

After 80 years, A.A. Brown & Sons recently completed its first over/unders—a pair of 16-bores based on the Woodward action and engraved in fine rose & scroll by Keith Thomas.

# The ABAS Series 8

A.A. Brown & Sons builds its first over/unders

*text by Vic Venters • photographs by Matthew Brown*



**R**OBIN BROWN HAS BEEN AT the bench more than 60 years, but even a lifetime building guns provided no easy answer to one client's problematic request. William had been a customer for 20 years and owned two pairs of Brown sidelock side-by-sides—12s and 20s—plus a pair of 20-bore Holland & Holland Royal over/unders that Robin had sourced for him from H&H. William's dad and uncle had been faithful customers of A.A. Brown & Sons, which Robin's grandfather, Albert Arthur Brown, founded in Birmingham's gun quarter in 1938.

William also had been smitten by a pair of well-used 16-bores. "I found a pair of H&H Royals that I took to Robin to bring up to a useable standard," he told me. "These have become my go-to guns, especially for grouse." These Royals were side-by-sides, and now, Robin said, William wanted a pair of best-grade 16-bore O/Us.

Trouble was that in eight decades A.A. Brown & Sons had never built an O/U. Nor would it be easy to locate a used pair of best English 16s. James Woodward, for example, built only 41 16-gauges to its O/U design. Between 1948—when Purdey purchased Woodward—and 1979, Purdey built only five 16-bore O/Us. Over the course of almost a century Boss & Co. likewise produced but two dozen O/U 16s up until 2005.

"I gave his request a lot of thought," Robin said. "I called him back and asked if he fancied a bit of philanthropy."

"Why?" William asked.

"We'd like to build you a pair of 16-bore over/unders based on the Woodward action," Robin said. "Everything else you can choose." Two days later they were discussing specifications.

William lives in Derbyshire, in central England, and shoots driven grouse and pheasants, and he especially likes shooting high pheasants. He requested specifications to suit: 2¾" chambers, 30-inch barrels, Teague chokes and double triggers, which allow easy choke selection. He also asked that the front trigger be set to fire the gun reverse of normal sequence: the over barrel first instead of the under. "It allows for quicker reloading if only one shot is taken," Robin said.

But why the Woodward instead of the Boss, Britain's other great traditional O/U? Both the Boss of 1909 and the Woodward of 1913 feature sleek low-profile actions, handle beautifully and have been and remain enormously influential designs with Continental and British gunmakers.

For sheer beauty I give the nod to the fine-boned Boss—no more elegant English O/U has even been made—but the Woodward's bones are plenty fine. Moreover, many working gunmakers will tell you

the Woodward action (with Purdey's improvements, it is nowadays more accurately called the Purdey-Woodward) is less complex. And Robin liked that the Woodward had a legitimate Midlands connection: Charles Hill, one of the design's co-patentees, hailed from Birmingham. Both the Boss and Woodward demand the highest gunmaking skills to build properly and make reliable.

William shoots driven game almost 50 days each season in weather fair and foul, so reliability was essential. Robin was particularly partial to the Woodward ejector design. "An important feature is the percentage of the cartridge-rim circumference covered by its extractors," he explained. "Most O/Us have a small extractor head that covers as little as 16 percent of the circumference. The Woodward bears on over 30 percent—a great help for consistent ejection."

A.A. Brown earned its reputation decades ago by making guns almost entirely in-house—lock, stock and barrel—employing a team of seasoned machinists, gunmakers and engravers in the small factory in Alvechurch that it moved to in 1974. But age and attrition whittled away the ranks until only Robin



remained—until 2015 when he was joined by his eldest son, Matthew. Today they work side by side.

Brown still employs top craftsmen and engravers, but today these include outworkers; and in this respect the Woodward held certain other advantages. British gunmakers suffered in the decades following the Second World War as orders and skilled labor declined while production costs soared. Purdey wasn't immune to post-war malaise, but its order book held up better than most. As a result, its factory floor remained more amply staffed with craftsmen and apprentices. Unlike Boss, which halted O/U production from the 1960s to the '80s, Purdey never stopped making its Purdey-Woodward O/U. Many Purdey-trained craftsmen are now outworkers intimate with the Woodward's design and build. Robin would be able to call on them when needed.

"As lifelong side-by-side specialists," Robin said, "there were a few challenges in thoroughly learning the mechanism. We've serviced many best O/Us of various makes over the years, but that's not the same as making them. However, the mechanical principles are much the same; so with some adaption and taking

Matthew Brown designed the logo for the new ABAS Series 8 range, inspired by the vertical O/U barrel configuration. (Note the Boss-inspired half-moon barrel extension—dubbed the "Nock's Form"—that allowed the Browns to reduce the "gape" of the barrels.)

advice when needed, we overcame these issues."

The Browns ordered actions and components in-the-white from Ian Clarke, who'd once been Purdey's machine-shop manager. Richard Barnes, a talented ex-Purdey actioner, was tasked with jointing-in the barrels and filing up the action to the shapes and style Robin and Matt requested. But it was never the Browns' intent to have a pair of pure Purdey-Woodward clones built "in the trade" to simply badge as A.A. Browns.

