

Sorn Castle

SHOOT AYRSHIRE

What do you want for Christmas? How about a castle in the snow, fine pheasants, fantastic food and great company? It can be yours...

WRITTEN BY: WILL HETHERINGTON | PHOTOGRAPHY: BOB ATKINS



On the shoot

Sorn Bank is the signature drive with the Castle sitting proudly in the background.



When we think of shooting in Scotland the mind tends to wander towards the

Highlands, hours and hours north of Edinburgh and Glasgow. But we don't have to go that far to experience classic Caledonian sport, as anyone who has been to Drumlanrig or Bowhill in the Borders will already know. So when we got the opportunity to visit little-known Sorn Castle in Ayrshire we were delighted to explore this very accessible part of the country. It's only half an hour from Junction 12 of the M74, that marvellous motorway which carves through the Southern Uplands of Dumfries & Galloway as it links Cumbria with Glasgow.

And don't worry, that half an hour from the motorway is more than

enough to convey the necessary sense of remoteness which is essential to the charm of shooting in Scotland. We arrived in the dark on a winter's Friday evening, so we didn't observe the full majesty of the castle overlooking the River Ayr charging below until the morning. However we did benefit from the warmest of welcomes from owner Jamie McIntyre and agent Nick Wright, the special glow of a log fire and an instantaneous gin and tonic.

The castle has been in Jamie's family since his great grandfather Thomas McIntyre bought it in 1903. And the family still use it as a private residence today, although it is let out for weddings and shoot parties at weekends. While it is unmistakably a castle, Sorn benefits from not being too big and therefore also feels like a home. None of the rooms are so cavernous

that they don't seem cosy when they contain a team of guns discussing everything from high birds to low politics. The dining room sports a smoking balcony overlooking the river Ayr as it crashes below. The snooker room has enough space for everyone to have fun, but it's not so big you can lose someone in the corner. And the main drawing room manages to feel simultaneously grand and comfortable.

The point I'm making is that should you and your shooting team find yourself holed up here for a couple of nights you will not only feel very special indeed, but you will also get the sensation of ownership for the duration. And enabling customers to feel like invited guests is the ultimate aspiration for any commercial venture in this market – just ask the big shoots and country-house hotels.



Sorn Castle provides the sort of weekend shooting accommodation that dreams are made of.



Thrilling shooting on The Cleuch drive.

The gods of entertainment

As we enjoyed pre-dinner drinks, the whole team gradually arrived from their various outposts in the UK, as with any Friday night shoot gathering across the country during the season. The broad grin on each of their faces as the memory of their journeys faded was a sure indication of the warmth and impact of the welcome here.

When dinner was served in the wood-panelled dining room, fresh Scottish langoustines were so good we couldn't stop eating them. Why would you? I mean there are times in life when you just have to accept you are in the right place at the right time. As the evening continued in the same vein, with well cooked fresh local food and plenty of fine wine, the Gods of entertainment must have really thought we deserved a good night. Because through the heavily paned windows it soon became apparent that thick flakes of snow were falling hard and fast all around the castle...

Who wouldn't want to go for a shooting weekend in a Scottish castle and be treated to the sight of snow falling outside, as the crackling log fire warms the cockles within?

“I wasn't aware of well-known ghost Green Jean, but I was heavily sedated by food and wine.”

The bright light of day

After an evening like that I found my giant bed in the oak-panelled bedroom more than comfortable as it swallowed me up. And I wasn't aware of well known ghost Green Jean making an appearance [see p29], but I was heavily sedated by the food, wine and ambience. It was only at 8am the next day when I became aware I also had the stunning view over the River Ayr

and the parkland from my windows. It turns out my room also had a secret doorway or two, leading to all sorts of unknown parts of the castle. I'm telling you – I was in heaven well before we got to the pegs.

But, after a typically Downton Abbey style breakfast (gentlemen serve themselves in the morning, you know) we gathered on the gravel in front of the castle to draw pegs and begin the shooting.

The shoot is spread out over some 8,500 acres and currently accommodates 15 driven days, with typical bags between 150 and 250, and 20 rough shooting days a season. Headkeeper Josh Gee has a keen sense of humour and a gentle manner that belies his determination to provide challenging sport for any lucky visitors. He is assisted by underkeeper Tommy Welsh. There has been a shoot here for many years, but it has been run in its current format since 2014. It's predominately a pheasant shoot but there are partridge and plenty of good ►



Factor Nick Wright is a keen shooting man.



Jamie McIntyre's great grandfather bought Sorn Castle in 1903.

rough shooting with snipe, woodcock and duck ponds.

