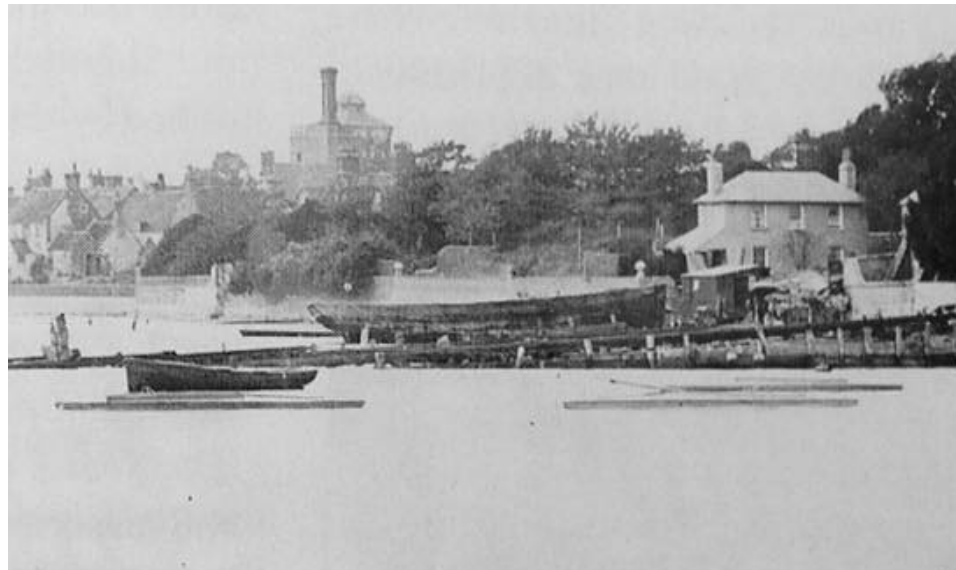


Punt Gunning in Emsworth Harbour

by Steven Borland*



Three low-lying punts can be seen in the foreground moored in Emsworth harbour

A little documented aspect of Emsworth's maritime history is the gunning punts that were once moored along the foreshore, and were employed by local fishermen to stalk the wildfowl that over-wintered in the harbour. Punts moored in the creeks and rythes of the harbour were a common sight throughout the 19th century, with a significant number of professional gunners earning at least a partial living from gathering the wild birds.

In 1503 mention is found of the abundance of wildfowl in Chichester Harbour, in particular the value of wildfowling 'at a little isle called Fowlie Hill' – this is the same Fowlie Island located off Emsworth foreshore. In the 17th and 18th centuries there are occasional references in the inventories of both Emsworth and Bosham fishermen, to 'guns' or 'fowling pieces'. In 1684 Richard Hedger of Emsworth was recorded as owning a gun, and in 1754 Joseph Bethall of Emsworth, mariner, had 'one sea-fowling gun'.

Punt gunning flourished in Emsworth Harbour for over two hundred years and was mentioned in 1799 in Walter Butler's *Hundred of Bosmere* (published in 1817) in which he records:

"... a fowler came from Dover and resided with his wife and family in a sloop near Pilsey Island. He ventured out with his little boat (gunning punt) and explored the various fowls... his boat being just sufficient to contain him at full length ... his instrument of destruction was nine feet in length, it rested upon the stern of the boat and carried a pound of shot 150 yards with certainty. In one winter he earned £100."

This extract appears in various forms in other publications (though it is unlikely that a gunner would be able to kill ducks at 150 yards, more likely 150 feet). The extract illustrates that this was a commercial gunner, a so called market-gunner, travelling to earn a living indicating that it was a viable source of income and enough to support a household at the time.

