



THE MUZZLE LOADERS' ASSOCIATION OF GREAT BRITAIN

CODE OF PRACTICE

For the use of

MUZZLE LOADING FIREARMS AT GAME FAIRS, SHOWS AND SIMILAR EVENTS (Issue 2)

General

This Code of Practice is issued by the Muzzle Loaders' Association of Great Britain (MLAGB) and covers the use of muzzle loading firearms for clay target shooting or blank firing displays at game and country fairs, shows, fetes and other occasions where guests or members of the public are present. This Code of Practice does not apply to clay target shoots and competitions organised by the Muzzle Loaders' Association of Great Britain, which are restricted to MLAGB members. These shoots are fully covered by the Association's established rules (Rule Book).

Appointment of a Responsible Person (Event Manager)

All MLAGB branches, members, or groups intending to participate in activities regulated by this Code of Practice shall ensure that a responsible person is placed in charge of running the event. This person shall be known as the Event Manager, who shall be an MLAGB member, qualified MLAGB as an Approved Instructor or a person acknowledged in writing by the Honorary Secretary of the MLAGB to be of suitable experience. The Event Manager shall be responsible for all preparation, administration of the event and any subsequent duties after the event. The Event Manager shall be fully conversant with this Code of Practice and ensure that its contents are correctly observed by all parties involved.

Notifications & Permissions

Prior to the event and with as much advance notice as possible, the Event Manager shall give full details of the event, in writing to the Honorary Secretary of the MLAGB (NB failure to do this could invalidate insurance cover). The Event Manager should also obtain from the Honorary Secretary a letter, specific to the event, acknowledging that this information has been provided.

The Event Manager will also ensure that all other parties likely to be affected by, or have an involvement in, the holding of the event, should be correctly notified and any appropriate permissions obtained in advance.

Police Authority

The Event Manager should apply to and obtain permission from the local police authority under Section 11 (6) of the Firearms Act 1968, should the event involve people without shotgun certificates using shotguns. Failure to do so would place the participants and the MLAGB in breach of the Firearms Act.

The police will wish to satisfy themselves that the site is safe, that the arrangements involve no danger to the public and that the event will be organised by responsible persons. Once the police have satisfied themselves that all criteria have been met they will issue a certificate in the name of the Event Manager, together with that of the Association. Included on the certificate will be the location and dates of the event. It is recommended that the Event Manager should also nominate his appointed Safety Officers to be included on the certificate.

It should be noted that it may be part of the conditions of the certificate that the shoot has to be directly supervised by a person named on that certificate.

Insurance

The MLAGB insurance scheme covers Association members against third party liability. For events covered by this Code of Practice, members of the public or guests may be covered by MLAGB insurance for shooting guns subject to the following conditions: -

- 1) A MLAGB Clay Shooting Event Emergency Action Plan / Risk Assessment is carried out for every event. (See MLAGB web site for downloadable approved Clay Shooting Event Emergency Action Plan / Risk Assessment).
- 2) An accident book is kept on the site of the event. Accident Books are available at reasonable cost from the Health & Safety Executive (HSE). See their web site for details. Any accidents / injuries however minor must be recorded. Further to this, any such entries must be notified to the Honourable Secretary for inclusion in the Association's main accident book as soon as possible after the event.
- 3) Members of the public and guests are not prohibited persons under section 21 of the Firearms Act 1968. This relates to offenders with criminal records. To ascertain this, members of the public must be asked to read a summary of section 21 (downloadable from the MLAGB web site), as below, and asked to confirm that they are not a prohibited person by signing in to an event visitor's book with their full name and address.

Section 21. Firearms Act 1968. *"It is an offence for someone who is prohibited by Section 21 to have a firearm or ammunition in his possession at any time. Section 21 applies to anybody who has been sentenced to imprisonment or to youth custody or detention in a young offender's institution for three months or more. The period for which they are prohibited depends on their length of sentence. (a) If the sentence was longer than three years, the prohibition is for life. (b) If the sentence was three months or more, but less than three years, the prohibition lasts for five years from the date of their release. It is an offence for a person to transfer, let or hire, give or lend a firearm or ammunition to someone whom he knows or has reasonable grounds for believing to be prohibited by Section 21."*

A copy of the summary of MLAGB insurance cover (downloadable from the web site) must be retained by the Event Manager on site during the entirety of the event. When required to do so, the Event Manager must give a copy of the summary of insurance cover to the organiser of the game fair / show.

