



# A. A. Brown & Sons turns 65

A "gunmaker's gunmaker", A. A. Brown keeps a low profile but has a reputation for producing some of Britain's finest guns. **John Martland** pays a visit

**A**. A. Brown & Sons is one of the most prolific and yet under appreciated gunmakers in the country and as the firm is currently celebrating its 65th anniversary, now seems like a good time to shed more light on the company.

Over the years, this Birmingham-based firm has built guns for many well-known marques, together with a host of retailers and trading companies. Despite this, it has managed to remain low key, never attending the big shows in the USA, nor taking stands at game fairs.

Very much a gunmakers' gunmaker, Brown's history is well documented if not well known, most notably in Douglas Tate's excellent book, *Birmingham Gunmakers*, and the late Geoffrey Boothroyd's extensive body of superb written work.

Briefly, Albert Arthur Brown and his son Albert Henry Brown established the company in 1938. They were joined six months later by Albert Arthur's other son, Sidney, and

► **At the helm of this family-run firm of international renown is Robin Brown**

quickly gained a reputation as the firm that the gun trade turned to when only the very best work would do.

This state of affairs continued into the lean post-war years. When barrel tubes weren't available in the late 1940s, the company turned to making money not from shotguns, but from a nifty little air pistol called the ABAS Major. It was so well built that one author has said the Major "was better than most of the air pistols being built in Germany today".

Through the 1950s and 1960s, the Browns kept building guns for the trade, including a stint housed within Westley Richards' factory, during which time it built some of Westley's best sidelocks, including a few lovely heavy-actioned pigeon guns.

However, in the mid 1970s, 10 years after Sidney's son Robin, the current proprietor of

the firm, started working in the family business, it was decided that if A. A. Brown was going to build the very best, it would do so under its own name. And this is what the firm does today from its base in the mediaeval village of Alvechurch, 14 miles from the centre of Birmingham.

Robin is proprietor and his father Sidney

still, at 86 years of age, puts in a few mornings' work at the bench each week. The business now concentrates on four areas: the building of new A. A. Brown sidelock guns; the customising work that produces, among other guns, the popular Brown/Beretta; the sale and brokerage of pre-owned Best English guns and

the repair, servicing, restoration and best restocking of fine guns.

## The A. A. Brown Supreme Deluxe

A. A. Brown has built both boxlock and sidelock side-by-sides under its own name, but has latterly concentrated on sidelocks. The cost of building

Best guns has escalated so much in recent years that Robin feels it makes commercial sense to focus on the building of Best guns only.

Originally the firm's sidelocks were offered in two models, the Supreme and the Supreme Deluxe. Though of super quality, the Supreme was built using dovetail lump barrels and not







◀ This 20-bore A. A. Brown was built on a 16-bore action at the request of a customer

The semi-round body variant differs from other round-body sidelocks, such as those produced by Boss, Purdey or Holland & Holland, in that the Brown manages to be rounder while still maintaining the traditional sidelock character, with beads, bars and shoulders to the action body. Slightly domed lockplates add to the effect.

It is not just the aesthetic of the guns that have proved hostage to fashion, bore sizes haven't escaped and Robin's books offer testament to the fickle nature of the market. In the past decade overall, 12-bores dominated orders. However, in the past four years, the shift has been to 20-bores. Today, all but one pair of guns on order are 20s.

The prices for new A. A. Brown guns begin at £32,000 excluding engraving. Delivery averages around three years.

## The Brown/Beretta

A. A. Brown has survived because of the flexibility and adaptability of its owners and Robin has maintained this view of business. He firmly believes it is important to give the customer what he wants.

The Brown/Beretta is a prime example. Not many shooters can afford to spend £32,000 plus on a new gun, but many still want to shoot with guns that give pleasure in ownership and a certain pride in good style and taste. Some years ago, Robin noted that the Beretta range of over-and-under guns was proving immensely popular, especially in 20-bore. He spotted a gap in the market.

