dog Trial. It 'was little more relaxed back then, less competitive, more like a social gathering. You'd all meet up; have a few drinks catch up with old friends. I've trialed all over the place - New Forest, Yorkshire Scotland, Wales - it becomes a bit addictive after a while'.

His first success was a merit at a Novice Trial with a bitch called Cleo of Hayle, then came her offspring, a black and white bitch called Berryroam Gossip, this was the first dog to show the real potential necessary to win an 'open stake' which gives the handler a run at the Kennel Club Championship held each year. Gossip was successful at the 1981 championships held at Welshpool in Powys getting a diploma of merit which I could see proudly hung on the wall.

Anybody that has owned and worked with a Springer will tell you that each dog has a distinctive character and qualities that can be nurtured. They are the most endearing animals with boundless

enthusiasm and the extraordinary ability to work all day and still have the energy to make that last extra special retrieve that leaves you breathless with pride. An expert like Graham can spot that extra spark that makes all the difference to a working dog.

One such Dog was 'Craigfelin Dai, a brilliant worker that just had something different about him, this dog was so competitive quick and daring. He got two open stake wins which gives a dog the Kennel Club title of Field Trial Champion (1987) Dai was a once in a lifetime dog and lived till he was 16 by which time he had long retired to become a keen gardener with Ann.'



In 1985 Graham was invited to become a judge and he tackled this new challenge with his characteristic (and quiet) zeal. He travelled all over England, visiting some magnificent country estates, judged in France and was invited to judge two Kennel Club Championships in England, as well

as one Irish and two Danish Championships.

Graham looks back on his trial days with pride and has many fond memories of these times having seen places, and met people that he would never otherwise have encountered.

Our conversation moved on to the changing times in the world of championship dog trials and rural pursuits. 'The trial scene is changing, there are more professional trainers about now, and of course, dogs are changing hands for a lot of money and this brings with it a new set of expectations and disappointments and the same is happening to shooting as well, if you are some merchant banker on a big corporate day that has cost you a lot of money you will have a set of expectations and disappointments that are out of tune with traditional values that we have had in the country for hundreds of years, as I said money always changes things, usually for the worse.'

For health reasons, Graham and Ann now escape the British winter heading for the Canary Islands each year leaving their daughter Karen, supported by husband Stephen, in charge of the farm. She incidentally, is following in the family tradition, and has started to breed working Dogs (Labradors).

It was obvious to me that Graham has lost none of his fondness for the South Hams, the Dogs, the sport or the way of life he now leaves behind each year, indeed as we neared the end of the interview, he looked a little wistful for a moment 'When I look back at what the sport has given me, I've made

so many friends, seen so many different places and got so much satisfaction from getting a little puppy and training it. It's a journey I wouldn't have missed.....'



He stopped and a silence followed, but I don't really think words were necessary because we both understood. That is what I meant when I suggested the reader not be misled by the quietness of a man like Graham, his reputation and achievements are evidence of his determination and his silence was proof of his passion.

Run deep