

Dersingham Decoy

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Sir Ralph Payne-Gallwey records in *The Book of Duck Decoys* (1886) 26 Duck Decoys in the County of Norfolk, of which five were still operating in that year. Of Dersingham Decoy he writes:

"About 1818 a Decoy was constructed at this place by George Skelton the younger, who died here. The pool was about an acre and a quarter in extent and had five pipes. No Decoy book was kept but Skelton's brother-in-law who worked the Decoy with him, stated that the average number of fowl captured each winter was from 130 to 200 dozen Wild Duck, Teal, Wigeon, Gadwall, and Pintail. Skelton was succeeded by a man named Sharp from Hilgay, and a new cottage was built for him but it is said he was not successful. Owing to alterations in drainage and drying up of the creek on which it stood, the Decoy ceased to answer, and about 1870 it was dismantled."

The suggested reason for the discontinuance of the Dersingham Decoy is probably only partly true, and had it still been a commercial proposition to maintain the Decoy, ways and means would have been found to keep water there. (No water was pumped into the pond in 1965 or 1966 when the water table was considerably lower than in the mid-nineteenth century.) Figures from Borough Fen Decoy show that the price of duck fell greatly during the nineteenth century (Cook 1960, *Wildfowl Trust 17th Ann. Rep.* : 118-22). If 165 dozens is taken as the average annual catch, about £330 would have been realised in 1818 when the price was 39/10 per dozen. By 1830 the price had fallen to 17/7 per dozen, yielding only £144 11s. 3d. from a catch of the same size. Ten years later the same quantity would have made £138 17s. 6d. The price remained low until the war in 1914 and by then all but a handful of Decoys had gone out of business.

Reference to the deeds of the property reveal that the Rev. J. W. Bellamy was the owner in 1867 and, on his death in 1874, it passed to his son who, when he died in 1909, left a Life Interest in his lands to his sister Mrs. Tylden. She died, aged 103, in 1928 and the estate—a considerable one—was then sold. The purchaser subsequently auctioned it in lots and the Decoy and 134 acres of marshes then came into the possession of the present owner, Mr. J. E. A. Lambert.

The Decoy pond was then much overgrown and there was practically no water in it. The pond was mudded out by hand in the early thirties, when the island—a non-traditional feature—was formed with the spoil. By 1937-38 it was in good order with about the right amount of reed cover. Without feeding, large numbers of Mallard and Teal, up to 1,000 at times, congregated there during the day. There were probably more ducks in the district then than now, and certainly less fresh water available to them.

The Decoy was reasonably maintained, but during the second world war the surrounding land was ploughed up, and has remained so. The drainage was also considerably improved, lowering the water table still further and necessitating the installation of a dam and flap to retain water. In some seasons it was also necessary to pump water into the pond to maintain a working level.

The East Coast flood of 1953 washed away the dam and filled the pond with silt and rubbish, and it again had to be dredged. In the Netherlands the same floods destroyed Schouwen decoy, which was entirely rebuilt at government expense (Matthews 1958, *Wildfowl Trust 9th Ann. Rep.* : 142-53). No serious attempt was made to conserve wildfowl whilst the surrounding fields were let to a tenant but in 1960 the adjoining land came "in hand" and it was then that the possibility of reinstatement became a practical proposition.

At a meeting between the writers the pro's and con's of building a pipe were discussed. In 1963 a cage trap was built in order to discover the trapping potential of the Decoy. This was a permanent construction six feet wide and fifteen feet long and took 139 duck in the first season. In the autumn of 1964 a second trap was constructed and the total catches for three seasons are detailed below.

Table. Catches of ducks at Dersingham Decoy.

	1963/4	1964/5	1965/6	Totals
Mallard	131	55	78	264
Teal		50	30	80
Wigeon	8			8
Shoveler		1		1
Gadwall			3	3
Shelduck			1	1
Totals	139	106	112	357

From these ringed birds 71 recoveries have been reported: 52 Mallard, 15 Teal and four Wigeon. The recovery percentages of 20, 19 and 50 are higher than those for other English ringing stations probably because of high "shooting pressure" locally. Two of the more interesting recoveries were a Mallard in the Eure region of France 22 days after being ringed, and another in a Dutch Decoy on 14th January 1964 having been ringed 20th December 1963.

In 1965 the restoration of the South pipe was begun. The channel which showed where the original pipe had been situated was almost completely overgrown with vegetation. Some of the Elders were fair trees, and a tractor was required to remove the heavier ones. A mechanical digger cleared out the debris and silt, shelving the bank on the screen side at the same time. The backwall bank was graded by hand later.

The little end was lined up and railway sleepers used to provide a revetment and a base for the conduit hoops, obtained from a local scrap yard. When working on this little end Skelton's original timbers were unearthed. Having built the little end of the pipe the more exacting task of bending one and a half inch water pipe to form the hoops had to be considered. This was achieved by trial and error, and no preconceived mathematical formula was used. The first hoop needed 39 feet of metal pipe and this was bent between two trees until a reasonable symmetry was obtained. Then all that was required was to bend subsequent hoops, each two feet shorter than the previous one. Each hoop was held vertical with string until lined up and then concreted in position. The stringers were fabricated by windlassing 12 gauge single strand fencing wire between each hoop. Five separate wires

were used from the big end to the sixth hoop and thereafter three to the little end.

Net was fitted in July 1966 and screens, endwall and backwall completed the pipe. The screens were constructed in the traditional way with common reed *Phragmites communis* packed between six cross members and held vertically by three or four uprights. The same technique was used for the backwall but willow trimmings were used instead of reed.

On 3rd September 1966 an informal opening of this refurbished pipe was held, attended by some twenty people including the Hon. Director of the Wildfowl Trust, Mr. Peter Scott, and Mrs. Scott, Dr. G. V. T. Matthews, Mr. R. E. M. Pilcher and representatives from the Nature Conservancy and the Norfolk Naturalists' Trust. Although there were several duck on the pond the disturbance was too great to enable a catch to be made.

By the end of the 1966-67 season 343 ducks had been taken, either by feed or resting on the banks, as no dog is used. The Borough Fen Decoy "Piper" was tried in late October. Although 30 Teal came to the mouth of the pipe they could not be enticed into a catchable position. It is intended to reinstate the north-west pipe this year.

The Decoy wood and its adjacent reed beds have proved a popular habitat for other birds, 78 species having been identified there in 1966. These include Short-eared Owl, Kingfisher, Lesser Spotted Woodpecker and Bearded Tit. Over 100 nests of 20 species were recorded.

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