Risk Assessment

The Event Manager should liaise fully with all relevant parties in respect of safety and ensure that the nature of the participation, together with an assessment of any risks or hazards are properly identified and understood by all concerned. A MLAGB Clay Shooting Emergency Action Plan / Risk Assessment approved by the MLAGB insurers must be completed and is available for download from the MLAGB web site.

Suitability of Facilities

The size, shape, contour and orientation of the ground on which the event is to take place must be entirely suitable and due recognition and allowances must be made for fall of shot (or wadding in blank firing displays), rights-of-way, public access, farm animals, safe loading areas, etc. It should be noted that the minimum safe fallout area for shot is 275 metres. Due cognisance should be taken of the likely effects of the wind on the drift of shot and the flight of the clay targets (both unbroken clays and broken fragments) and of the possible shift in wind direction during the event. The Event Manager should ensure that the shooting area will not be used for grazing of livestock on the day of the event.

Shooting must not take place over dry grass (uncut or mown) or similar dry vegetation where fire from smouldering wads etc. present a fire risk. The area must first be cleared of all combustible material and filled water buckets must be on hand to extinguish any burning particles.

Safety Officer

The Event Manager must appoint at least one Safety Officer. The Safety Officer will be an experienced MLAGB member who will be responsible for the safe running of the shoot or display. A Safety Officer shall be in attendance on the shooting line at all times when shooting is taking place. Safety officers must be fully conversant with this MLAGB Code of Practice.

First Aid

The Event Manager shall ensure that First Aid facilities are available and where they are located. The Emergency Action Plan states all the necessary information and procedure required to summon outside help for serious injuries. Administration of First Aid in the event of an injury should not be attempted by someone without adequate knowledge or experience.

Firearms

All muzzle loading firearms to be fired must be of sound and reliable condition and properly licenced. should be personally checked by the Event Manager before being used. Lock mechanisms must operate correctly with an effective half-cock position and a safe let-off at full cock.

Extra care must be taken when either demonstrating or instructing in the use of matchlocks. The presence of burning match cord should be strictly controlled. A fireproof container (e.g. a metal container with a hole large enough to take the burning end of the match cord and further holes for combustion air, mounted on a stake) should be driven into the ground in a safe position next to the firing point. At all times when not in actual use, the burning end of the match cord should be kept in this container.

The Event Manager has an obligation to ensure that unsafe guns are not used and to forbid the use of any gun that becomes unsafe during the event.

Loading Equipment

The use of a purpose built loading rod, in preference to the ramrod fitted to the gun, is recommended. This loading rod should ideally have a large ball end, to minimise the risk of it inadvertently being left in the gun barrel. It should also be marked, flush with the muzzle, when placed within a correctly loaded barrel as a simple check to the user that the gun has not been miss-loaded.

Accidental overloading or double loading of guns is most likely to happen when the loader is distracted in conversation with other shooters or spectators.

Powder flasks for dispensing the main charge should be of a Patent top design for greater safety and in proper working condition with an effective shut-off. Pre-measured charges dispensed from individual plastic or glass phials are recommended.

The loading of powder from open container or cartons is strictly forbidden.

Shot may be dispensed through a shot flask or dipper. It should be noted that calibrations on the spouts of original shot flasks are often incorrect, many throwing heavier charges than indicated.

Reloading one barrel of a double barrelled gun whilst the other barrel remains loaded is to be avoided. It is safer to fire off both barrels before reloading. However should it be felt necessary to reload just one barrel, it is paramount that the unfired barrel be uncapped or un-primed, the lock lowered to the fired position and the muzzles kept pointing away from the head and body during reloading.

Loads for Clay Target Shooting

Loads for clay target shooting must not exceed the 1887 Rules of Proof (see MLAGB web site) service load for the calibre of firearm. In large bore guns these may be considered excessive and reduced charges are recommended. Only commercially produced black powder may be used and the shot size should not be larger than English size No. 6. To avoid the risk of premature ignition from a spark remaining from the previous shot, only proprietary materials, such as felt, vegetable fibre (Kleena wads) or card should be used for over-powder wads and over-shot cards.

