

By

Elizabeth Marsh

At this, the beginning of the outdoor season for the 3,000 or so clubs of the National Small Bore Rifle Association, thousands of men and women are trooping out to the ranges.

Until October they will be spending whole days lying on rough ground aiming at inanimate targets. The proportion of women to men in the clubs has been increasing steadily. Now it is around one to five.

Ron Russell, secretary of the association, sees this as part of a natural trend for women to participate in all sorts of leisure activities that were once male prerogatives.

He says shooting is a sport, like football, and no more threatening than darts or bridge. Since members are responsible people (given the dangerous nature of guns they have to be) there are very few accidents, hence insurance is still low.

Women in clubs shoot on equal terms with the men and can be just as skilful. "You don't have to be a big, strong person to be good at rifle-shooting," says Mr Russell. "It's all a matter of balance and co-ordination. We have quite a lot of women taking part who are very slightly built."

The Deal and District Rifle Club, in Kent, was founded in 1902; it has an indoor range in an Elizabethan malthouse off Deal's narrow High Street.



Members of the Deal rifle shooting club, from left to right: Barbara [redacted] aged 24, Christine [redacted] aged 26, Jackie [redacted] field, aged 22, and Christine [redacted] with the secretary of the club, Christopher [redacted]. Picture by ANTHONY MARSHALL.

## More gun girls are on target

It is a typical club, with half a dozen women competing with 40 or so men. Grades are X, A, B, C and D. Most of the girls are in C grade, but then so are most of the outnumbering men.

You have to be very, very good indeed to reach grade X. In friendly matches, Deal is well able to hold its own.

Recently back from their first day's outdoor shoot of the season at the Inveresk Range, Northfleet, the women were wearing the conventional gear (windcheaters with padded shoulders and

sleeves, slacks and jerseys) when I called to see them.

They laid down their arms, lightweight B.S.A. Martini Internationals or Anschütz bolt-action rifles which cost, second-hand, £120 to £200, new £350 to £450.

Barbara [redacted] a civil engineering technician, is club treasurer, and married to Chris, the club secretary, who is a teacher. Both are 24, and perhaps typical of the intelligent young people who seem to make up the membership of these clubs.

They started going out

together—and shooting together—when they were 17. Said Barbara: "Chris told me before we went to London University together 'If you want to go out with me on Friday nights, you'll have to come down to the club.' Perhaps he hoped it would put me off, but it didn't. I think you can say I'm quite committed to rifle shooting now."

Committed, and competent: Barbara is on the verge of moving up into Grade B.

An attractive brunette, she says: "It doesn't mean we're butch or anything like that. I like to tog up, wear feminine clothes when I go out. We all do."

Christine [redacted] from the nearby village is the mother of daughters aged 10 and 7. She wanted a hobby she could share with her pistol-shooting husband, a maintenance engineer.

But, says Christine: "Shooting is something you do for yourself. You are pitting your wits against yourself. It's not like fishing—a matter of whether the fish are there. It is purely you. I can't tell you how elated you feel when your score is good."

A farmer's wife, Christine [redacted] is expecting a baby in September. Already she's getting a little tubby for lying down comfortably but she is glad the doctor says she can carry on meantime.

"And I'm not getting rid of my gun," she says.

Licences are hard to come by in Britain, the club members think rightly so. Would-be recruits who have been vetted by secretary Chris must get arms certificates from the local police. This takes about five weeks, and costs £25.