

FARMERSWEEKLY Farmlife

FARMERS WEEKLY'S MAGAZINE FOR THE WHOLE FAMILY | Edited by Tim Relf 020 8652 4928

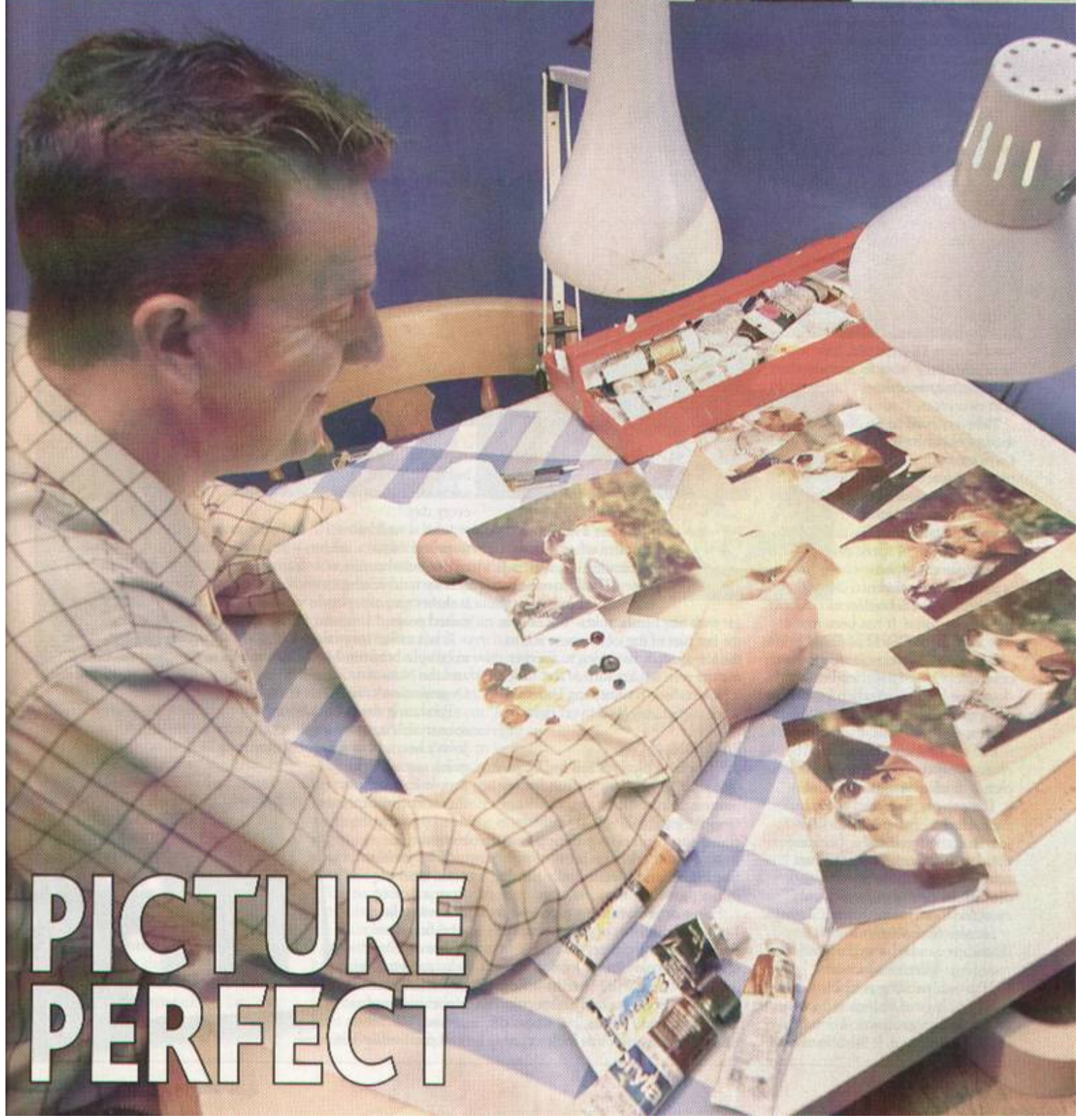
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Student celebrations,
farmer-style



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YFC prepares for
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Dorset farmhouse's
curious pedigree



PICTURE PERFECT

Head gamekeeper John Clarke spends his free time painting animal portraits, as **Wendy Short** finds out

JOHN CLARKE has never had a formal art lesson.

Artistic talent does not run in his family, either – but he has always been keen on painting and the Lancs-based man, who specialises in sporting dogs and horses, is able to capture an amazing likeness of people's pets.

Good quality photographs are essential to capture a likeness, says John, who has found that acrylic paint is the best medium.

"Watercolour paint can look a bit flat. I've never been trained to use oils, they would also take up too much space in my 'studio', which is actually one corner of the kitchen," he says. "Acrylics give a nice depth to an animal's coat, and the colours are really vivid."

John, who has been working on the Duchy of Lancaster's Dunsop estate near Clitheroe since he was 18 years old, has been taking on more and more commissions over the past two years.

"It's very hard to quantify how long it takes me to do each picture, because I only work in the evenings. I try to complete each one within two or three weeks."

One painting John is particularly proud of features a black labrador holding a grouse. It has been made into a set of 100 limited-edition prints.

But not all requests are for sporting animals. "One of my friends likes to do phone hoaxes, so when I got a message that someone wanted me to paint a pair of gerbils, I was convinced it was a joke," says John. "But the call was quite genuine. A man wanted the picture for his daughter's birthday."

The two gerbils turned out to be the most challenging subjects that John has attempted so far. "Finding distinguishing features that give an animal its individual character is the trickiest part of my work, and I struggled to tell the two apart," he says.

He also finds that including a landscape can be tricky, because it requires a different approach.

"Portrait painting is highly detailed, and I find it hard to loosen up when I am asked to put a wood or a field in the background. It is instinctive to

Countryman's living art



want to add each blade of grass separately, and of course that doesn't work well."

He has a similar problem when it comes to painting in an animal's nose. "I will have spent many hours putting in the fur with tiny brushstrokes. The nose is the last part of the job, because it is in the foreground. Switching to another texture with a shiny surface and making it look realistic is something I have to work particularly hard to get right."

PASSION

John, whose pictures sell for £250-plus, has an abiding passion for painting birds. "It's a real challenge to make each individual feather stand out. I still class painting as a hobby, but it takes up most of my free hours, and it's gradually turning into a part-time business.

"No matter how many pictures I do, I still get a thrill out of giving people a painting of a special pet that they can cherish and enjoy," says John.

His favourite wildlife artist is Roger McPhail. "Some animal artists paint picture postcard scenes, but Roger can make animals and birds look exactly

as they do in the wild. His paintings bring back memories of the wildlife I see when I am working on the estate every day."

John is well known to some FARMERS WEEKLY readers – he was one of the gamekeepers who featured in a cheeky fund-raising calendar in 2004. It shows gamekeepers in various semi-naked poses, "Calendar Girls" style.

It has raised more than £50,000, to be split between MacMillan nurses and the National Gamekeepers Organisation's charitable trust.

Educating the public about the countryside is another subject close to John's heart. "I'm a firm believer in going out and letting people know about the work gamekeepers do to preserve the countryside.

"The problem often stems from a lack of understanding – I talk to lots of townspeople who can't tell the difference between a pheasant and a grouse."

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