It should be noted that certain firearms (such as Live Pigeon Guns) are disproportionately large in calibre in comparison with their weight and were never intended to be fired with the heavy powder and shot charges indicated by their calibre alone. In such cases one should calculate a shot charge based on 1 ounce of shot per

6lbs of weight of gun. Therefore a gun weighing 7½lbs would be suitable for a charge of 1¼ ounces of shot, a gun of 9lbs suitable for 1½ ounces of shot and a gun of 12lbs suitable for 2 ounces of shot etc. The powder charge should be in proportion to the shot charge as indicated by normal service loads.

Loads for Blank Firing

Loads for blank firing must not exceed the powder charge designated in the service load for the calibre of firearm. Only commercially produced black powder may be used. To avoid the risk of premature ignition from a spark remaining from the previous shot, only proprietary material, such as felt, vegetable fibre (Kleena wads) or card, should be used for over-powder wads. The use of self-combustible paper cartridges is not permitted.

It is recommended that a fine grain black powder (e.g. TS2, FOA) is used for blank firing to ensure the powder is quickly and efficiently consumed on firing.

Loading

Guns should be loaded at a safe, designated area away from the firing point, so that the blast of ignition from guns being fired is well away from powder and caps being handled at the loading point. The loading area should comprise one or more suitable tables and they should be roped off or otherwise positioned away from public access. It should be remembered that many spectators may be smoking and unaware of the risks of exposed powder and caps on the loading point. No smoking signs are to be placed at the spectator boundary barrier.

When carrying loaded guns from the loading point to the firing point and when returning to the loading point after firing, muzzles must be pointed upwards and away from the body. It is paramount that this is observed both from the safety aspect and as an indication to all that the gun is safe. It is the muzzle loader's equivalent to carrying a breech-loading shotgun in the 'broken' position, or a rifle with a breech flag inserted.

All powder flasks (except priming flasks), powder horns, bulk supplies of powder and tins of percussion caps must be left on the loading point. Shooting while carrying exposed powder flasks or powder horns on slings hung from the body is not permitted.

It is strongly recommended that the Event Manager arranges for the provision of a gun rack where unloaded guns may be stood safely when not in use. This rack must be sufficiently sturdy and stable so as not to be easily knocked over or blown over by the wind. If a gun rack is not available a sturdy table should be provided upon which the guns may be laid with their muzzle pointing in a safe direction.

Capping and priming

Guns must only be capped or primed immediately prior to firing, with the shooter in his or her firing position and with the muzzle(s) pointing safely in the direction in which the shot is to be taken. Additional caps, cappers, priming flasks, powder flasks,

and any other material at risk of ignition from the blast of firing must be put away or safely covered before the gun is fired.

Misfires

In the event of a misfire, the gun should be maintained in the firing position for a reasonable amount of time to ensure that there is no chance of delayed ignition. For a percussion or flintlock gun this should be a minimum of 20 seconds and with a matchlock up to 30 seconds as there is a chance of a lingering ember remaining in the pan. After these periods the gun should be lowered from the shoulder and with the muzzle still pointing in a safe direction, one may attend to the lock, recapping, re-priming the pan or probing the vent as applicable, following which a further attempt to fire the gun may be made.

If the gun cannot be made to fire the Safety Officer shall give instructions for the gun to be taken to an unloading table, provided for the purpose, with the muzzle pointing down range. The load may then be withdrawn or discharged. This may comprise feeding powder in through the nipple vent/touch hole, blowing out the charge with compressed gas, or drawing the charge with a worm. Suitable tools for drawing charges from all the guns in use should be readily available at the unloading table. At all times the muzzle of the gun shall be kept pointing in a safe direction.

There should rarely be an instance where a shotgun cannot be made to fire or the charge cannot be drawn. However, if all attempts fail and the gun has to be taken away for attention later, it should be made as safe as possible separating the major parts of gun. These parts may then be placed in a secure cover for remedial attention at a later time.

If the barrel(s) can be removed from the stock (as is the case with most single and double barrelled sporting guns) it is advisable to stand the breech end of the barrel(s) in water so that any powder in the breech becomes thoroughly saturated.

Legal Obligations in respect of firearms and black powder

The Event Manager shall ensure that all firearms to be used are registered on a Shotgun Certificate.

All individuals handling black powder must be in possession of an Explosives Licence authorising the possession of black powder (Control of Explosives Licence to Acquire or to Acquire & Keep).

