



WILLIAMS

COMMISSIONED BY VIC VENTERS FOR GAME  
SCENE ENGRAVING BY KEITH THOMAS.

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# AA Brown's last boxlock?

NEVER SAY NEVER, but the likelihood is that the old and renowned Birmingham gun-making firm of A.A. Brown, once of Sand Street, now based in Alvechurch, will not make another order like the one it completed this year for noted American firearms writer Vic Venters. Brown's have made boxlocks in the past for 'just about everybody except Boss, Purdey and Rigby', according to Robin Brown, but boxlocks are no longer cost-effective and bespoke orders these days are invariably for sidelocks.

The firm was established in 1938 by Albert Arthur Brown, who had previously worked for Greener and for FE&H Rogers. He spent most of the 1930s as a self employed actioner before setting up his first premises at 4 Sand Street, in the Birmingham gun quarter. As a skilled and respected gunmaker, Brown was in demand, along with other men of his calibre, like William Baker and S. Wright, to build guns for the big, well known firms in London; Churchill, Jeffery, William Evans and Holland & Holland among them.

While a large number of gunmakers went to the wall after WW2, the Browns continued to supply guns to the trade and succeeded where others failed. They had the machinery to make actions from forgings themselves, rather than have to rely on those commercially available from Webley & Scott. Timely amalgamations of other trade suppliers like A.E. Bayliss and Joseph Asbury helped Browns keep one step ahead and good business sense, stability and a quality product enabled them to weather the lean years as successive generations of the family continued to run the business and build the guns.

In the 1960s Browns moved from Sand Street, as it was flattened and turned into a car park, and the firm moved to Bournebrook to find refuge within the Westley Richards factory. Here they built the boxlock 'Connaught' model, as well as Westley's sidelocks. The

Connaught was built on an A.A. Brown action with particularly thick walls, which enabled the exterior to be rounded gracefully, in contrast to the more angular A&D actions usually encountered. These guns have a style, which is identifiable to the trained eye and they attract a certain cachet to those in the know.

Today, A.A. Brown is managed by Robin Brown and operates from premises at 1 Snake Lane, Alvechurch, where they specialise in best sidelock production. However, they have made, and will make to order, best quality boxlocks. Vic visited Brown's in the early 1990s, where he was impressed by the depth of knowledge shared by Robin, his father, Sidney and their colleague Harold Scandrett, all working alongside one another at a traditional bench.

"To my mind, it was what British gunmaking was supposed to be about. I took an instant liking to Robin; smart, articulate, obviously a perfectionist, and willing to share information with a wet-behind-the-ears Yankee journalist."

The experience left a mark and Vic remembered and admired the work the firm turned out, using traditional gun-making skills at every stage. "Even then, I liked the shapes they achieved on their guns and I liked the old-fashioned methods of craft used to make them. Later, I bought an ABAS boxlock from the late '40s, and then an early '90s Supreme De Luxe sidelock. I still own them and shoot them at virtually everything. The sidelock is my go-to gun, except for waterfowl."

Years later, Vic got the opportunity to have a gun built the way he specified. "I always wanted to order a bespoke British gun and I've always loved Keith Thomas's scroll engraving. I'm passionate about woodcock hunting and also ruffed grouse and wild bobwhites in the American South. All are close-range birds, shot 15 to 30 yards, often in dense cover."





Keith Thomas was chosen for his fine scroll engraving, with delicate bouquets. Beaded fences and bow-back action add refinement.

“When Robin informed me he had a 20-bore boxlock barreled action, I was intrigued. It had 26” tubes, which I like in woodcock and grouse cover. Also, silly as it sounds, only smallbores are allowed on Southern quail plantations and 12s are regarded as ‘unsporting’. A 20 would be a perfect light upland gun.” They shook hands on a deal and Robin got to work building Vic’s baby.

The gun is based on a 1980s action, which had been one of a batch produced on the back of an order for a 20-bore game gun from an American client. Making one action is not cost effective, so Brown’s put together six machinings. They sold four to the Trade and kept two. The action walls were thicker than normal, in the manner of a Westley Richards ‘Connaught’ and could be rounded and shaped with a ‘fancy back’. The internal

cavities are machined narrower than usual, leaving the walls thick and the action strong. The engraving would be done by Keith Thomas, whom Vic had long admired for his scroll work.

