

A. A. BROWN & SONS

Only a handful of Birmingham gunmakers survived the Great Depression, the Second World War, and the period of austerity that followed. But one was established, survived, and ultimately succeeded during this difficult period for the trade.

Albert Arthur Brown was the son of John Joseph Brown, a gunmaker who had at one time worked for Webley & Scott, B.S.A., and W. W. Greener and who ended his working career as resident caretaker with Greener. A. A. Brown was an action filer who carved the leaf fences for the Birmingham trade. Although English gunmakers are a conservative lot by nature, not given to decorating their products with the bas-relief so familiar on Teutonic weapons, better-quality sidelocks are occasionally found with ivy,

fern, and oak leaves chased to the fences. It is difficult, demanding work requiring a hammer and chisel instead of the normal hand-held graver, but Albert Arthur Brown was considered one of the few men capable of executing it.

In 1930, after working for F. E. & H. Rogers in Loveday Street and just a few months after the collapse of the U. S. Stock Exchange precipitated the world's worst economic crisis, Albert Arthur established his own business at 27 Whittal Street in what was then the heart of the gun quarter.

A very wealthy few managed to breeze through the Depression in magnificent style, ordering best guns as usual. Since A. A. Brown made a specialty of building high-quality guns that were ultimately signed by more prestigious firms, he appears to have survived by virtue of the trickle-down effect.



The rounded underside is a signature feature of A. A. Brown guns. (A. A. Brown & Sons)

On the eve of the Second World War, Albert Arthur was joined by his eldest son, Albert Henry, born in 1913. A few months later a second son, Sidney Charles, born in 1916, also came on board.

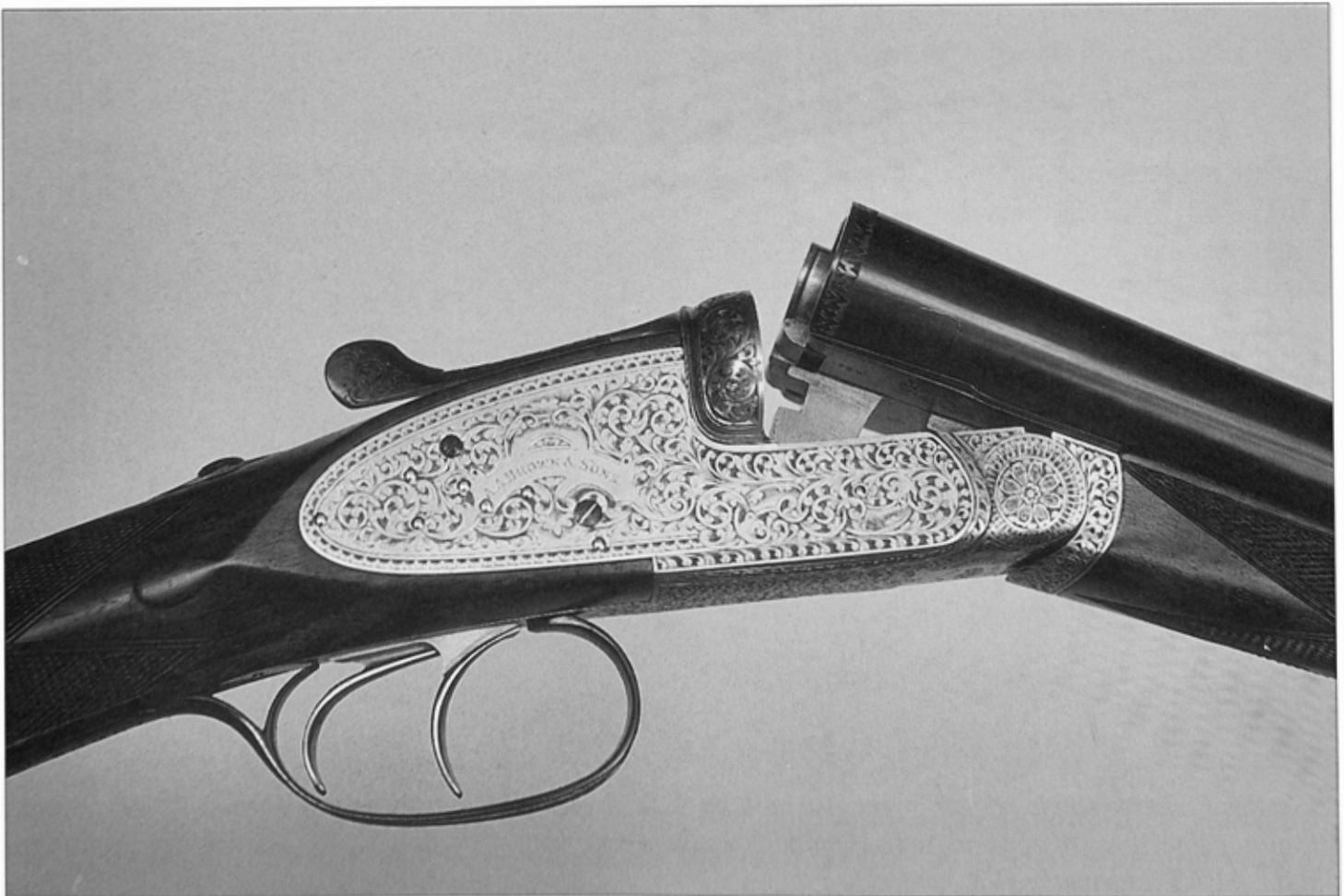
During the Second World War, when sport shooting was largely suspended, the family firm worked on weapons components for the War Department and made machine tools for that era's ultimate weapon, the Spitfire.