Whilst it is permissible to hand a loaded gun to a person who is not in possession of such a licence, that person must not be allowed to come into possession of black powder at any other stage. He must not, therefore, be allowed to handle black powder or to handle black powder in flasks.

Safety glasses & hearing protection

The Event Manager shall ensure that all shooters, instructors and trappers use safety glasses and hearing protection. An adequate supply of safety glasses and proprietary ear muffs or disposable ear plugs shall be provided.

Security

Guns, black powder and other equipment at all times should be kept safe and secure from theft or unauthorised handling. Loaded guns should never be left unattended. If members of the public wish to examine a gun the owner must first check that the gun is unloaded and then remains in attendance whilst ensuring that the gun is handled in a safe manner.

Arena Displays

On occasion, members may be requested to stage a blank firing display in an arena. This can only be accepted if there is a safe area in the direction in which the gun is to be discharged. This is to ensure that an accidentally discharged ramrod would cause no harm to other persons. The Event Manager should first decide it is safe to hold such a display and if there is any doubt the request should be declined. If a decision is made to proceed, the display must be handled with utmost care owing to the restricted safety area. Again, if the arena is such that there are onlookers all around with no safe area, then the request is to be declined.

In such events the Event Manager must exercise extreme care in instructing and supervising those taking part, ensuring that:

- a) Only light non-combustible wadding is used on top of the powder charge, or if the arena is restricted, that powder only without any wadding is used.
- b) Those taking part position themselves to make maximum use of the amount of safety area available.
- c) After loading all ramrods/loading rods are removed from the gun barrels and returned to their ramrod slots or carefully placed to one side so as to prevent them being inadvertently fired from the gun.
- d) All powder flasks and caps are put safely away before anyone commences firing,
- e) That muzzles are safely elevated when capping or priming,
- f) That guns are only fired with their muzzles elevated to a high and safe angle.

Instructions to a member of the public or guest

When allowing a member of the public or a guest to shoot a muzzle loading gun at clay targets, once should adopt the following guidelines:

First ascertain whether he or she has prior experience of handling and shooting a shotgun. An experienced clay or live quarry shooter will generally be able to use a muzzle loading gun with a minimum of instruction (although their claimed expertise should not be assumed to be proof of their competence). Anyone unfamiliar with gun handling and shooting will require careful attention in all respects.

In both cases the gun should always be loaded by the owner, carried muzzle up while escorting the guest to the firing point and only handed to the guest when he or she is on the firing point and equipped with eye and hearing protection. It is safe practice to hand the gun uncapped or un-primed to the individual on the firing point so that he or she may assume a comfortable stance and grip of the gun. They should then be asked to lower the gun so that it may be capped or primed by the owner before the gun is returned to the shoulder.

In the case of an experienced shooter one should point out the dissimilarities between a breech loading gun and a muzzle loading gun with which he or she is likely to be unfamiliar i.e.:-

- a) The stock is often shorter than with a modern gun, as the more forward balance of a muzzle loading gun (due to the weight of the ramrod and barrels being heavier nearer the muzzle) tended towards a more upright stance than is used by modern clay or quarry shooters. An experienced shooter can normally adopt his or her posture to suit the shorter stock without further advice, but he or she should be cautioned on keeping the thumb well clear of the nose to avoid bruising under recoil.
- b) The principles of the lock mechanism, i.e. that the gun as handed to them is in the half cock position and the cock/hammer must be drawn back to the full cock position before the gun can be fired. On double guns it is advisable to suggest that the guest cocks and fires each barrel in turn, remembering to change triggers between shots.
- c) The need to maintain one's follow through due to the slower ignition and not to be alarmed by the flash of ignition when using a flintlock or matchlock gun.

While the guest is taking the shot, the instructor should stand close behind the guest's shoulder both to give an opinion on the accuracy of aim and to be ready to grasp the gun should it slip from the guest's hands. This will also help prevent the guest from turning around or pointing the muzzle in an unsafe direction in the event of a misfire.

In the case of an inexperienced shooter, the instructor must spend whatever additional time is necessary to instruct the guest in stance, gun mounting, aim, swing, trigger control and the effects of recoil. Not until the instructor is sure that the guest fully understands what is expected of them should the gun be primed or capped. It is important that guests should not be hurt by recoil. Therefore, for young persons, ladies and slightly built men, the shot load should be reduced to the lowest reasonable level.