Robin says: "The little Berettas are so sweet handling, especially in the 20-bore variant, but in my opinion the guns are still some way from the English ideal for gameshooters.

The full A. A. Brown customising package can be carried out on any grade of Beretta — or any imported gun for that matter — but Robin feels, to justify the average £2,500 cost of the customising package, the high-grade EL, EEL and Jubilee models make the best starting points. However, he is keen to point out that he has carried out custom work on grades down to the basic Silver Pigeon.

Robin says: "The work adds value to the piece as well as adding immensely to the pleasure of ownership."

The basic Brown/Beretta modifications include the slimming down and rechequering

of the standard stock, converting the standard Beretta pistol hand to a slim, straight-hand English-style stock, or a Prince of Wales if the customer prefers. The fore-end is removed and slimmed down, usually to a splinter style, and completely re-chequered, again to an

**"Often, Robin has at least a handful of excellent Brown boxlocks and sidelocks for sale. Condition is everything"**

English pattern. The stock also gets an oil finish, gold oval, and superior butt-plate to the standard one. If more length of pull is required, a leather-covered pad can be fitted.

The metalwork doesn't escape Robin's attention either, and it is enhanced to improve even further what Robin describes as "an already excellent product".

These metalwork modifications include the re-engraving of the fore-end latch and the fitting and re-engraving of a long trigger-guard tang. In addition, the shoulders on the barrels where they lock into the action are silvered too and re-engraved, providing a smoother overall line to the gun. Though not cheap, as Robin himself admits, the modifications to Beretta over-and-unders carried out by Brown really enhance an already super product. The guns are well worth a look.

▼ Smooth and sleek, the metalwork on Brown guns really enhances an already superb product



## Brokerage

When you've built as many fine guns as A. A. Brown, it is inevitable that you will be asked to sell guns on behalf of customers, and this is a major part of the business today.

Often, Robin has at least a handful of excellent Brown boxlocks and sidelocks for sale. Condition is everything and Robin insists that any guns he sells come up to his own rigorous standards.

When I visited recently, he had several pairs of best Supreme Deluxes for sale, as well as a pair of round-body assisted-opening boxlocks. Another gun that caught my eye was a beautiful and snake-like Clabrough & Johnstone 20-bore sidelock built in the 1930s. This wasn't only a

▲ When you have a gun this fine, you want the standard of the engraving to match

nice gun, it had shed light on a bit of unknown Brown history. Namely that Robin's grandfather had worked for Johnstone's immediately before setting up A. A. Brown. If Johnstone hadn't failed as a business in 1937, A. A. Brown might never have existed, and what a blow to the British gun trade that would have been.