Achieving a successful shot

Punt gunning is a precise and extremely tactical, stalking pursuit which requires an expert knowledge of the tides and the channels and mud banks that lie beneath

Continued overleaf

* Author: Mud Pattens in the Morning – A History of Wildfowling in Chichester Harbour



Modern punt on the Emsworth foreshore

the surface of the water, especially as the tide rises in the harbour. Understanding the habits and movements of wildfowl, together with the vagaries of the weather and light, plays a significant part in the proceedings. The punt is manoeuvred whilst the gunner is lying prone behind the gun. It requires a high level of fitness and seamanship, as well as field craft, to approach the birds. To achieve a successful shot the punt must be within approximately 60 yards of its quarry. This is not easy and it is unlikely that a gunner will achieve more than one shot in a day. In addition, the fortnightly tide cycle can mean that only two or three days a fortnight are suitable as bad weather can render outings untenable because the punts have very little freeboard.

Punts vary in design throughout the country but are broadly similar in that they are canoe-like in shape. They are usually low boats between 19 and 23 feet long with little freeboard. Depending on the size of craft, one or two people lie prone in tandem, one behind a large single gun. The local punts are long, due to the length of the stanchion gun, and they are fast. All are sculled towards the birds, except in shallow water where a short pole is used. All have rowing spurs mounted on outriggers, as the hunting grounds are

large and a good row from home. Some punts had a sail that could be rigged. Punts are difficult, sometimes impossible, to handle in rough seas. They are poled or sculled in pursuit of their quarry. By law, they cannot and never have been propelled by use of a motor.

Accidents and escapes

Punt gunning is inherently dangerous as revealed by a press cutting from the *Hampshire Telegraph* of 17th August 1881:

"A man named Prior living in South Street Emsworth experienced a remarkable escape whilst in a punt for the purpose of shooting wild ducks in the harbour, the gun burst and was blown to atoms. The punt, in which the man when firing remained prostrate, was also reduced to atoms and a can of powder on which the man was lying was also blown away.

Prior who in his fright precipitated himself into the water escaped without any injury whatsoever and was eventually picked up by another fishing boat. The gun in question weighed over 1cwt and its charge was 1lb of shot and 1/4lb (pound) of powder. Both gun and punt were property of William Leggett who is now deprived of one of the means of earning a livelihood".

Another accident which Harold Pycroft, a master market gunner from Hayling Island, witnessed as a boy, concerns an Emsworth-based gunner 'Nanny' Dridge, so-called because of his nanny goat beard. It grew in this fashion when, after one winter's day spent resting his chin against the breech, Dridge found he had become frozen to it and on pulling away he removed not only the hair, but the skin from his chin! He was killed later when, pushing on the punt's gun to get the punt off the mud stern first, the gun which was old, discharged as the hammer worn through use dropped unexpectedly and a full load of 2lb of shot tore his arm clean off.

In 1892 there were fifteen active punts in Chichester Harbour. These men were market-gunners earning a living from wildfowling. In Havant Museum, there is a nine foot long duck gun which was constructed by James Pycroft. It allegedly belonged to, and was used extensively in Chichester and Langstone

Harbours, by Alan Atkins. His punt was often moored close to The Ark; the structure built by Fosters of Emsworth for storing oysters and other shellfish.

The late Linda Newell of Emsworth Museum recalled being told by Harold's son, Noel, that Pycroft's punt gun was often loaded with stones and gravel for a scatter effect. However, other gunners are firmly of the opinion that this is no more than a myth, and that it is unlikely any punts man would so mistreat his gun, added to which, loading cartridges with gravel was unlikely to produce a worthwhile shot. Although, when a shot was fired towards a shingle bank, the resulting gravel kicked up by the shot would have accounted for a number of birds, in addition to those killed by lead shot. This could easily have been the origin of the myth.

Punt gunning continues today in parts of Chichester Harbour, but it is low key and often employs a camera rather than a gun.

Emsworth Museum's Gun



Visitors to Emsworth Museum can see a duck gun displayed on the back wall of the Main Room near the emergency exit.

It is actually a bank gun which would be laid at an angle up a bank or other support. A line of them would be primed, and when game came over the harbour, the whole line of guns would be discharged using lanyards attached to the triggers. This particular gun was owned by Albert Willie Miller (1868-1938), who was licensee of the Sussex Brewery pub for many years. His son Wyndham Miller, pictured on the right holding the gun, followed his father as licensee and the gun used to hang in the cellar before being loaned to the Museum.



A small-scale model of a punt and its horizontal gun is also on show in one of the cabinets.