

Simon Emeny pursuing a fast crossing pheasant on the Ice House stubbles.

# Lees Court

## ESTATE

### KENT

*Running an estate is very much a team game. This gem demonstrates not just ambition to field a good team, but delivers it in all its enterprises, not least its shooting.*

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Considering the variety of shooting estates in the UK, very few of them can boast the ownership of their own bits of ocean, but this is just one aspect of the Lees Court Estate that sets it apart from the normal run of things. What other estate has its own creep of breeding giant sulcata tortoises or is home to one of the biggest hordes of Bronze Age artefacts yet discovered or harvests its own handpicked oysters? In fact, pretty much every aspect of the estate is unusual yet its shooting is as traditional as one could wish for.

The Lees Court Estate has been home to the same family for more than 700 years and in its heyday extended to 85,000 acres. Changing priorities in management over the centuries have seen it consolidate to 6,900 acres today, its core being the 2,700-acre block of conventional agricultural and forestry land surrounding the family home of successive Earls Sondes. In addition to this and more unusually, the estate also owns a further 4,200 acres of inter-tidal coastal mud and waterways below Mean High Water Mark that make up the Swale Estuary and Faversham and Oare creeks facing the Isle of Sheppey on the north Kent coast.

It was into this favoured corner of England that the late Earl, the fifth in his line, had brought his newly married Countess 32 years ago and introduced her to the varied enterprises and often surprising eccentricities of rural Britain. Among these was game shooting, a passion of the Earl that took full advantage of the topography

of his rolling acres, from its open valleys to its stands of established ancient woodland, a combination of sporting possibilities that he and his keepers had cultivated assiduously over many years and to very good effect. Those who shot there in the Earl's time agree that Lees Court always delivered a day to remember, from the presentation of its birds to its comprehensive hospitality, so when the Countess Sondes became the steward of this ground on the death of her husband in 1996, those who didn't know her might have expected her to cash in her chips and move back to her native US.

**“Those who didn't know the Countess might have expected her to move back to the US. But they would have sadly underestimated her.”**

But they would have sadly underestimated the resolve, love of the land and invention of the lady. Resolve to maintain and improve all the better things that the estate had to offer, a love of the countryside and its ways and invention of new and interesting enterprises to move it gently forward into the next decade. Twenty-two years later, the product of her thinking is plain for all to see and relies throughout on the advice of people who have become an integral part of the Lees Court team. Strutt & Parker's Rhodri Thomas has been a mainstay of the shoot's development, overseeing the involvement of

Holland & Holland in the early days before deciding to bring the management in-house for better control of all its aspects. Liz Roberts, estate administrator and PA to the Countess, has been in post for most of the time of change, and Shayne Dean, headkeeper for the past nine years, has been integral in bringing the plans to practical fruition most recently. Together with the Countess, they make a formidable group of talents with a common aim of delivering excellence.

### Wonderful grounds

In the Kent Downs Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty and ranging in height between sea level on the marshes to around 105m inland, soils range from higher-yielding Hamble and Coombe series glacial drift in the north to thinner soils over a chalk base in the valleys, where there is the most woodland and pasture. Five hundred and fifty acres of woodland are mostly native broadleaf varieties featuring oak, ash, beech, hornbeam, field maple and, inevitably, hazel and sycamore, with limited stands of firs. Aside from his keepership, Shayne has a particular interest in the ecology of the estate and has happily watched the development of a more commercial forestry plan which he says has made a huge difference to the shoot with progressive widening of drives and creation of flushing points, managing the fall-out from ash dieback felling and re-seeding helped by mulching the sycamore stumps, but all with an eye to improving presentation.

