

Brown 'Bests'

Looking to the future with A.A. Brown & Sons

by John Ian Gregson · photographs by Matthew Brown

A.A. Brown's signature gun is the Supreme de Luxe—a racy sidelock built on a modified Holland & Holland design. This 20-bore has a rounded action and was engraved by Keith Thomas.

SOMEONE ONCE OPINED that it takes a foreigner to show you your own country, and that's why I wasn't surprised when an American introduced me to one of the best English gunmakers there is. One summer in the late 1990s, my good friend Vic Venters was visiting the UK on one of his gun-writing research trips which, to be frank, always seemed to involve a lot of beer sampling in various hostelryes. On one of our drier days, we were driving from my then home near London to Wales on another attempt to shoot woodcock. To break up the highway monotony, Vic suggested we visit his old pal Robin Brown of A.A. Brown & Sons, south of Birmingham in Alvechurch. Even after several years editing Britain's *Shooting Times & Country Magazine*, I didn't know Robin and only knew of his family business through the writings of Geoffrey Boothroyd.

Vic and I popped in to say hello, and the rest is history. Since then I have owned—and will own again—A.A. Brown guns; I have admired Vic's small collection of Brown guns; and I have taken up so much of Robin's time with my fantasies about gunmaking projects that I'm surprised I'm not forever banned from the workshop.

But Robin isn't like that. On first meeting he typically is reserved, like many craftsmen, and could be described as "serious." However, get to know him, and the time you invest reveals a generous and kind spirit with a roaring sense of humor and passions for the broad and unexpected, such as wild rock music and windsurfing.

Through the years I have gotten to know Robin so well that when I was assigned this article about him and his company, I found it to be one of the most difficult tasks I have had as a writer. This is because not only is Robin a friend, but I also have such a deep regard for his work that the prospect of doing it justice in print was extremely daunting.

Add to that the fact that the history of the firm is long and honorable and so well recorded that I didn't want to simply rehash it. Doug Tate's excellent book *Birmingham Gunmakers* covers A.A. Brown in depth, including the years the company spent making guns for "best" London names such as Churchill and Holland



Robin Brown re-joining a Supreme de Luxe. Maintenance of used A.A. Brown's and other "best" guns is a major part of the company's business.

& Holland, the period "in house" with Westley Richards and latterly its "stand alone" work under its own banner. A brief glimpse at the website aabrownandsons.com shows even more historical granularity along with some cracking photographs from the heyday of Birmingham gunmaking. If that's not enough, Geoffrey Boothroyd covered A.A. Brown in depth in many of his books, and good friend Vic Venters has written about the firm as well.

And then there's Matt Brown—Robin's son. He is a musician, artist, photographer and the man who will carry forward the A.A. Brown name as a gunmaker. Therefore, to be fair to Matt and Robin, this piece could not be merely a look at what had gone before; it had to be a look forward to what will be for one of the best English gunmakers in existence.

When I first met Robin, his father, Sidney, and uncle Albert still worked with him every day. Then, after the older craftsmen passed, I got used to finding Robin alone in his workshop, classical music—and some not so classical—always playing in the background. But it was never a melancholy scene. Robin was well used to his own company and enjoyed the space and time to concentrate on the exquisite handwork that made his name.

At that stage Robin had pretty much reduced production to two models, to allow him to maintain standards and cope with the workload—with help from some of the best outworkers in the business. His signature gun was—and still is—the Supreme de Luxe. This racy sidelock may be built around a heavily modified Holland & Holland design, but its aesthetic is all A.A. Brown. It is available with either a conventional square or gently rounded action, which has subtly domed lockplates and a look and feel that Vic has described as the gunmaking equivalent of a Spitfire airplane. The Supreme de Luxe is available with or without a self-opening mechanism and in whatever gauge the client fancies. It is a completely bespoke item.



The second Brown model produced by Robin is the BB Game (the "BB" standing for "Brown/Beretta"). Robin recognized early on that there was a market for an anglicized 687 EELL Diamond Pigeon and set about making the raw factory gun handle and look like a best. Many of his modifications—including vastly improved aesthetics and stock shaping—have been adopted on production guns. However, even the improved factory guns won't push the BB Game out of the Brown catalog, as Robin's improvements to the stock guns are enormous. In Robin's opinion, the straight and Prince of Wales grips make the guns seem oriented toward game shooting, and the addition of trigger-guard tangs and drop points further anglicize the aesthetics.

If you want to buy a new Brown, the Supreme de Luxe and BB Game are the choices you have. The lovely ABAS (for A. Brown and Sons) boxlock is no longer available—in fact, Vic owns the last one: a 20-gauge made into a beautiful and fast-handling woodcock and grouse gun with 26" barrels and a beavertail forend. It is an exquisite thing.

Now back to Matt. After a decade in the music business, he became disillusioned and began to notice that his father was something of an artist himself. "It felt like the right time to take on this gunmaking heritage that runs through the family," he told me. "I became really interested in working with the wood and especially checkering, which, to me, seemed the right place to start. In many ways stocking is a unique skill that is central to good gunmaking, and I also loved the arcane nature of the task. The wood is so fragile, and errors are not easily corrected. If you want to develop a steady hand, it's a great place to begin."

The result is that Matt is now well on his way to becoming a skilled gunmaker, working through a classic apprenticeship under his father's tutoring eye. He also has become one of the best gun photographers in the business, as his images with this article—and on the cover—show.