Due to Hermann Goering's redevelopment of Whittall Street, A. A. Brown moved around the corner to 4 Sand Street in the mid '40s. And during the austere period immediately after the war, when the steel tubes used to make shotgun barrels were unavailable, the Browns once again developed a strategy for survival. It is worth mentioning that Britain's industries were

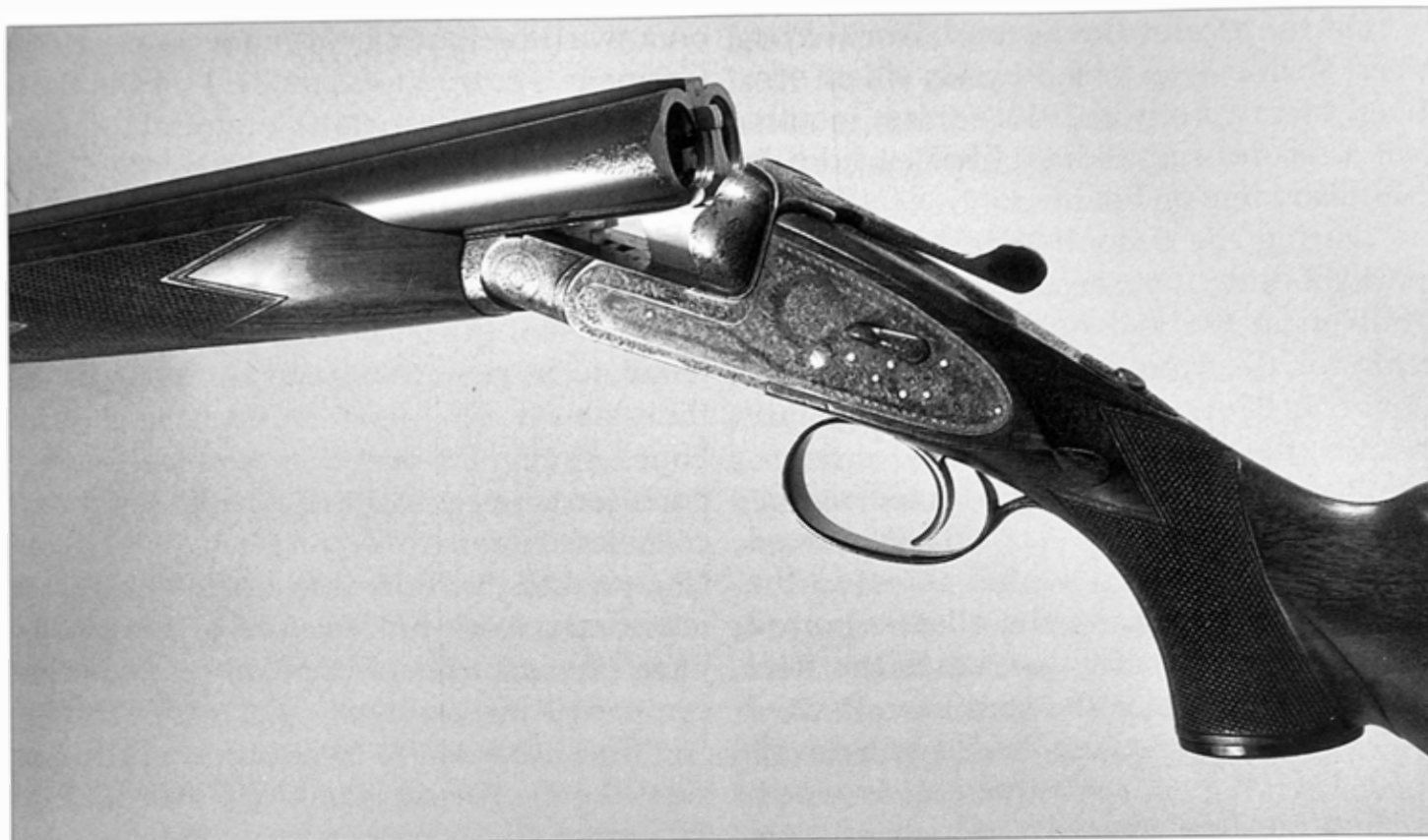
on a wartime footing for many years after Germany's surrender, and steel tubing that had been an important element of the armament's procurement took a long time to be rerouted into what were considered nonessential, leisure-oriented crafts like the building of sporting guns.