Vic has some specific requirements regarding fit. He told me “I take a long stock, about 16 inches, and due to my long neck a lot of drop. Also due to damage to my spinal cord, I’ve suffered moderately severe permanent nerve damage which greatly affects strength in my left hand, less so in my right. Weakness is exacerbated when it is cold—in fact, the narrow grip afforded by the grip of a 20-bore barrel profile will cause the gun to “jump” out of my left hand under recoil. A wider grip is much better for me, so I agreed to a beavertail. I like the Woodward half-pistol hand, which also helps grip in my right hand. The beavertail, with all the extra wood, will help balance out the buttstock, which is dense Turkish walnut. The stocking is perhaps not classically ideal, especially for a small bore, and rather ‘American’ in configuration, but I intend to shoot it, and this is what true bespoke gunmaking is all about.”



Selection of wood and choice of engraving are major elements in personalising a commission. Vic had clear ideas about the look he wanted to achieve. "I have mixed feelings about game scenes but this action had a floorplate sans the normal pin. Robin convinced me a scene needed to go there, and given my predilection for woodcock, that would be the bird of choice. Since it is an English gun, I decided to go with *Scalopax rusticola*, the European bird. I had met Welsh artist Owen Williams at a Gamefair years ago. He has a special affinity for woodcock, so I commissioned a pencil drawing of one flushing from ferns to serve as Keith's model.

We thought the ferns, with their curling heads, would complement Keith's surrounding tight scroll, which after all is based on organic motifs. Keith also engraves his game scenes deeper than the super-fine bulino exponents, which was important for durability, as this gun is meant to be used afield. I chose to have Keith inlay the initials of the firm's old trademark "ABAS" on the top-lever in gold, something found on early A.A. Brown guns."

Balancing the style and coverage of the engraving is something I believe can get lost in the design process. Some people demand very fussy wood and very fine engraving but make no allowance for the relationship between the three required to make the wood, the lines of the gun and the engraving blend-in

to complement one another. Vic was very aware of this danger and mentioned it in his appreciation of Keith Thomas's abilities:

"I think the decoration speaks for itself; one of Keith's greatest talents is knowing how to design and apply engraving so that it complements the lines of a gun, rather than smothering them—as you sometimes get with Italian engraving. He subsumes his craft to that of the gunmaker. Maybe that's because he was trained at Holland & Holland, unlike many engravers who have never worked in a gun factory. In any event, both the gun and engraving benefit."

The action was based on the style Brown's used to make for Westley Richards, as the 'Connaught'. They came from forgings by George Morgan, machined by hand, in-house by Harold Scandrett. The barrels were Webley & Scott tubes, made up by Roy Yeomans and fitted with a Purdey type high, narrow rib. Robin's uncle Albert jointed it and it went to Birmingham for proof. Then it stood in the rack for a few years, until Vic showed an interest.

Once the project was underway, Robin began the actioning and designed and made the distinctive bottom plate, then Haydn Hill completed the actioning

**Vic's gun ready for final assembly. Quality control throughout the entire build process has been very carefully managed by Robin Brown, with a very satisfying outcome.**







and Robin stocked the gun. Robin then smoothed and polished it for engraving and sent it to Keith Thomas. It now awaits the final leg of the journey.

Robin will colour harden the action, free and finish the gun. He has stocked it in a very striking piece of Turkish walnut, which has the colour of classic French wood. Peter Rowland stocked the forend to match and chequering went to a specialist; Michael Dingley.

The bores are finished, in the modern style, slightly over-bored for a twenty, at .618". Chambers are 2¾" and the fixed chokes set at ¼ and ½. The barrels were blacked by Paul Stevens, to the highest quality available.

When I visited Robin in his workshop, the gun was in the pre-hardening stage and the build quality was evident in the assembled parts, fresh back from engraving. Brown's have interpreted Vic's vision of his ideal upland gun, incorporating his American tastes and performance preferences without losing the gun's very English heart and soul.

**The flawless fitting of carefully selected wood and perfectly filed metal is evident, the engraving complements the gun's lines, without overpowering it.**

Robin was keen to steer me away from the theme of 'the last boxlock', like Holland & Holland's 'last .600' double rifle, one can come to regret such absolutes. However, the production run of British boxlocks is, I feel, coming to an end. Customers ordering bespoke guns only want high quality, figured wood, best engraving and quality finishing. To apply these to a boxlock today is as expensive as it is to apply them to a sidelock and customers will balk at the prices when the action is an Anson & Deeley.

Though the heyday of this staple of the Birmingham trade is behind us, we should pause, look back a while and appreciate the back catalogue of firms like Robin's and their legacy of proud, functional, beautifully made guns. They are still standing. They can be bought for far less than they cost to make and they deserve a place in the line for decades to come.