On this day we enjoyed six drives on varied terrain. The first two (Brocklar and Blairmulloch) took place on snow-covered sheep pasture fields and suffered from a complete lack of wind on a still and beautiful morning in south-west Scotland. But there's nothing wrong with a gentle start, and it was clear that even a slight breeze would have got the birds curling here.

After a typically genial elevenses break we moved on to Dykeneuk, which was more of an adventure as it meant almost the whole team crossing a reasonable-sized stream. On a cold winter's morning the prospect of an impromptu dip was not too tempting and thankfully all the guns made it unscathed. The drive produced a handful of challenging shots as birds sped over the narrow clearing, and it

was becoming apparent we were in good hands with the picking-up team, which is always a pleasure to witness.



Excellent pickers-up ensured every bird made it into the bag.

After Dykeneuk there was a complete change of scenery with a return to the castle and its stunning parkland for Sorn Bank. This is very much the signature drive and guns reach it by crossing the iron pedestrian

“On The Cleuch drive the pheasants launch off the edge of a precipice.”

bridge over the river Ayr. They then line up in a giant semi-circle around the base of the wooded hill to the front and with their backs to the castle. It's a long drive and produces plenty of shooting for the whole line, with those towards the middle and



The beaters' wagon is something a bit different.



Headkeeper Josh Gee.

the right seeing some quintessential high parkland pheasants. In this sort of terrain the birds are in view for a long time and it can be hard to get an idea of their speed as they appear to be gently cruising. However, the guns on this day did not seem to have too much trouble and it was an extremely content team which retreated back over the river and up the hill to the castle

for lunch at the end of four varied morning drives.

Afternoon show-stopper

Lunch lived up to the high expectations which had been built the night before and it was a struggle to lever the team back out into the cold afternoon for the remaining two drives; however they would prove to be worth it...

The Walk is a well-stocked drive which any shoot would want in its armoury as it delivers a steady stream of birds in even the stillest of conditions. The sport is pretty well spread out up and down the line and on this day it really prepared the team for the final drive, The Cleuch. It might sound like a hungover local clearing his throat after a heavy night, but this drive

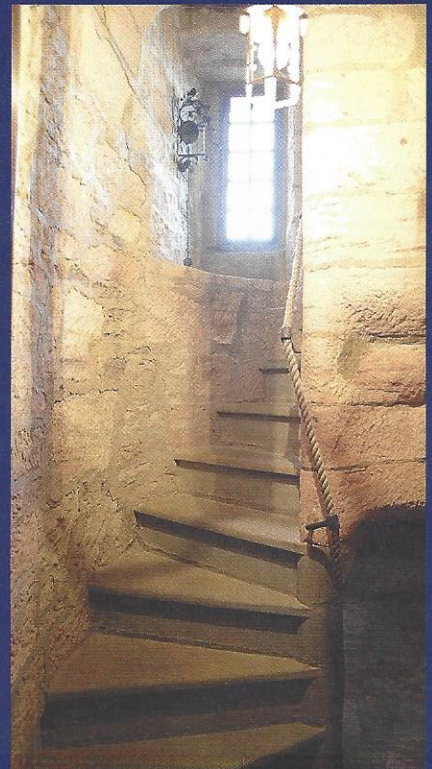
Ghosts and special forces

Originally acquired in 1903 by Thomas McIntyre, great-grandfather of current owner Jamie McIntyre, Sorn Castle has remained the family home ever since. Originally built during the reign of Edward III, the listed building dates back to as early as the 14th century. Since that time the castle has seen many owners and there have been a number of additions over the years. The last expansion was completed under Thomas McIntyre's ownership in 1908. Apart from the main reception rooms and bedrooms, the castle also has a few surprises such as secret doors and staircases (pictured), and of course the odd ghostly inhabitant.

In fact Sorn Castle has been well known for its ghosts

for hundreds of years. Green Jean is a beautiful lady's maid from the 18th century who makes periodic appearances, and Ned the nightwatchman keeps guard over the Castle. Meanwhile Margaret lives on the servant's staircase and over the years there have been many sightings of all three, but the current custodians can assure you that they are mostly friendly.