In 1945, Curry & Keen purchased the name, workshop, tools, and components of the established E. Anson & Co. on Steelhouse Lane. Among the materials purchased were parts for an air pistol, the Anson Star, now considered a rare collector's item, which Joe Curry asked the Browns to assemble. It was temporary work but appears to have provided the inspiration for an air pistol of the company's own design.

The "Abas Major" was of concentric design like the Anson Star, which inspired it. This means the compression cylinder envel-



One of a pair of Supreme sidelock ejectors with cutaway scroll engraving by Les Jones, built in 1970. (Keith Flannery)



A Westley Richards single-trigger target gun built by A. A. Brown and Sons during its tenure at Bournebrook. The gun is something of a hybrid, with Holland & Holland-type hand-detachable locks, Purdey-like engraving, and the ABAS trademark. (Vic Venters)

ops the barrels, providing a compact design. In his classic tome *Gas, Air and Spring Guns of the World*, W. H. B. Smith calls the Abas Major "a better air pistol than most of the designs currently being made in Germany today. . . ." The visitor to Brown's current premises at 1 Snake Lane, Alverchurch, can see an example of the Abas Major fully engraved in bold foliate scroll in the manner of a Holland & Holland "Royal." It is the highest-quality British air pistol most visitors will ever see.

In 1948 tubes once more became available and the company ran down air-pistol production to again build shotguns. The firm's record books for the 1950s and '60s are replete with guns made by A. A. Brown & Sons for other makers. A recent visitor was shown entries for Holland & Holland, John Harper, and even Alex Martin "ribless" guns. Robin Brown explained that the Browns had made "many of the ribless guns for Alex Martin" and many of the XXVs sold by E. J. Churchill.

Alex Martin advertised that its ribless guns were "lighter, stronger and better balanced than guns of ordinary construction." Other advantages claimed were:

- 1) A quarter pound of useless metal is removed.
- 2) Removing this weight from the barrels makes the gun lighter forward, giving the left arm less work, more control, and an easier swing.
- 3) The usual hollow space between the barrels in which corrosion can take place undetected is eliminated.

Guns in which the barrels were constructed with spacers at the breech, muzzle, and mid-barrel have a long tradition with Scotland's gunmakers—both Daniel Fraser and James MacNaughton made them. It is therefore a little ironic that by the early 1950s Alexander Martin, like most of the provincial

British gun trade, was having its guns made in Birmingham.

Robin Brown explained how the Churchill firm would order guns of identical specifications from different makers—Baker, Wrights, or Brown—that were engraved and finished except that the stock, though inletted and attached, remained in a rough and unfinished state. When a pair of guns was needed, Robert Churchill would select two likely candidates from the rack and have a stocker set about carving the wood to fit the customer. Robin's father, Sidney, said it was "pure hell" for the woodworker, but it meant finished guns could be ready in four or five weeks. On 9 January 1931, the Prince of Wales ordered a pair of Churchill "Premier" XXVs, and the guns were miraculously delivered five days later. Robin and Sidney Brown's explanation of how Churchill guns were made would account for the short delivery time.

Throughout the postwar period the Browns continued to build guns for the trade. Perhaps because they were industrious at a time when much of Britain wanted to rest after the exhausting task of defeating Hitler's Germany—or perhaps because they had a mature, highly skilled workforce dedicated to building the finest guns available—they flourished where others had failed. When Joseph Asbury, which machined many of the actions for the trade, went under, A. A. Brown acquired its machinery, giving Brown the capacity to machine its own actions from the raw forging.

Albert Arthur Brown retired in 1957, but new blood arrived four years later when Sidney's son, Robin, joined the family firm as an apprentice stocker.

In the early 1960s, much of the gun quarter was redeveloped to make way for Birmingham's inner-ring road. It was a time of turmoil for the trade: Shooting was unfashionable, and apprentices were hard to



One of a trio of Supreme Deluxe game guns with game-scene engraving by Keith Thomas. (A. A. Brown & Sons)

find. Many well-known names—R. B. Rodda & Co., Bentley & Playfair, and Clabrough & Johnstone—disappeared rather than face the challenges of finding new premises, markets, and a work force. A. A. Brown's Sand Street premises became a multilevel parking structure, but the company found a new home within the Westley Richards firm out at Bournebrook. Westley Richards continued to build its own Anson and Deeley designed guns, particularly the hand-detachable lock model known to American collectors as the "droplock." However, for approximately fourteen years A. A. Brown built the Westley Richards best sidelock ejector gun.

