

Labour MP turns gamekeeper - and discovers the 'benefits' of shooting

By Melissa Kite, Deputy Political Editor

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One of Labour's most outspoken opponents of field sports has become an advocate for the social and economic benefits of shooting after swapping his sedentary Westminster life for a week as a gamekeeper.

Peter Kilfoyle now admits that shooting is a classless pursuit with "huge" economic benefits after his experience with beaters at Shieldhill Castle in Biggar, south Lanarkshire, one of the oldest shooting estates in Scotland.

The Liverpool Walton MP confessed that he had previously known nothing about shoots and said his week had been a "massive education". He also made the startling admission that during the 1970s he had shot kangaroos in Australia, putting him off field sports for life.

Mr Kilfoyle was initiated into country ways for a BBC television programme, *My Week In The Real World*, to be broadcast this week.

He arrived for work on the 700-year-old estate in jeans and an anorak but was soon kitted out in £700 of country clothing, including tweed cap, waxed jacket and wellies.

At the start, Mr Kilfoyle dismissed the shooting parties as "toffs" and described the beaters as downtrodden but as he got to know both groups his attitude softened.

The portly MP spent his first day wheezing up hill and down dale, stopping to light up in between hitting the ground with his stick to send pheasants into the air. He also had to haul sacks of pheasant feed and learn how to work a dog.

Mr Kilfoyle was born in 1946, the 11th of 14 children of a council labourer and cleaner. After getting four A-levels he went to Durham University but lasted only a year because it was "full of public schoolboys".

In 1985 he began work as the Labour Party organiser on Merseyside and was the scourge of the Militant Tendency. He became an MP in 1991, taking his present inner-city constituency at the by-election after Eric Heffer's death.

In 1994, he was among the first to back Tony Blair's leadership bid and after the 1997 election was made a cabinet office minister and then - against expectation - a junior defence minister. He resigned in 2000, disillusioned with New Labour, but promised to be a "critical friend" to the party high-command.

Still seen as one of Labour's bruisers, he managed during filming to pick up dead rabbits during a night of "lamping", when pests and vermin are shot. He also cut the heads off dead rabbits and put them into trapping boxes designed to catch weasels and mink.

But he froze during one shoot when a dog dropped a half-dead duck at his feet. Mr Kilfoyle radioed for help, shouting: "Can you hear me anyone? I don't know what to do, it's wounded." Eventually a member of the party arrived to wring the duck's neck. Mr Kilfoyle confessed: "It's not for me, not for me."

During lengthy discussions with his fellow workers, Mr Kilfoyle wrestled with what he felt was the moral dilemma at the heart of field sports. Pointing to his head, Mr Kilfoyle repeatedly asked his fellow beaters: "What I don't understand is what happens up here when you get a buzz out of killing something." One explained: "You put your wits and thoughts and eyes on trying to bring a bird down that is 40 yards high."

The MP protested that the countryside was riddled with class prejudice. He was shocked that, as a beater, he had to stand outside the castle in the cold with a sandwich and a Thermos while the shooting party ate three courses inside.

As the week went on, Mr Kilfoyle's objections weakened. Halfway through, he conceded: "I do appreciate the skills without a doubt. I appreciate the hard work; the economic need; that it is skilful, that you manage the countryside."

By the end, the MP said: "I really don't know how they do it. It's been a massive educational process for me. I knew nothing about shooting. I knew nothing about the background, the effect on the economy and it is massive." He also admitted that all the walking had left him "absolutely knackered".

He added: "My image was of a bunch of toffs all out for the day, Lord and Lady Muck, and that was it. But I was disabused of that in a number of ways. We had a large group from Yorkshire of ordinary working men. It is all about bonding for them. It doesn't matter if they are a bricklayer or a baronet. Ultimately it is rather classless."

Last night Mr Kilfoyle insisted that he remained implacably opposed to hunting with hounds. He told the Telegraph: "I would not have gone foxhunting because I can see no rational justification for it.

"I don't understand why people kill things for pleasure. I understand that the birds end up on the table and that they are in the food chain. But the psychology still mystifies me."

He has however been convinced of the economic need for shoots. "In Scotland all the textile mills have closed down. For many of the beaters, that is the only job they can do."

The former defence minister later explained how he came to kill kangaroos. "I was with a friend on a farm in the bush," he said. "There were mobs of the things. They were seen as vermin. We shot quite a few. It put me off shooting for life."

- My Week In The Real World is on BBC2, Tuesday at 9pm