

Smoking guns: at Ballynatray

Pheasant are the silliest birds imaginable and it's easy to accept that they look best on a plate. All the same, I'm happier that the missiles flying over my head are clays and not the real thing. At Ballynatray estate, the birds stalk the avenues like resplendent peers of the realm, which is what they are until November. And then comes doom. But that's not the atmosphere up here in the parkland, where the woods slope from the fringes of the meadows to the Blackwater several miles below. Further up the hill and hidden from sight is the trap, the device which flings cylindrical clays into the air in arcs replicating the flight, if not the flurry, of the pheasant. Stuck into the shining grass are the pegs, white markers for each gun.

We are the guns. This is a simulated driven shoot, one of four spread through the estate that, like Ballynatray House itself, has been renewed by Henry Gwyn Jones and his estate manager Neil Porteous. The landscape, again like the house, is impressive. But it doesn't take more than a few salvos from the traps before house and landscape are lost to the thrill of shooting, even if the targets are not actual birds. The killer instinct may be diluted by the fact that there is no carnage, but is replaced by an increasingly fierce determination to blast that black disc out of the sky. A surprising number of us are willing to try, an equally surprising number are able to do it.

As a bloodless sport, a simulated drive is hard to beat: it combines skill with weaponry, hours spent in green, grassy sunlight with like-minded company and, in our case, the guidance of a group of experts. It is led by shooting instructor Tom Leahy, with Tony Keane, who trains in the sport, and Martin O'Riordan. The latter is a former plasterer so skilled in his management of shoots that he is described as "an ornithological alchemist", who is able to conduct driven flushes over the guns as if they were orchestrated. That's for later in the year, but for this facsimile event they tutor our group of newcomers with care and good humour. The ear-plugs are handed out, the eye-glasses provided, the guns broken and explained, the stance arranged, the purpose of the second gun for each peg made clear. We are told how to minimise the recoil, how to aim high but not at random, how to step into the shot and how "not to turn around".

Parties are organised to shoot at four different areas of the estate, with a competition before the last drive of the day. Corporate events can be arranged, with lunch in the walled garden, walks along the causeway to the seventh-century island abbey of Molana, or to the ancient salmon and sprat weirs, for which Ballynatray has been given a restoration feasibility study grant. It all takes a bit of doing, especially in November when up to 6,000 birds have to be driven towards stands of 10 guns. For this more than 20 beaters are required, with intelligent dogs which can pick up the spoils on shoots which average a bag of 150 to 200 birds. Accommodation is available in pristine and well-stocked cottages, the Love Nest and in the romantic boathouse.

Among the great houses of the Blackwater, Ballynatray has a long history, from Norman invaders to Penelope Smyth, daughter of the house and princess of Capua through her Gretna Green marriage in 1846 to Carlos, son of the king of Naples. Thinking of these shades of the past as I negotiate the bird-ridden avenue, I hear the raucous shout of a cock pheasant, rampant in his coat of many colours. Just you wait, I think to myself. Just you wait until November.

Ballynatray Estate is near Youghal, Co Cork. See ballynatray.com, tel: 024-97460/97899. **Mary Leland**



Mark Smith, winner of the Vodafone World of Difference competition

TRUE CHARACTERS

I left my job of 15 years, setting up fashion shows in Paris, London and New York for a job in my home county of Meath because . . .

through the World of Difference programme I got the opportunity to work for a year with my chosen charity. I was project arts officer with Navan Resource Centre and RehabCare.

I thought I'd messed up the World of Difference interview when . . . I spilled a bottle of water on one of the judges, Ray D'Arcy, but luckily it didn't go against me.

Working in the fashion industry . . . was frenetic.

I've a background in graphic design but because I was working with small labels I got pulled into everything, from lighting to music to photography.

I love working in fashion but the main thing I miss about Paris is . . . decent crème brûlée.

Working on arts projects with people who have disabilities . . . is a complete eye opener. You walk into a room and the warmth is almost overwhelming – people wanting to tell you their stories and make a connection, there is no falseness or hidden agendas. Over the year I've worked with people who are blind or have learning difficulties or Acquired Brain Injury and that warmth has been a common thread.

I don't know why art seems to be a key to unlock certain people . . . but it definitely is. There was one service user who was very withdrawn but who really opened up when we started a project that was painting the four seasons on the walls of a relaxation room. On the first day, he disappeared for hours to paint a robin on a tree but it was hidden away behind a door. After two weeks he had done a fox on some ferns and it was the first thing you saw when you walked into the room. He hadn't talked much in seven years but now he was telling staff all about it. That was really satisfying.

Community arts is not . . . just about making puppets and papier-mâché. I think the work



we've done has shown people that it can compete with any other art.

One of my favourite projects . . . was creating giant kites which we flew over the hill of Tara (above). There was one participant who had a dislocated shoulder but it didn't stop him. He kept falling down and getting up again. It brought out the kid in him.

I still get calls . . . from my colleagues in fashion. Even though my World of Difference year is over I will continue doing what I am doing and have no plans to go back to fashion full-time. There is one designer friend, Sharon Wauchob (creative director for Ali Hewson's fashion label Edun), who I'd like to help out with shows in the future.

I think the death of the Celtic Tiger . . . has been good for community groups and given them more of a voice than they had before.

People should enter the World of Difference 2011 because . . . it's a way to do meaningful work and make a positive difference in your community. It's been a brilliant year.

For more information on Vodafone's World of Difference programme, visit vodafone.ie/foundation/world-of-difference/. The closing date for applications is September 10th

In conversation with Róisín Ingle

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