Another change of premises in 1974—this time to the country village of Alvechurch, fourteen miles south of Birmingham—gave Brown an opportunity to change direction. Rather than continue to build a range of guns for the trade, A. A. Brown would henceforth make only best-grade sidelock ejectors, plus the occasional best boxlock, with a view to

capturing a share of the bespoke or custom market. This is not a decision the Browns can take full credit for. It was partly a result of the Trade Description Act passed into law by the British government, which demands accuracy in product identification. The Browns interpreted this law to mean that they would no longer be allowed to build guns to which other makers put their names. However, the practice of well-known makers having guns built in the trade continues to this day, with outworkers apparently enjoying the same legal status as subcontractors.

The decision to leave an urban gunmaking center for a village mentioned in the Domesday book (circa 1085-86) was a courageous one back in 1974. However, the Browns held an advantage: Most of the work on their guns was done in-house. Only the tubes were bought in and only the engraving was farmed out—and only some of that, because they had a house engraver named Les Jones. Today, other independent gunmakers such as Alan Crew, Peter Chapman, and Peter Nelson have followed Brown's example, realizing that in the age of phone and fax, proximity is no longer essential to good gunmaking.

The decision to build only best guns to clients' specifications has also proven prescient. With most of the "off-the-shelf" guns today coming from Italy or Japan, the remains of the Birmingham trade are polarized between repairs on the one hand and building best bespoke guns on the other, with the latter doing better than the former. Brown's

best gun is the model Supreme Deluxe, which uses a self-opening system similar to the Holland & Holland and a method of hand-detachable sidelocks like the Holland & Holland "Royal."

If the mechanics of the Supreme Deluxe are similar to a Holland & Holland, the aesthetic is entirely A. A. Brown. The semi-rounded body of the Supreme Deluxe developed out of a customer's request for a gun that was "already worn." Slightly domed lock plates and a double bar to the action add to the effect of a rounded gun. It is this roundness that gives A. A. Brown guns their organic feel and distinctive appearance. Apart from the engraving and the rough barrel tubes, virtually all of the work, including lockmaking, is done in-house by Sidney and his son Robin. They are aided by Harold Scandrett, a veteran gunmaker with more than forty years of experience with the firm. The Supreme Deluxe is built entirely to customer specifications, using chopper lump barrels, actions hand-filed from a solid forging, and exhibition-grade walnut of either French or Turkish origin. Best-gun features include disc set strikers and gold plating of the lockwork and the self-opening mechanism. This is not done for cosmetic reasons, but rather for corrosion control and ease of maintenance. Engraving in the past was executed in-house by Les Jones. Today, engraving on Brown guns is the work of modern master Keith Thomas, but clients can elect to go with any one of a stable of British engravers. Customers have a choice of case-hardened or polished finish, with any combination of bouquet and scroll or game-scene engraving.

Brown will build the Supreme Deluxe in any standard gauge in three weights: as a standard game gun, as a lightweight game gun, or as a slightly heavier pigeon gun. On average, Brown builds six to ten guns per year. In the past, the firm has also built several com-

memorative pieces—a 28-bore for the Queen's Silver Jubilee, a pair of 20-bores for the same event, and a magnificent pair of 20-bores commemorating Matthew Boulton, an important figure in the Industrial Revolution and Birmingham's most famous silversmith. Prices start at about £20,000 for the standard game gun, and delivery time is about two years. Significantly, about 80 percent of Brown's guns are purchased within Britain, traditionally a market where intrinsic quality at a fair price has been more important than a prestigious name. Most of the remaining 20 percent are sold to buyers in the United States.

All of the guns made in Alvechurch are recognizable by the ABAS trademark found on the action flats; first used as the name for an air pistol, it is an acronym for A. Brown and Sons. The ABAS markings are also a reliable, but not foolproof, way to tell whether your gun, ostensibly by another maker, was actually made by A. A. Brown. The method isn't foolproof because in the past some retailers insisted that Brown omit the ABAS mark in order to create the impression that they—the retailers—built the gun.

A. A. Brown & Sons has come a long way since the days it made airguns, and the quality of its workmanship has continued to rise throughout the '70s, '80s, and into the '90s. Because so few are made, the emphasis is on making every gun the best yet. As long as there are customers who have the taste and resources to invest £24,000 in a Supreme Deluxe, A. A. Brown will not only survive but prosper.

B. S. A.

Until the Industrial Revolution, all guns were made by hand; then, in the last century, a schism occurred: The huge demand for weapons with interchangeable parts, together with the development of machine tools, combined to make possible the mass-produced gun.