The estate sees around 650mm of annual rainfall, but has no natural ground water so getting water to the pens relies on polyethylene pipe, which has a fatal attraction for squirrels; fatal to the pipe, ▶





that is, not the squirrels, though a goodly number meet their maker every year as part of a progressive vermin management policy. As the keeper says, "Relations with our three tenant farmers are very good and with much of the estate land managed in-hand, I have a fighting chance of getting enough cover crop sown in the right places each season. Currently our 35 acres of cover are made up of maize and Oakbank partridge mix, though chicory and canary grass have been used and there are still signs of volunteer borage as a hangover from its previous commercial cropping. Winter wheat and oilseed rape feature among the 1,900 arable acres with spring peas, calendula and echium and we leave spring-cropped land over winter stubble to enhance habitat and cover for wildlife, with peas or non-food varieties used as break crops."

### Purdey bronze

Shooting takes place over around 2,000 acres run as two beats with 18 primary drives. The estate hosts 27 let driven days of 150- to 350-bird bags, the majority self-let on reputation, referral or re-booking, plus two beaters' days. Again, the underlying strength of a team that regularly works together to deliver best practice and best sporting presentation and a bronze at the 2013 Purdey Awards rather suggest that the estate is getting things very right. It is likely that any shoot day will see the same 20 to 25 beaters in the line and six pickers-up behind the Guns so there is a demonstrably well-oiled cohesion born of practice as they go silently about their business. Hosting is regularly shared between Liz and Hugh Digby-Baker, who both have intimate knowledge of the ground. It was a full house on the rawest of November days when we visited, with Hugh hosting, Liz working her dogs and the Countess keeping a weather eye on proceedings ▶



Shoot host Jonathan Neame among the trees at Falcons.



before bracing up the birds at the end of each drive. As she says, "There is no better way of monitoring our progress than taking an active role."

### Surveying the field

The team shooting on this day were regular visitors to Lees Court, some local and some from much further afield, but clearly knew the lie of the land as they began their action on Stocking Wood, one of a number of drives in the base of the long grassy valley that runs north/south along the spine of the

estate. In a miserly three degrees ambient, with an easterly wind and regular rain showers beating across the valley, standing well back on the slope behind and above the Gun line with the whole drive in view felt a little like Wellington must have felt as he surveyed the field before hostilities commenced at Waterloo. Tapped in from both sides of a long stand of trees and flushed over a strip of laurels, a succession of high, curling pheasants presented the Guns with testing shooting from the off, dealt with in some style by Miles

Templeman on the left flank, Chris Pattinson below him and Simon Emeny in the middle of the line.

Team host Jonathan Neame had watched the action with his wife Lucy and Dolly the Border terrier, but on the second drive at Ice House, further up the same valley though on the opposite side, he became fully engaged. In a day and age when most Gun lines appear to favour over-unders, this line mostly showed side-by-sides and their host shot high, fast birds elegantly with a classic Purdey, sporting a notable cast. The Ice House is but one of

**Chris Pattinson helped organise the day and was in action on the first drive, Stocking Wood.**



**Miles Templeman awaiting action.**



**The Countess Sondes.**

a number of noteworthy subterranean archaeological features on the estate as is the Chalk Pit, which gives its name to the third drive of the day. The front rank of Guns pegged in a gentle arc along the perimeter of stubbles with the back line beyond a small lane and in some trees. Beaters had tapped in from far back and their efforts brought forward covey after covey of smartly moving partridges that proved challenging, before the big battalions of pheasants rose and towered over the Guns, seeking the woodland beyond.

Guns took their elevenses, served by the estate butler, in the ubiquitous chalk pit, while beaters and pickers-up occupied the higher

ground, before decamping a short distance to the first of the woodland drives, Falcons. Beaters walked through the tree belt moving the birds quietly up the valley side before Guns pegged along an open ride and around a clearing at the base of a long grassy vale. Flushing back down the bank from whence they had come, with most of the leaf off the trees birds could be picked up quite well ahead, but progressively gained height making for some classic snap shooting.

