

CLUMBERS TAKE COVER

In a century, the clumber became a massive spaniel fit only for Crufts. Can working lines be re-established with such a narrow gene pool, wonders **David Tomlinson**

IT'S easy to understand the decline of the clumber spaniel as a working gundog. During the past century, the breed standard has been changed four times, each update increasing the permitted weight. The result was a giant spaniel weighing a mighty 80lb, twice the size of its ancestors a hundred years before. The breed standard even stipulated it to be "a massive spaniel". No shooting man wants a spaniel that weighs more than a rottweiler.

Thanks to the BBC documentary *Pedigree Dogs Exposed* and The Kennel Club's subsequent Fit for Function, Fit for Life campaign, the breed standard has been changed once again. The word "massive" has been deleted and the requirement now is for a dog that is: "Balanced, well boned, active with a thoughtful expression, overall appearance denoting strength. The clumber should be firm, fit and capable of a day's work of beating in heavy cover." The maximum ideal weight has been reduced to 75lb for dogs, 65lb for bitches.

I looked at the clumbers at Crufts this year and saw few that looked capable of a day's work, let alone in heavy cover. The revised breed standard has had little real impact. As for the weight, there were some giant spaniels at Crufts casting doubts on the quality of the judging that let them qualify. Though the breed standard may stipulate the upper weight limit, dogs are never weighed in the showing.

It was difficult to look at these huge spaniels and not feel a pang

Workers Bella and Boris weigh much less than the show limit



of sadness for the destruction of one of our oldest sporting dogs. Many Victorian prints depict clumbers when they were active, sporting spaniels. The current crop of show dogs are about as suitable for a day's work in the beating line as a Ferrari would be for pulling the beaters' wagon.

If it weren't for the hard work and devotion of a small number of enthusiasts, most of whom are members of the Working

Clumber Spaniel Society (WCSS), the clumber would be doomed as a sporting dog. James Darley was one of the founders of the WCSS; he has owned and worked clumbers for nearly 40 years, spanning 10 generations of dogs. In that relatively short time, selective breeding has brought back a spaniel that King George V, a clumber enthusiast, would certainly recognise.

Earlier this season, Darley invited me for a day's rough-shooting over his two five-year-old clumbers, Venaticus

Henrietta (Bella), who weighs 40lb, and her brother Venaticus Hercules (Boris), who weighs 45lb. The pair have gained an impressive number of field-trial awards and Bella recently won a certificate of merit in an Any Variety spaniel trial, the first clumber bitch to do so for 75

years. Both dogs impressed. While one walked to heel, the other hunted with genuine enthusiasm, covering the ground thoroughly and with style. There was none

of the frenetic questing of a trialling springer, yet one felt confident that neither dog was going to miss a bird. Darley shot as well as his dogs hunted, and we ended up with five cock pheasants in the bag for the cost of five cartridges.

The real test of a working gundog is not how it looks but how it performs: Boris and Bella showed conclusively that a working-bred clumber can still do the job it was originally bred for. However, and equally significantly, the two dogs retain

their distinctive clumber looks, closely resembling the spaniels depicted by the Victorian artists.

Re-establishing the clumber as a working breed has been far from easy, and there's no room for complacency even now. Darley admitted that he is doubtful whether the working clumber can continue to develop with such a limited gene pool available – an outcross might be the only solution. Cocker blood has already been introduced to clumbers in Sweden, and Darley believes an English setter might be another possibility.

Two of our other five breeds of native spaniel – the sussex and the field – are even more critically endangered than the clumber. On the plus side, an encouraging number of owners are keen to work their spaniels and they are catered for by the new Working Minority Breeds Spaniel Club. However, both the Field Spaniel Society (FSS) and Sussex Spaniel Association (SSA) seem oblivious to the implications of breeding dogs with such a narrow gene pool. The chairman's report from the last AGM of the SSA notes: "Our aim is to make the best of our purebred sussex not produce a designer crossbred that has unknown characteristics."

Last year the FSS celebrated the breed's 90th anniversary but can the field spaniel go on to reach its century with such a tiny gene pool? The SSA uses the slogan "a breed never to be forgotten". Unless action is taken soon, memories might be all we have.

