

THREE OF A PERFECT PAIR

Robin Brown, Simon Gudgeon and Keith Thomas have created a pair of guns that defines traditional British craftsmanship.

WORDS: VIC VENTERS. PHOTOGRAPHY: MATTHEW BROWN.

bituaries announcing the death of British craftsmanship have been written for nearly as long as has reigned the Age of Industry that was supposed to kill it.

Yet the gun trade - one of the last and most rarified bastions of the British craftsman - arguably makes the finest guns it ever has, certainly fewer of them than in decades past, but almost all of glorious quality.

The "machine", long regarded the mortal enemy of handwork, has clearly not killed the trade, but it has inextricably altered it. Under the exacting control of computers, modern machining can almost replicate what was once only created by human hands twined with skills learned on the bench.

Almost, but not quite. Nowadays, most new best guns are the product of a marriage – a balancing act, really – between craft skills and computer-aided technology. When the partners are properly paired, it is a happy marriage and the ofspring exquisite.

But a few firms have clung entirely to the sort of old-fashioned gunmaking that once embodied the term "hand-built English gun." A. A. Brown & Sons, of Alvechurch, is one such maker. Owner Robin Brown, 65, (and craftsmen associated with him) uses virtually no CNC-machining, and still files up and fits almost all components from those made by manually controlled millers and lathes, and then finishes the gun entirely by hand. It is a labourand time-intensive method of production, and Brown's annual output is consequently small. The quality is not.

A pair of recently completed Supreme De Luxe 20 bore Brown sidelocks exemplifies the best attributes of traditional British craftsmanship in every way. The pair was engraved by Keith Thomas, one of the finest contemporary exponents of fine English scroll, with game scene drawings by Simon Gudgeon, one of England's leading wildlife artists. Gudgeon's drawings, and Thomas's renditions of them, depict Britain's quintessential gamebirds—the red grouse and the grey partridge. Even the magnificently figured stocks were carved from rare Juglans regia grown in Kent—English walnut in the truest sense of the term.

The pair was commissioned by one of Robin's long-standing clients, making them his fifth and sixth Brown guns. He asked for 20 bore easy openers made not too light - 6lb 3oz each - so they'd be comfortable to shoot using 70mm cartridges. "These guns are intended to be used," said Robin, "not collected for a closet."

The son of a son of a son of a Birmingham gunmaker, Robin's roots in the trade date at least as far back as the mid-19th century. His grandfather, Albert Arthur Brown, founded the firm that bears his name in the 1930s, and over the next four decades built a reputation as a "gunmaker's gunmaker," crafting high-quality guns in-house for the trade, notably for many of

"A pair of Supreme De Luxe 20 bore Brown sidelocks exemplifies the best attributes of traditional British craftsmanship in every way." London's finest firms.

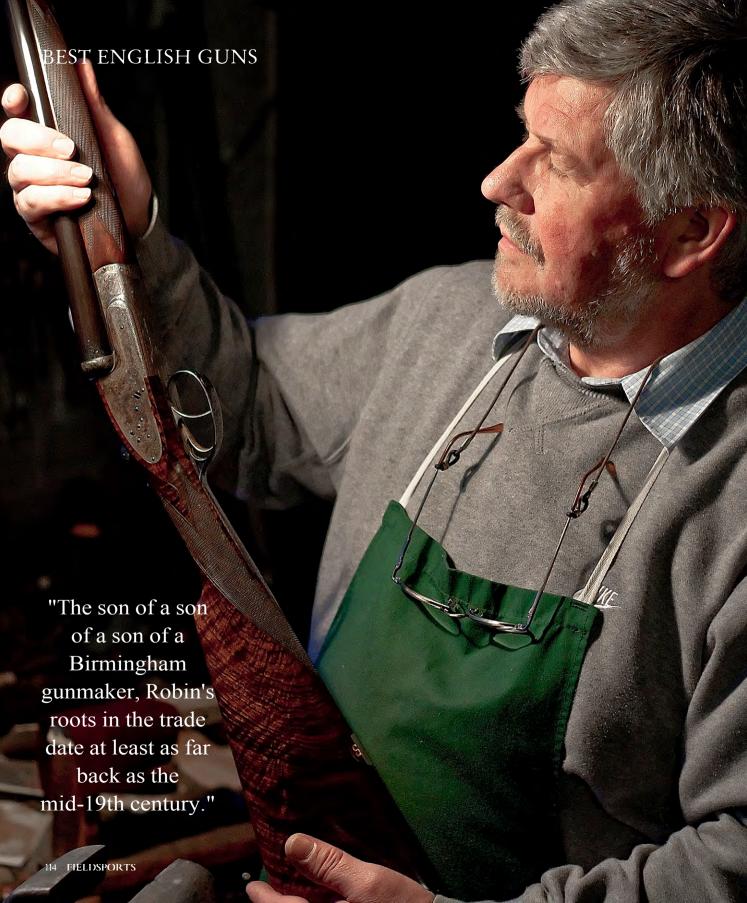
So good had its reputation become, that in the 70s, they stopped taking orders for the trade and instead make guns only under their own name for retail clients, with the best-quality Supreme De Luxe the standard bearer of the firm. Mechanically, it owes its lineage to the Holland & Holland Royal, but is fitted with Brown's house version of the easy-opening mechanism and, if requested, a proprietary single trigger.

