



Gun ho! Bisley Ladies Days are popular with women of all ages and all walks of life (above)  
Below right: the cosy, Victorian clubhouse. All images courtesy of [www.trishgant.com](http://www.trishgant.com)

# Babes at arms

Clay shooting at Bisley has a female edge these days.  
**Fiona Adams** joins some of the hot shots at Ladies Day

**W**hen I was growing up, my dad who was a farmer, kept his 12-bore shotgun in our downstairs loo. Standing guard like a sentinel, it was always near to hand if a fox threatened our chickens. It also served as a silent, but unmistakable, warning to my potential boyfriends!

Despite its accessibility, the gun was strictly off limits to a young girl and to be honest I was not remotely interested in giving it a go. To me guns were toys for the boys and shooting a male-dominated pastime.

These days, of course, gun security is much more strictly governed. And it is not the only thing that has changed about the sport. More and more women are taking up shooting, competing side by side with men – in practice and in competitions – often more successfully.

Bisley Shooting Ground, set in 3,000 acres of the National Rifle Association shooting centre at Brookwood, near Woking, specialises in sporting clay shooting, which simulates game shooting. It actively encourages women to join and has seen its female membership rise to around 20%.

Never one to pass up an equal-rights opportunity, I decided to put my adolescent prejudices aside and, along

with fellow editor Catherine Whyte, I headed to Bisley, to its bi-monthly Ladies Day event, to find out what all the fuss was about.

Arriving at the Victorian clubhouse, elegantly decked out in forest greens and tartan, and furnished with squashy sofas and stuffed game birds, we were greeted by 20 or so ladies keen to convince us that we would soon be hooked.

*“It’s a very nice sport for ladies,” says Jackie Kenny from Cobham. “I come to every Ladies Day and I find Bisley is a very welcoming club. It feels refined here. The clubhouse and facilities are lovely.”*

Sally Tunley, a local mum who works at Garson’s Farm, in Esher, first caught the clay shooting bug a year ago, when a friend gave her a free lesson.

*“I feel pampered when I come here. The surroundings are beautiful. It’s not a cheap hobby, but I absolutely love the satisfaction of knowing when I’ve got it right. You can’t think of anything else except for hitting that ‘bird’. My family think I’m having a mid-life crisis. I know I’m not. It beats yoga!”*

Lesley Macdonald, from Mytchett, wants to dispel the prejudices about gun clubs being stuffy and for moody loners.

*“There are certain negative views surrounding guns and people who shoot.*



*There’s the idea that it’s elitist, but it’s really not like that. Everyone is very friendly and encouraging.”*

Armed with shoulder padding, ear plugs, and careful instructions on stance and how to hold, aim and fire, we set off in a group of five to try out the 20-bore shotgun. Instructor Sarah White set us five ‘stands’, all varying in degrees of difficulty, and one by one we took our turn.

Emma Tonkins, a full-time mum of two from Woking, who has only been shooting for five months, soon dispatched most of her clays. The rest of us followed, a little more hesitantly it has to be said. However, with Sarah’s humorous, but accurate

advice (“rest your cheek on the handle, cuddle your gun, don’t throttle it; think of your husband!”) furrowed brows were quickly replaced by smiles as we all managed to avoid complete humiliation.

Jackie, who began shooting with her husband 18 months ago, assured me that by the end of the morning I would “hit something.” She told me under no circumstances was I to “over-analyse my shots” if I missed. Needless to say this was easier said than done, especially as when I did hit a clay, I wasn’t entirely sure how I’d done it!

As our skills improved and shattered pieces flew above our heads, it became obvious that clay shooting is a sport that quickly gets under your skin.

For me the breakthrough came when I stopped thinking about my technique and let instincts kick in... and I realized that keeping my right eye open might help.

Each stand varies in distance and speed. Some fire “driver” or outgoing clays, which fly away from you, while others fire “decoys” or in-coming clays. Hitting the elusive flying saucers is very addictive and the sight of the smithereens in the sky has the joyful satisfaction of – as ex-teacher Anne Nash put it – “smashing plates in a taverna”.

The two and a half hours of shooting and instruction are sandwiched together with elevenses and a two-course lunch in the clubhouse. Bisley has the use of two grounds – Cottesloe Heath and Long Siberia – with more than 70 stands.

Despite the pop, pop, pop of the shotguns, it is surprisingly peaceful as heather, heath and woodland stretch as far as the eye can see, making the location



Instructor Sarah White supervises Sheengate editors Fiona Adams (above) and Catherine Whyte (below) as they shoot their first clays



## ***“Rest your cheek on the handle; cuddle your gun, don’t throttle it – think of your husband!”***

ideal for shooting. Even the occasional rabbit bravely hops into view.

Sarah, who has been shooting for 12 years, and instructing for five, teaches all ages and all levels.

“It really is a sport for everyone, and men and women can compete on the same level,” she says. “It’s a social thing, you have a laugh and then it becomes a bug.”

“We have young guns days, for 12-year-olds upwards; our stands are wheelchair accessible and we even teach the visually-impaired.”

Back in the clubhouse, it is clear that Bisley does indeed attract all-comers, ranging from full-time mums, to retirees and romantic novelists. Some travelling

regularly from as far afield as the south coast and north London. All enjoy the camaraderie and the thrill of hitting the target.

As writer Norma Curtis from Highgate sums up, it offers a gun culture without violence and a great place to meet and make friends.

“You can’t be mad to own a gun – the police wouldn’t let you,” she laughs. “You have to be level-headed. There are only sane people here!”

■ Bisley Shooting Ground, Bisley Camp, Brookwood, Surrey, GU24 0NY. Tel (01483) 797017 or visit [www.bisleyshooting.co.uk](http://www.bisleyshooting.co.uk). The next Ladies Day is Mon, Nov 15. Price £85 (non-members), incl. breakfast, morning coffee and two-course lunch.