The penultimate drive, Badgers Earth, had the beaters bringing in a high bank with trees atop it from the right to the flushing point in the centre of an open valley floor. Early birds made

a break for it across the valley and were handled very proficiently by Mickey Davies, who confided that a previous back problem had incentivised him to shoot from a seat, before he gained full upper-body mobility. From the way he was swinging through fast crossers his recovery was clearly complete. To his left, Andrew Turner was dealing with tall overhead birds and at the whistle, the team left for the final drive of the day in high spirits. On a thoroughly dank day whose end resembled something between crepuscular and stygian gloom, New House delivered as it always does and produced a remarkably fine final flourish where Steve Goodyear, Kevin Georgel and





Hugh Digby-Baker, who ran the day, leads the team into the Falcons ride.

Mickey Davies ended proceedings with a masterclass of selectivity on some of the highest birds of the day and the team went to the lodge with 314 pheasants and 18 partridges well accounted for.

**Innovation everywhere**

That the Countess has totally embraced the English countryside and stewardship of the estate is a given, but her dedication to making Lees Court not just a fine shoot but the most innovative estate in Britain is a high bar, as she explains.

“Many estates talk of diversification and innovation, but I see the estate in an holistic way with every one of our eight enterprises interlinked for the betterment of all the others and we try to think outside the box on everything. We have a proactive relationship with the Kent Archaeological Society and it is important to me to find out more about the history and heritage of Lees Court and the discovery of

the Bronze Age hordes has been very exciting. Our water frontage also offers intriguing insights into local history and we have everything going on from wildfowling on the marshes, rejuvenation of the creeks, maintenance of the moorings, through oyster farming, to accommodating the power line from a vast offshore wind farm array coming ashore over our mud.

“Our farming is sustainable and very productive, we have an ongoing 10-year integrated forestry programme including leading a project to re-establish disease-resistant elms in Britain, the Lees Court Education And Research Network (LEARN) that has worked with more than 40 groups and organisations seeking to bring knowledge of the countryside to the next generation, our pioneering work in non-food cropping, our wonderful giant tortoise breeding programme and, of course, our shoot.

“When we decided to go forward as a commercial shoot, we researched the market and what Guns might look for and settled on showing very traditional sporting days giving a sense of history and replicating the type of shooting and hospitality enjoyed by my late husband. What we offer is the fine



Estate administrator Liz Roberts.



Keeper Shayne Dean is now in his ninth season at Lees Court.

detail and style that creates the sense of occasion and it is this detail and provenance that brings teams back each season. The Americans have an expression ‘to get the ox out of the mud’ and I am fairly confident that we are past that and well on the way to harnessing the beast to pull us through the next decade and beyond.”

Diligence and breadth of thought are steadily transforming the Lees Court Estate into a showcase for

modern diversified agriculture and sustainable shooting, led from the front by a lady who doesn’t mind getting her hands grubby; it is an engaging and successful mix. 🦌

For more information on shooting opportunities at Lees Court Estate contact tel. 01227 731331 or email: office@leescourtestate.com



New House produced great birds to end the day.

**The knowledge**

*How to get there, where to stay and what you’ll eat.*



TRAVEL	STAY	CATERING
Lees Court is 60 miles by car from central London, easily accessed on the motorway network via the M2 or M20, and at around 40 minutes from Eurotunnel and seaports, it is ideally placed for European visitors. Faversham railway station is handy, as is Ashford International for the Eurostar. The estate has a helipad and both London Gatwick and Biggin Hill airports are on hand.	Kent is blessed with accommodation at a full range of prices. Reads in Faversham has stylish rooms, fine dining with a great wine list (reads.com) and Wye near Ashford has the choice of The Wife Of Bath with its Spanish influence (thewifeofbath.com), the New Flying Horse, a good Shepherd Neame establishment (newflyinghorsewye.co.uk), or the dog-friendly Kings Head (kingsheadwye.com).	Lees Court is blessed with a resident chef of great experience and demonstrable prowess and his lunches are a gastronomic joy. As one might expect game features prominently in season, but locally sourced meats, fish and crustacean all hit the button, as do great mid-morning elevenses. Everything that comes out of the kitchen is freshly prepared and accompanied by notable cellar offerings.