Nor would the pair be one-offs. They would introduce a new A.A. Brown O/U range called the ABAS Series 8, so named for the acronym for Albert Brown and Sons and because O/U barrels viewed muzzle-on resemble an "8." With decades of experience to guide him, Robin would make numerous changes and modifications—some mechanical, others aesthetic.

Today A.A. Brown's sidelock side-by-side—the Supreme de Luxe—is built to a house style best described as semi-rounded. Its lockplates are subtly domed, and the sculpted double bars on the underside are rounded. "We followed this style through on the O/Us," Robin explained. "We also lengthened the top strap to be similar to our side-by-side's, which moves the safety catch farther away from the toplever and minimizes risk of injury if the thumb is left in line with the lever when the gun is fired."

A standard Woodward has one visual element Robin dislikes. On the action underside is a notch just aft of the knuckle into which the lower lip of the forend iron dips as the barrels drop when the gun opens. This creates the "gape" needed for the gun to open fully enough to aid speedy loading of the lower barrel and permit empty cartridges from it to clear the top of the breech face when its ejector trips.

British gunmakers sometimes call this notch the "gash"—an unseemly word that suggests disfigurement at best and vulgar things at worst—and of its appearance Robin is unsparing. "We don't like the gash at all," he said, "and the smaller it is, the better. Some O/Us have a huge one. It is ugly." *Ouch*, Mr. Woodward.

At least one modern Italian gunmaker (Abbiatico & Salvinelli) eliminated the gash on its Sovereign model by hinging the lower lip of its forend to move parallel to the action underside as the barrels drop, but this seemed out of place on a traditional English design.

Instead, from Boss the Browns borrowed a



*Robin liked that the Woodward had a legitimate Midlands connection.*

◀ The action shape shows the influence of A.A. Brown's side-by-sides—a semi-rounded action with double bars coming around the shoulders and down its underside. (Note that the notch is smaller and more elegant than on many O/Us.)

▶ Series 8 locks after freeing and finishing prior to color-case hardening the lockplates and bridles. As traditionalists, the Browns used hand-forged mainsprings instead of the wire-cut springs in common use today.



solution—even if partial. The Boss O/U has a small barrel extension that the firm's craftsmen call the "Nock's Form" (after famed 18th Century London gunmaker Henry Nock), which has a tab that fits into a female slot at the top of the action behind the breech. The cutout for the slot isn't deep, but it's deep enough to reduce the height of the breech face at the point where an ejected cartridge from the bottom barrel passes. This added clearance reduces the gape required, and less gape lets the gunmaker make the gash shallower, hence smaller—and on the Browns' gun the Nock makes it more a nick than a notch. "We like it," Robin said.

A.A. Brown was one of the few gunmakers in pre-CNC days to make its locks in-house and, based on long experience, Robin has his own ideas on lock design and function. As a traditionalist, he dispensed with the wire-cut mainsprings in common use today and turned to lockmaker Mark Wallin of York & Wallin to hand-forge and correctly harden and temper the mainsprings from spring steel.

Building best guns in Britain is never quick, with first-class craftsmen always overbooked, so work on the O/Us proceeded slowly. The Covid pandemic, with its dislocation and disruptions, didn't speed the process. After four protracted years, the pair was finally ready for an engraver.

Robin had one in mind and one only: Keith Thomas—Britain's master of fine rose & scroll. Thomas began engraving A.A. Brown guns in 1982, and in engraving many since he helped refine and improve the gunmaker's house pattern: full coverage of tight fine scroll surrounding three rosettes on the lockplate, the maker's name framed by a cartouche on the side, balanced by three rosettes on the underside and the model name Supreme De Luxe.

"With the O/Us," Thomas said, "there was no previous pattern to follow, so my instructions from Robin and Matt were to emulate their house style." The

Browns supplied sketches, and Matt helped designed the distinctive Series 8 logo. "After some thought and trying out ideas on paper, I got on with engraving."

Unlike some younger rock-star engravers, Thomas's thoughts on the relationship between gunmaker and engraver are old-fashioned. "One thing an engraver should always bear in mind is that primarily they are working for the gunmaker," he said. "If the gunmaker isn't happy with your work, then there will be no enthusiasm when dealing with the customer."

When the guns returned from Thomas after six months, enthusiasm at the Brown shop was not in short supply. Said Robin: "In my opinion, having had dozens of rose & scroll guns from Keith in four decades, this was the best he's done for us—simply outstanding." I agree.

On January 11 this year I received an email from Robin. "Well, a big day here," he wrote. "William has been and gone, and the six-year project is at last over. He liked them very much. We must now see if he can shoot them and if they keep working well."

He added: "It is weird here without them."

Robin has told me before that he often feels wistful when he sends a gun to a new home. A gun bearing his family name must be good enough to bear it, and to make it so, he will have poured into it skills passed one generation to the next—and next—and more than a bit of his soul.

Good news: In his first week William shot the pair five days—taking a pair of high birds with his first two shots—and couldn't be happier. "Neither could we." 🦋

For more information, visit [aabrownandsons.com](http://aabrownandsons.com). Thanks to Purdey Gunroom Manager Dr. Nicholas Harlow for additional details on Woodward and Purdey production numbers. To see this article online along with a list of the craftsmen involved, visit [shootingsportsman.com/abasseries8](http://shootingsportsman.com/abasseries8).

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