The castle and grounds also played host to the SAS who were billeted here during World War Two, and much of their part in the fight for the bridge at Arnhem was planned while they were there. This was the action which was subsequently immortalised in the film *A Bridge Too Far*. ■



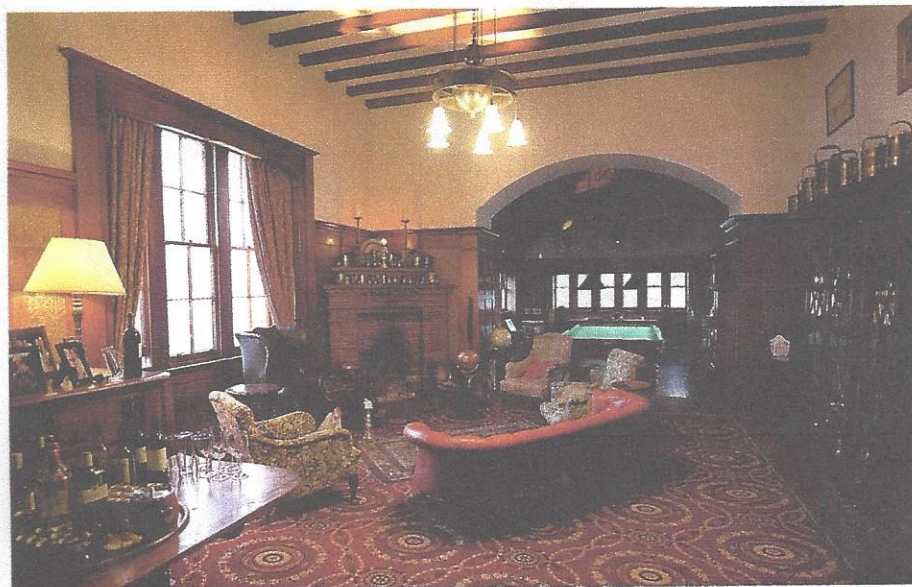
On the shoot



reassuring to see the excellent picking-up team and their dogs working swiftly and efficiently to account for all the birds shot here.

Sorn Bank may be the signature drive at Sorn Castle but with others like The Cleuch at their disposal, this shoot is able to mix things up between the traditional parkland and farmland shoot and something a little wilder. The final bag on this day was 211 pheasants, six partridges and one woodcock.

“This shoot mixes things up between traditional parkland and something a little wilder.”



This castle is just perfect for you and your team to have a memorable shooting party.

offers something a lot more enticing than that. It is reached via a steep path down to the river bank, so that's a clue there might be some decent birds to be had. Old Chinese proverb say: steep bank mean great shooting!

This whole area has been recently cleared of most of the trees, which on the one hand makes it look like a scene from the trenches. But on

the other it means the guns have an increased chance of seeing some of the pheasants launching themselves off the edge of the precipice above. And they do launch and then hurtle overhead to provide thrilling shooting, especially for those guns placed lowest right down by the water. Behind the stream the land rises quickly and is heavily wooded so again it was

Estate factor Nick Wright was a gun on this day and he provides a steady overseeing hand in the development of the shoot. As a passionate shooting man he knows it's already a good shoot but is well aware of the potential, and there's a possibility of something extra too, as he told me: “We want to establish new drives and increase the number of days' shooting. But alongside that there is a long-term vision to regenerate the grouse moor, which has not been shot since the 1980s. To that end we have already reduced sheep numbers on the moorland and a burning program has been started.” Exciting times indeed in this special corner of Scotland. 🦋

The shooting costs £32 plus VAT per bird and a team of eight guns can stay in the castle, fully staffed and catered including drinks for £2,250 a night (there is a £40 catering supplement for non-shooting guests).

For more information contact Nick Wright on 01659 58697 or email nick@stanleywright.co.uk

Excellent elevenses



FOXDENTON

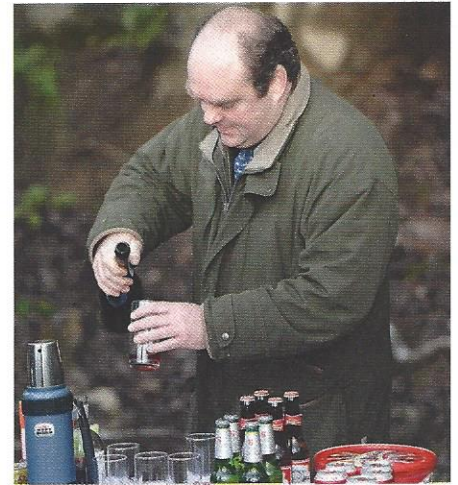
Est. 1935

In association with Foxdenton sloe gin



In keeping with the rest of this hospitable shoot, elevenses at Sorn Castle in Ayrshire are something of an event. Here castle owner Jamie McIntyre helps to serve the soup in this picturesque setting.

Factor Nick Wright serves the swing enhancer.



A good shoot day is all about pace and timing – it can't be crash, bang wallop all day long. And the elevenses break comes as the perfect opportunity to stop and reflect on the privilege of spending a day in the field. So in recognition of this most excellent of sporting traditions we have teamed up with Foxdenton, makers of traditional drinks for the perfect elevenses and famous for their Goliath bottle, to select one shoot to feature in excellent elevenses each month.