What is interesting is the new aesthetic that Matt is bringing to the Brown workshop. According to Robin: "As well as the practical skills, Matt has a good eye and a real grasp of the



This lovely ABAS boxlock was the last that the Brown's will ever make. It is a 20-bore fashioned for grouse and woodcock hunting. The woodcock on the bottom was drawn by Welsh artist Owen Williams and Engraved by Keith Thomas



Clockwise from left; a pair of square-bodied 12-bores engraved by the late Geoffrey Casbard. heir apparent to the Brown gunmaking business Matt Brown. the ABAS series 8 over/under action, based on the Hill/Woodward design.

importance of getting the aesthetics right on the guns. When customers see a gun they like, the eye drives the heart, and so what you produce has to look as well as feel exactly right."

In late summer I took Robin and Matt to their local pub to discuss plans for the future of the business. I wanted to know how they were going to move forward with the Brown line of guns, so in my innocent way I just asked the question. Their reply stunned me.

"Er, do we tell him, Dad?" Matt said with an uncertain look on his face.

"We probably should," Robin replied, sounding even less sure. "Well, we're going to build an over and under."

"You already do," I said.

"No," Robin said, "a sidelock of our own style."

Bloody Hell, I thought. This is huge! The first new A.A. Brown in, well, years.

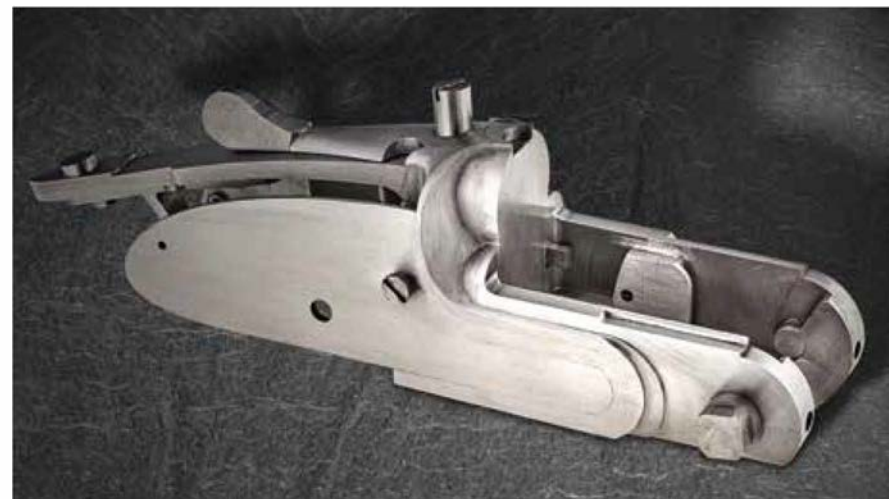
Robin explained that the big omission from the company's line was a handsome British over/under game gun. To correct this, he and Matt have designed the ABAS Series 8, a new over/under based on the classic Charles Hill and Woodward action.

"I think the Hill/Woodward is the most suitable of the British O/Us," Robin said, "and the fact that it was partly designed in Birmingham is very relevant to us." He added that the new gun, like the Supreme de Luxe, will take the best features of the original but bring the design up to date to meet the demands of modern shooting.

"We plan to echo the style and shapes inherent in our Supreme de Luxe," Robin said, "so that it is clear that our O/U is from the Brown stable. We are

also incorporating outstanding features from other makes that, in our opinion, are flattering to those old designers. We can't reinvent the wheel; the lovely O/U designs of Boss and Woodward set the benchmarks over a century ago, and many features are evident in a huge number of the O/Us in production today—for example, the bifurcated lump, allowing a shallow action profile. This is essential to our eye.

"Another advantage of the Woodward design is the percentage



Making a gun to an improved design is undoubtedly a brave move for the company.

of the circumference of the chambers utilized by the extractors. It is much higher than most designs, and this can be important if a batch of undersized shells is used."

The first pair of round-bodied 16-gauge guns is being built for a UK client, and Robin promised that as soon as photographs are available, *SSM* readers will get the first look.

Making a gun to an improved design is undoubtedly a brave move for the company. But Robin already has been through this with the Supreme de Luxe and BB Game and, like all true artisans, he has a well-honed feel for what will work. But why a pair of 16-gauges?

"It's the aesthetics," Robin said. "The 16 is just a lovely action size, and we think it will show off the handsome lines of the Woodward-inspired shape to perfection."

Before you ask, the Browns don't know when the guns will be complete. The first pair will be a long build because of the need to get everything right. Once the lessons of the first pair have been understood, things will speed up—although like all best gunmaking, time scales are glacial by the standards of most other industries.

My conversation with Robin and Matt that day gave me considerable reassurance in the company. I must admit that through the years I have wondered whether the little workshop in the pretty Midlands village of Alvechurch still would be up and running by the time I was ready



to order my first bespoke gun. Now I believe that in 30 years you will be able to order a new A.A. Brown & Sons gun and have even more exciting choices and an evolved aesthetic.

The company currently offers new and used guns. New Supreme de Luxes are priced from £55,000 (plus VAT or duties, if applicable) and include standard-pattern hand engraving. (If you prefer a 28-gauge or a .410, prices start at £60,000.) The guns are made mostly by Robin and Matt, with carefully chosen outworkers handling jobs that are impractical to do in-house, such as barrelmaking and engraving. The waiting time for new guns is from three years, depending on specifications.

The BB Game custom Beretta, based on the sideplated 687 EELL, begins at £9,600 (including the gun) and runs to £12,000 for the deluxe, which features more extensive

engraving and nice touches such as polished and re-engraved shoulders on the barrels. Clients can have their own guns customized for £3,600 to £6,000. Jubilee and Classic models also can be customized.

Prices and delivery times for the new A.A. Brown ABAS Series 8 over/under are to be determined; however, it is estimated that the gun will cost around £75,000.

The Browns also offer gunsmithing services, renovations, restocking and so on for their own and other best guns. They also specialize in selling and customizing good-quality Continental guns. ✦

For more information, contact A.A. Brown & Sons, 01144-121-445-5395; aabrownandsons.com.

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