One of the most appealing attributes of a traditional hand-built English gun – that is, one shaped and sculpted by file and chisel – is that each is unique unto itself, maybe subtly so, but nonetheless bearing the fingerprints and a bit of the soul of the men who made it.

Robin's muse as a gunmaker manifests itself visibly in the shape and style of the Supreme De Luxe: in the early 90s he began rounding the edges off the bar of his sidelock's action, yet retaining its traditional double bars and flutes while carrying the roundness back into the head of the stock and keeping the tear-shaped drop points. The look is sleek and sexy, as is a Boss round-body, yet with its elegant bars and fluting, it still showcases his skills as an action-filer at their most sublime.

Keith Thomas, 64, engraved the pair, framing Gudgeon's game scenes with English scroll. The London-born, Oxfordshire-based artisan is one of Britain's most celebrated contemporary engravers, and has decorated many of A.A. Brown's guns over the last three decades. His scroll-work, in particular, has become something of his signature: dense, cleanly cut, sinewy, almost alive in its texture, Thomas's interpretation of the most "English" of all the world's engraving patterns is uniquely

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recognisable - no mean feat for a style that has become nearly generic, so widely has it been copied.

The pair's game scenes are based on a set of four pencil drawings by Yorkshire-born Simon Gudgeon, the 54-year-old artist who has evolved over the last decade into one of Britain's most celebrated sculptors. His artwork is owned by members of the Royal family and his acclaimed sculpture, Isis, became the first new installation of its type in London's Hyde Park in half a century.

"Our client knew Simon from past purchases and from meeting him at various exhibitions," explained Brown of the trio's collaborative project."At one such meeting, he broached the subject of four pencil drawings of grouse and partridge, one flight scene and one ground scene of each."

Today, Gudgeon is regaled for his almost abstract, minimalist sculptures in bronze, marble and granite that convey movement, motion and always mood. Back in the 90s though, he was active in high-detail pencil work of wildlife and sporting scenes, which, although of a different medium, convey the same qualities as his current three-dimensional work. A few of those pencil commissions served as models for engraving on guns by E.J. Churchill a decade

ago, though transpositions of his art to guns have been very rare - and as he admis these are almost certainly his last.

Working with images that weren't his own presented Keith with a couple of challenges. "The first problem was the physical fitting of a composition done on paper to a gun, with its odd shapes and to a surface that isn't flat and is pierced through with screws, pegs and tumbler axles. Poor placement on my part could ruin both our work."

Keith's other challenge was capturing Simon's original concept and artistic vision in a very dissimilar medium. "A pencil is designed to put down lead and a graver is made to remove metal," Keith explained. "This makes a drawing a challenge to reproduce - and to some extent it is impossible. I tried to keep the same feeling Simon was after, just on a much smaller scale."

Unlike many of Italy's top engravers, Thomas eschews the micro-dot bulino technique that produces photo-realistic detail, but can also be prone to wear and degradation afield. His engraving is sharp and deep. "English guns are built to be used and to last," he explained, "and my engraving must last with them."

Astonishingly, Keith works without



wearing only standard reading glasses to correct mildnearsightedness. Only when he tackles the heads and eyes of birds in a game scene will he augment his vision with a simple clip-on 2.5x loupe. "The most important things on the game scenes are the birds, and the most important thing about the birds is their heads and the most important thing about the head is the eve."

That Keith achieved this, reveals ixelf most perfectly in the right lock of the grouse gun, where Simon's drawing depicts five birds peering intently from a hillock of heather in all directions, alert as only wild grouse are. Keith's interpretation, likewise, looks ready to spring into the skies from its bed of steel.

A salient feature of old-fashioned gunmaking is the presence - and the persistence over time - of national characteristics made manifest in guns. Elegance and economy of line, restraint in decoration, and handwork have long characterised English design. Best-quality British guns are bound by practical utility, and at their essence purposeful, as well as beautiful. In the art and craft of three of a perfect pair, this tradition survives.







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