

# COWBIT WASH



**M**Y NAME IS TYRRELL, Thomas Tyrell. Never Tom, always Tunkey. I never found out why but that's what they called me. Perhaps because of the way I set myself square and straight.

I was born in the last year of Queen Victoria's reign in a place called Cowbit, "Cubbit" if you lived there. That would make me a hundred and I don't know how many years old. I am telling you this from my bed in the green garden under the lighthouse. The lighthouse is what we called the church. It was the only tower that stood for miles around, above the fields and the high bank around Cowbit Wash. We worshipped that land mark in the dawn and the dusk and many is the time it guided us home when there was no sight of the houses behind the bank of Cowbit Wash.

I was a wild fowler. There were about five of us getting a living from the hundreds of ducks which came and settled on the Wash. The Wash flooded every winter when the Welland overflowed. There were miles and miles of open water and every year there were flocks of pintail shelduck, teal and a few geese. And every winter we would harvest some of this bounty.

Our equipment was simple. A flat bottomed punt about ten feet long, low in the water. Just light enough for me to carry

over the road from our cottage over the bank and down to the reeds. The next trip was to fetch the punt gun. A long barrelled muzzle loader which we charged with powder and four ounces of No. 5 shot. Heavy enough to shoot almost fifty yards and bring down birds. The technique involved a lot of patience and quiet movement.

*by Reg Dobbs*

We would set off before dawn, often in a light mist and paddle slowly out into the middle of the Wash with

the punt gun lying in the front of the boat, its muzzle just above the prow with me lying face down behind it. Against the cold we wore shapeless woollen coats and ragged hoods over our heads and faces.

Propulsion was by short wooden paddles or close up just by hand to minimize visible movement. The approach was the crucial thing. There had to be no sudden move, no silhouette. The boat, gun and man had to look like a log floating harmlessly across the water.

So we crept slowly out towards the middle. As the dawn broke I could see a large cluster out to my right, a hundred yards away. Steadily changing course I kept my head low and inched forwards. One or two on the outside of the flock skittered, especially at the sight of the drifting log.

It took me half an hour to manoeuvre closer. I took a steady look - about fifty

yards now, about right. Should I shoot while they were still down, sitting ducks, or let them lift off in a cloud? The decision was made for me as the nervous ones began to lift off. Quickly now, because surprise was lost, I grasped the punt gun and fired into the rising cloud. A huge bang and a swirl of smoke. The butt hit my shoulder and the boat shot back a couple of feet.

As the smoke cleared I could see that it was a good shot with birds falling around. No need for caution, I paddled towards my prey. Picking up was easy and the punt was soon loaded down to the water line. A few had to have their necks wrung but not a bad haul, about three dozen from one shot.

I turned round and paddled home, catching sight of my landmark, the lighthouse above the bank. Fifteen minutes quick paddling and I was at the bank. First the gun, then the ducks over the bank to my cottage.

In the afternoon the wagons would be along to collect the bag on their journey round the decoys and west to the Great North Road for London. Another good day before the frosts iced over the Wash.

We were the last of our breed. In 1952 the new channel took the overflow water away to sea and the Wash has not flooded since.

Now as you ride past Cowbit church, just think for a moment of those days gone by and of us fowlers waiting for the flocks to come again and to creep out through the mists of time over the wide water.