Clay Target Traps

It is strongly recommended that electrically operated clay target traps be used in preference to manual traps as the former are much safer to operate. Only clay target traps in good mechanical condition and fit for purpose should be used. Any trap that is broken, unreliable, badly repaired or inadequately maintained should not be used.

No one should be allowed to set up, operate, reload or otherwise attend to a trap unless he or she is fully conversant with the safe handling procedures and safety precautions.

At most shows and game fairs it is likely that you will be on a shared gun line. It is therefore strongly recommended that a going-away target be used for 'have-a-go' stands because, although it is not the easiest target to hit, the layout is safer to operate with both the shooter and trap on the gun line. The trap is easily restocked without causing interference to other shooting stands and there is a great deal less chance of

pieces of broken clay targets being carried by any wind onto spectators. A protective shield should be placed on either side of the trap to prevent injury from a clay target breaking as it leaves the trap. Traps should be firmly fitted in place and set to throw a regular target which does not interfere with those of a neighbouring stand.

Trappers

Most of the traps now in use at game fairs are electric but if manual traps are to be used then one or more trappers will be required. Trappers need to be well trained and the hazards of trapping explained to them. PPE such as hearing protection, eye protection and industrial gloves must be provided. When not in use all clay traps must be left in the discharged (safe) condition. Clay traps present one of the major hazards on a clay shooting layout and constant attention and checking is needed to avoid risk of injury. Before every shoot all the trappers must be briefed on safety matters, rules and correct procedures, following which the Event Manager shall check that they have fully understood the safety briefing.

The main points are:

- a) The safe (left hand side) and danger (right hand side) sides of the trap being used (manual traps).
- b) Leaving a trap safe when unattended and never to leave it cocked, with or without a clay on the arm. (manual & electric traps).
- c) Correct operation of the trap, positioning, adjusting the clay and stacking the clays on the safe (left hand side) side of a manual trap.

Trappers should be a minimum of 16 years of age and of adequate build and strength to safely operate the trap. Their duties should not be over-extended so that they become bored or tired as this may lead to negligent behaviour and accidents.

Trappers should be provided with and instructed to use, eye and ear protection. When forward of the shooting line they must be provided with a red flag with which to signal a cease-fire. They must be clearly instructed to remain behind the shielding at all times, until specifically and clearly instructed otherwise.

Under no circumstances may anyone cross the gun line into the danger zone unless given specific instructions by the Safety Officer and then only after all the shooting on the gun line has ceased and the area deemed safe. The signal for a cease-fire & resumption of fire shall be clearly determined prior to any shooting taking place and shall be agreed by all participants including other persons / organisations on the shooting line. This can be by use of a whistle, air horn or other similar device.

Firing Points

Firing points must have a safety cage which should be about one metre wide, giving sufficient room for both the shooter and the instructor and having vertical front corner posts of at least two metres high in order to stop the shooter swinging the gun across the gun line. The cage should be of robust construction and if necessary for stability, pegged to the ground.

Clay Targets

The Event Manager shall ascertain from the organiser/landowner as to what colour clay targets may be used. Black clays only are permitted on many game fair sites. Always pick up the un-shot clay targets unless you have specifically instructed not to do so. When picking up, avoid damage to any crops that might be growing in the fall-out area.

Capping-off Point

A capping-off / gun clearing point should be established on the gun line and clearly marked. If there is insufficient room for a separate capping-off point then the firing point may be used.

Dry Mounting of Guns

Shooters should be made aware that the dry mounting of guns off the firing point or capping-off point is not permitted.

Safety Signs

No Smoking signs should be prominently displayed at access points to the loading and shooting areas.

Reporting

Immediately after the event the Event Manager is to notify the MLAGB Honorary Secretary of any incidents or accidents as recorded in the event accident book. These will be recorded in the Association's main accident book. Further action by the Honorary Secretary may be required in respect of reporting to the insurance company, the Police, HSE etc.

And finally, remember

When taking part at a game fair or similar event, you are representing the Association and the sport of muzzle loading. You will be under the eyes of the general public, other shooters and other shooting organisations who may not understand muzzle loading firearms or the different practices involved in their use. Be seen to be safe, responsible and well organised.