



*Rosie Barham
discovers a top
shooting crop at
Pete's Airgun Farm*

Growing Great Guns

I found Pete's Airgun Farm eventually, and just the one hour late for my appointment with Pete Mallett, who runs it. I set off in good time, it's fairly easy to find and had I been a bloke it would have been a doddle but I do not have the male logic; neither was I blessed with a sense of direction so getting hopelessly lost was inevitable really. When friends ask why I don't invest in a sat nav of some kind, my response is that I rarely go anywhere that I haven't been before so it's not worth the expense. The fact that I had been to Pete's Farm before is beside the point entirely.

I arrived, flustered and slightly embarrassed for my tardiness but Pete was waiting for me and waved reassuringly as I pulled into the car park, indicating that I should drive to where he stood outside an outbuilding, some hundred yards away. We shook hands and I felt that I knew him quite well, already, since I'd spoken to him several times on the phone that morning while trying to find out if I'd crossed any borders.

Pete led me into the main, indoor shooting range. It was mid-week, about lunchtime and I was surprised to see three airgunners at the benches. My preconception of airgunnery only taking place at the weekends was way off the mark. Pete told me that there were no set times. 'It's not a club, so if someone decides that they fancy some shooting, they can just turn up, providing they phone or text me first to let me know they're on their way.' The guys couldn't stay long, which was a shame. I would have liked to talk to them but they had other arrangements and I should not have been late.

I asked Pete how it all started. He told me that the land was in the family, his father having successfully farmed it in the late thirties. The BSE incident in 1997 caused them to stop farming beef and by 2000, the cattle sheds stood empty. One day, while zeroing his own gun, he had a brainwave. Why not turn the empty outbuildings into an air rifle venue for others?

It would have been far more financially sensible to rent out the barns for storage. Just the one lessee involved and minimum hassle, but Pete is passionate about shooting and has been since he can remember, owning his first air rifle when just fourteen; he'd saved up all summer for it. I found that admirable. My own son 'borrowed' (on a strictly non-repayment basis, as it turned out) cash from me for his first Webley pistol. He'd bought it during a morning break swap shop and brought it home from school, swaddled in the pages of a French textbook; this was before the days of strict Health & Safety regulations, and gun crime taking off as a national sport.

Pete told me that he was always shooting around the farm, targets mostly, and he thought long and hard about how to make it viable for others. It's a working, arable

farm of 500 acres and Pete can't be with his visitors at all times so a considerable amount of organisation was required.

By 2004, with the ranges kitted out and ready to go, Pete placed ads in local gun shops and the initial response from airgunners was very good. By 2006, Pete's Airgun Farm was really up and running, and Pete stopped advertising. The farm was so successful that word of mouth was all the promotion he needed.



Pete is a great host - with a superb venue.

RANGE SAFETY

- Always assume your gun is loaded.
- Never point your gun at something you do not wish to shoot.
- Never go forward of the firing line until everyone has proved to you that they are unloaded with their gun pointing in a safe direction.
- Do not touch any gun when someone is forward of the firing line.
- Charge your gun up outside and be sure it is unloaded.

I was very impressed with the indoor rifle range. Apart from the obvious, visible aspects, there is a friendly feel to the place. For me, that's important, if you don't feel comfortable, you won't shoot well. The target distance is 55 yards; it's fully floodlit, there's a work bench for making minor adjustments to your rifle, it's heated in winter, there's background music and you can buy tea, coffee and snacks. What more could you want? It's like being at home but with the bonus of being able to shoot in a safe environment.

We walked to the indoor pistol range, next. I asked Pete why pistols were kept separate from the main area and he explained. He told me it can be easier to swing round with a pistol, and, the ever safety-conscious Pete remedied the matter by constructing separate pistol booths with screens between each one, thus minimising the risk of accident.

As stated, Pete is big on safety, and rightly so. New air gunners are given a thorough induction which covers every aspect of all potential dangers. Most of it is common sense but no one shoots without an induction and valid insurance documents. Pete has to make sure the safety rules are understood and adhered to. As he said, the whole enterprise runs on trust. He is inviting strangers onto his farm, mostly unsupervised, so he needs to be able to trust his visitors.

Outside, there's an HFT/FT area with targets out to 65 yards. I was particularly intrigued by something running up a rope. I asked Pete what it was. 'It is a rat,' he said. 'No it isn't,' I argued with the poor man. 'Looks nothing like a rat. More like a pig with a tail. Where on earth do you get your targets from?' Pete grinned. He makes his own targets. He told me that he was 'cutting out the metal rat with an angle grinder and it went a bit wrong but I just kept going.' The shooters don't mind

that it looks like a pig, apparently, despite the fact that pigs are not very agile and, as far as I know, don't run up ropes.

Seriously, the targets outside are brilliant. There is a duck, floating in a trough of water, which wobbles if hit, there is a rabbit behind bars, squirrels on poles, crows in trees, and a pipe set into a bank with a ditch in front of it, at the end of which sits a rabbit. To shoot the rabbit through the pipe, you'd have to lie down, hunter-style, in order to get the right angle. I wanted a photo of it but refused to lie down in the ditch. Pete's a gentleman. He did it for me.

There is also the opportunity to shoot vermin. 500 acres, split into separate areas so that groups can shoot without getting in each other's way. Hides are purpose-built with parking nearby and lamping for rabbits is available, with permission.

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I enjoyed a very pleasant couple of hours at Pete's Airgun Farm. Pete is a lovely bloke, interesting, informative and the perfect personality to host this kind of venue. If you fancy a trip to rural Essex, phone Pete first to arrange an appointment for your induction visit and for directions to the farm. I promise you that you'll be able to find it easily, providing you don't panic when you see a sign that says 'M11 this way' and start turning right at roundabouts, when going straight on would bring you practically to the door.

Pete will show you around the farm, check that you have the right insurance and give you the safety lecture. The induction costs £20; thereafter it's £10 per visit, no time limits and you can turn up whenever you wish, up to about 10pm, providing you text or phone Pete first and tell him that you're coming.

It doesn't stop there. There is fishing to be had, metal detecting if that's your thing, and rambling, which really appeals to me. There's also the advantage of four pubs within about a third of a mile distance from the farm. Sounds pretty good to me! And there's a loo in the farmyard - luxury!

Check out Pete's Airgun Farm website for contact details and more information on www.airgunfarm.co.uk. You won't be disappointed.

Targets on the move, Excellent!

The indoor range offers wind-free zeroing.

Bench rests undercover? MEMBER: Pete's got em.

Here's the place to practice your FT and HFT skills.