

T H E
G R E A T
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Craftsmanship is in the blood of the gamekeepers of Holkham Estate in Norfolk, England – from the tools they use to the land and game they steward. *Onelife* takes a bespoke Range Rover SVAutobiography commissioned by British gunmaker Holland & Holland on a tour of the grounds →

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We arrive at Holkham Hall, seat of the Earl of Leicester, in late October. It's rutting season amongst the estate's 400-odd fallow and red deer. A low sun enflames autumn leaves. Pheasant and partridge browse in the long grass beneath the trees and the steady calm of the high season's end has descended. Visitors will not return until Easter and the estate's five gamekeepers – led by headkeeper Kevan McCaig – are readying themselves for the shooting season. Some 40 shoots will take place through the winter months at this renowned estate – the site of the first recorded driven shoot.

THE PERFECT COMPANION
 A single piece of French walnut is used for all the woodwork in a Holland & Holland Range Rover. This ensures that every veneer matches perfectly. It's then polished to resemble the oil-finished stock of a Holland & Holland shotgun. It's just one bespoke element of this Land Rover Special Vehicle Operations project that pairs two companies with a rich heritage and commitment to craftsmanship. It's only natural, then, that they should have come together to collaborate on the perfect sportsman's vehicle.

According to the annals, the Earl's gamekeepers arranged for game fowl to be driven into the small copse of Scarborough Clump in 1877. After lunch, the Earl and his guests went out and bagged the birds as the beaters drove them into the air. Today, McCaig and his team focus on sustainable practices that ensure the entire biodiversity of the estate can thrive – alongside a healthy population of game birds and deer. It's a very intimate job. The team is close knit and stewards its environment with studied care.

Early on the morning we arrive, with the mist still clinging to the hollows by the lake's shore, McCaig has the unhappy task of pulling two red deer stags from the water. They had locked antlers in a tussle during the night, couldn't separate themselves and dragged each other down. It is a tragic accident, the first of its kind that McCaig has encountered. He is an inscrutable Scot from the Dumfries and Galloway coast who has worked the estates at Alnwick Castle and Sandringham. His gamekeeping is highly regarded. He has led royalty on shoots and his knowledge of partridge rearing is award winning.

The loss of two stags can be disruptive to the herd. Each male has his place in the hierarchy and during →



the rutting season that hierarchy is being established. Every male in the herd is watching for signs of weakness in the opposition. It's a tense process in the natural cycle. A weakened male means another has an opportunity to take command. Since McCaig arrived at Holkham in 2011, he has been working to create a more sustainable and environmentally balanced herd.

"When I arrived the herd was around 700," explains McCaig. "They stripped all the trees and grass. Reducing the herd size increases the grazing. Now we don't need to feed them at all, except in very harsh weather. It's reflected in the carcass weights. In the past we used to get 28kg. Now some of them are up to 33kg. We're still in the middle of sorting some of the older fallow bucks out. That takes time, looking at the prickets – two-year-old bucks – and selecting those to keep. We assess the antlers, looking for the most even sets."

An estate is an artificially controlled environment. The countryside often appears wild to today's urban dwellers, but as any gamekeeper knows, the only truly wild environment is wilderness – hence the name. An estate is managed nature. Deer numbers must be monitored and carefully maintained, but they are only the most visible sign of wildlife. The gamekeepers must also monitor chick numbers among the game birds and the small nesting birds. These can be affected by the weather, but also by farming practices and predators.

"I do the Waterden beat at the south end of the park – there's two tenant farmers, woodland and partridge ground," explains Catherine Leach, gamekeeper at Holkham since 2012. "We've had three poor breeding seasons because of the weather, but they'll make a comeback. If the birds get cold and wet when the eggs are hatching and the chicks are young,

they die. They also need insects for the first couple of weeks of life. We have margins with wildflowers and what the farmers would see as weeds – but these offer insects a place to breed. These are called 'conservation headlands.'" Predators also have to be kept at manageable levels so that the whole ecosystem can thrive. "Every day, traps and snares must be checked by law,"

says McCaig. "It doesn't matter whether there's snow, ice or sunshine. Every day. They'll be checking them for foxes, stoats, weasels and rats."

The gamekeepers must go out in all weather, often working on quad bikes or on foot with their dogs. They usually rise before dawn and are not home until after dark. Each has their beat, an area of the estate, woodland and farmland that is their responsibility.

" GAMEKEEPING IS NOT JUST A JOB, IT'S A WAY OF LIFE "

STEPHEN HERRIEVEN

It can be a tough and solitary job, but there's also camaraderie. Everyone you meet locally is in some way connected with the running of the estate. It's like one very large, extended family.

Two of the keepers – Martin Joyce and Stephen Herrieven – have served the estate for 20 years apiece. As Herrieven says: "Gamekeeping is not just a job, it's a way of life." Such continuity is the stuff of which such great British estates are made. McCaig explains that all three of the younger keepers – Catherine Leach, Joe Smith and Jake Hadley – are graduates of Sparsholt College in Hampshire, regarded as perhaps the premier training ground in the art of gamekeeping. "Not everybody's academic, but you need an element of theory," says McCaig. "They also do practical work at a small shoot on the college estate." Yet, perhaps more important than formal education is the gradual appreciation of country life gained through an upbringing around those who live it. "I grew up on a dairy farm in Berkshire," says Leach. "My grandfather was a gamekeeper in Herefordshire. I used to go up and stay with him in the summer holidays. He worked there all his life. That's where I first learnt the profession."

A similar sense of contentment pervades Holkham's keepers. Each has their dogs – either spaniels or Labradors. "Jake will get his dog after his first year,

once he has bedded into the role," says McCaig. A certain bedding-in period is an important aspect of the role. Its completion is marked not only by the arrival of hounds at their feet, but also a bowler hat upon their head – or a Coke hat, as it's known in these parts. After a year's service, each gamekeeper at Holkham is allowed to wear the bowler – a hat that was originally invented for the gamekeepers of Holkham. In 1849, Edward Coke, younger brother of the 2nd Earl, asked Lock & Co of London to create a hat sturdy enough to protect his keepers against low branches and the animosity of poachers. The resulting hat was crafted by Thomas and William Bowler and Lock & Co supplies the estate to this day.

As with all things at Holkham, heritage is never far from the surface, but it is worn easily. This estate, whose energy is supplied by a vast woodchip burner in the woods next to the Hall and which runs conservation schemes in conjunction with Natural England and the Game Conservancy Trust, is as much a place of the future as it is one that honours the past. □

The privately owned Holkham Hall offers a variety of options for visitors. For details on tours, opening hours, accommodation and dining options, visit holkham.co.uk

Previous page: the gamekeepers of Holkham Hall with their hounds. This page, from left: the interior details of the Holland & Holland Range Rover include soft tan and espresso leather hides and a console panel inspired by Holland & Holland's distinctive forend diamonds; on the terrace at Holkham Hall