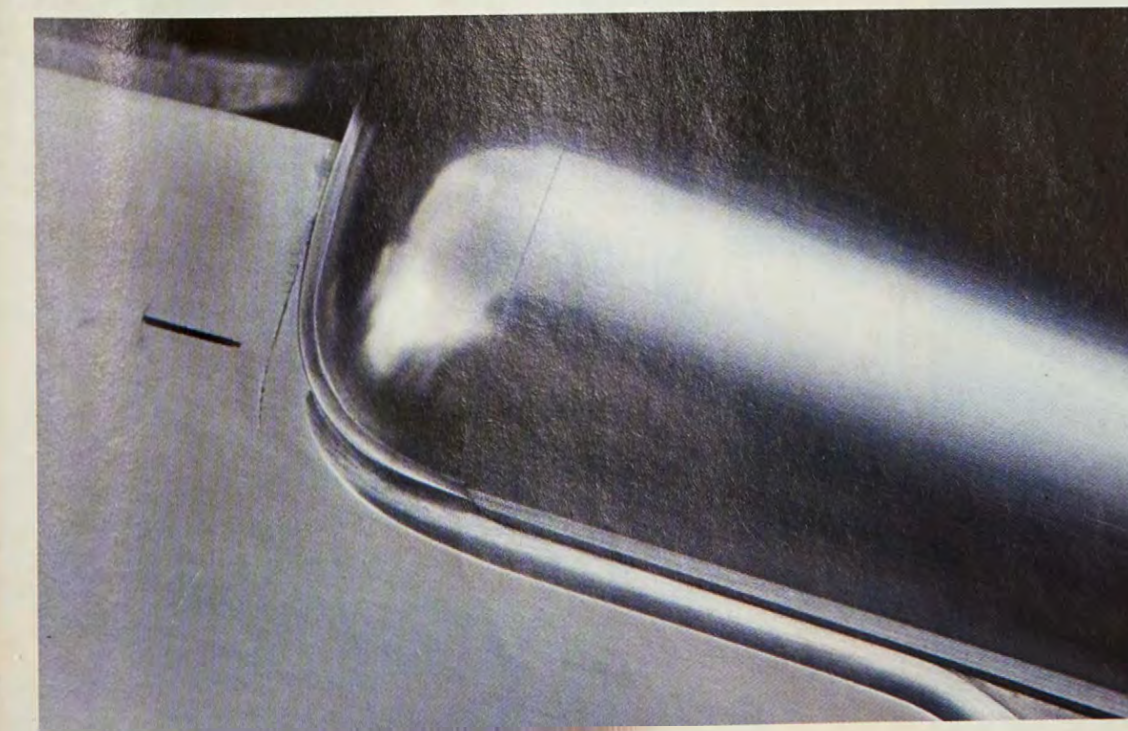
## Restocking, repairs, service and renovation

A major part of A. A. Brown's business today involves the repair, renovation, servicing and restocking of guns, especially Best-quality English examples.

Robin has many loyal customers who come back year after year to get their guns properly serviced or repaired to the best standards of the trade. Brown will also renovate older guns and is renowned for its Best restocking service. If your measurements have changed over the years, if your stock is broken or you just have a favourite gun that deserves better wood, Robin would be glad to hear from you. ■

## CONTACT DETAILS:

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◀ offered with a self-opening action, while the Supreme Deluxe was built with only the very best materials such as chopperlump barrels and exhibition-grade French or Turkish walnut.

These days only the Supreme Deluxe is offered and, unlike most other makers of Best guns, the majority of orders come from British shooters. Robin puts this down to word-of-mouth recommendations and the fact that he has never exhibited at shows in the USA, such as the Safari Club event held every winter in Reno, Nevada.

Explaining his decision to concentrate on only the very best, Robin said: "Because of the cost of making Best guns these days, it makes sense to build only to the highest specifications. The savings made possible by using, say, dovetail lump barrels are so tiny compared to the overall cost of a new gun that it just doesn't make sense to scrimp that way.

"When you're spending more than £30,000 on a new gun, it is a bit short-sighted

to try to save a couple of thousand pounds by lowering the specification, and thus adversely affecting the resale value if you ever choose to take the gun back to the market."

The Supreme Deluxe is offered as a traditional square-bar sidelock or a semi-rounded bar. The semi-rounded model

**"Because of the cost of making Best guns these days, it makes sense to build only to the highest specifications"**

came about through a customer saying that he wanted his new gun to feel as though it had already been worn in. He wanted it to feel more "organic" with softer lines overall.

## HOW CAN YOU TELL IF YOU'VE GOT A BROWN?

Prior to the 1970s, A. A. Brown didn't build that many guns under its own name, however they do crop up from time to time. My own post-war boxlock 12-bore is a good example.

One way to tell if you have a Brown-made gun, especially if it is a sidelock, is that it will have the ABAS trademark on the action flats, in the bottom of the lump slots or at the back of the action. If it is the latter, you'll have to take off the stock to see the word ABAS, an acronym for A. A. Brown & Sons.