And our winner this month is Sorn Castle shoot in Ayrshire. This tremendously atmospheric

shoot is only half an hour's drive west of the M74 to the south of Glasgow, but a visit here feels like stepping back into the Edwardian era of the shoot party. The catering generally is exceptional and elevenses stick to the theme. As you can see from the pictures they have the right spot for the morning refreshments, taken after the second drive. It's sheltered, picturesque and ever so slightly haunting. And it's even better on a cold day when the hot soup, warm pies and a sharpening swing adjusting drink all combine to keep body and soul together until lunch back in the castle. ■

WIN A BOTTLE
AND SHOOTING FAME

Do you want your shoot to feature in excellent elevenses and win a bottle of sloe gin? If so just send an email to Martin Puddifer with no more than 250 words and a few pictures about what you serve at elevenses. We will choose the winner every month and feature it on this page.



Game recipe of the month

Roast duck, orange & pistachio yoghurt

Ingredients

- 2 oven ready wild duck
- 500ml natural yoghurt
- 2 fresh oranges (peeled & segmented)
- 100g shelled pistachios
- 50g butter
- Cornish sea salt
- Milled black pepper

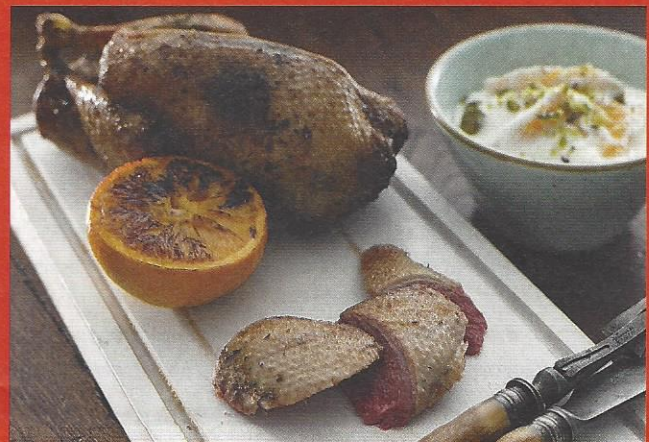
Method

Score the duck breast with a knife. Season the duck and sear in a hot pan for two minutes each side.

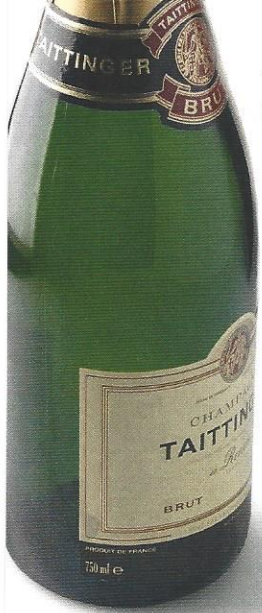
SERVES FOUR PEOPLE

Place into a hot oven and roast for six minutes at 220°C. Remove from the oven, add the butter and baste for two minutes then allow to rest for 10 minutes. The legs might need longer but the breast should be pink.

Mix the yoghurt, oranges and pistachios together and season well and place into a bowl. Place the duck onto a serving board. Serve with the orange and pistachio yoghurt. ■



Lee Maycock is the development chef for Game-to-Eat (gametoeat.co.uk)



General gallery

Shooting gallery

For your chance to win a bottle of Taittinger Champagne for Picture of the Month, send us a team photograph or a picture of something unusual from your shoot. Send high-resolution images or prints with captions to Shooting Gazette Gallery, Time Inc (UK) Ltd, Pinehurst 2, Pinehurst Road, Farnborough, Hampshire GU14 7BF or email: will.hetherington@timeinc.com.



This team of guns enjoyed a splendid shooting trip to Sorn Castle in Ayrshire. For a full report see pages 24-30 of this issue. Also pictured is castle owner Jamie McIntyre's Bizzarrini racing car which made a brief appearance on the day.



PICTURE OF THE MONTH



Pictured are John Frank and Charlotte Stacey on their first day's game shooting together at Badnocks Farm, Southminster, in October when the bag was 206. It was clearly a very happy occasion and we thought a bottle of bubbly was in order for sharing it with us...



This was the team on an October day at the Gatacre & Four Ashes Shoot in Shropshire when the bag was 96 partridge and 25 pheasants. From left: Ray Wassell, Jose Strong, Tony Head, Brian Head, Nick Spragg, Lee Foster, Alex Orpett, John Farrier, Alan Ball, Ali Snelson & James Atkinson.



The ladies of Scottish Shooting Club Glad Rags and Cartridges Bags took to the stands at Findrack Sporting Estate in Royal Deeside for an afternoon tea clay shoot for ladies of all abilities of shooting. Pictured are Megan Hollis, Shelley Tait & Catriona Mackison.