

A VERY SWEET SIXTEEN

After testing their new Hesketh De-Luxe 16 bore, Vic Harker is left with nothing but praise for Longthorne's marriage of traditional aesthetics and revolutionary design.

Shotgun design is a well-trodden path, to the extent that the modern gunmaker, for the most part, is recreating the past. In the Longthorne over-under, however, is a gun breaking new ground in significant areas.

Based in Lancashire, Longthorne Gunmakers Ltd. was founded in 2006. James Longthorne Stewart likes to keep some guns in stock, however, demand is such that there are very few available, and so my test gun was a 16 bore, made to order – the Longthorne Hesketh De-Luxe.

Longthorne's over-under gun is built around a sidelock action. While their guns have a uniqueness about them in some areas, they certainly retain an elegant orthodoxy. The action body incorporates handsome shell fences and beaded side-panels that overrun the bottom plate.

My sample gun was covered in bold acanthus leaf engraving set against a richly figured walnut stock, creating an appearance bordering on the exotic.

The action body's low profile is created by a system adopted by most of the best makers of over-under guns.

This system has wedges integral to its interior walls and reciprocating draws on the sides of the barrel

lumps, which come together when the barrels – which pivot on trunnions – are locked into the action by a bifurcated bolt, moving forward from the breech face and engaging with bites at the sides of the bottom barrel.

The four-pin sidelock action has intercepting sears and rebounding hammers. Innovation takes the form of an integrated bridle that provides a rigidity to the lock-work, thus maintaining consistency in operation. What is particularly attractive about all these features are their small dimensions, which, integrated into the gun's design, provide strength without excessive weight. The ejector work is mounted on the barrels' breech ends and is activated by trips on the forend iron.

The stocking of all Longthorne guns is done in-house, to the customers' requirements. My sample gun featured a well-designed semi-pistol grip configuration that provided an excellent hold for use with a single trigger. The forend wood was made to a schnabel shape, although I personally prefer Longthorne's slim beavertail option.

The one-piece barrel assembly is undoubtedly the most unique component of the gun. Although efforts to produce one piece shotgun barrels have been made in the past, neither the materials employed or the machinery

to make them were up to the task. There are several ways of producing shotgun barrels, but the chopper-lump principle is considered the best. In the case of the over-under, the barrels are dovetailed together at the lumps and then hard soldered. The lumps are pieces of metal integral to the forged tubes, and on the bottom barrel they are left larger to provide sufficient material to joint the barrels to the action. In contrast, the monobloc method, used by most volume manufacturers, is the means by which two separate tubes are inserted into one piece of metal which form the breech ends and the jointing of the barrels. Though immensely strong and much simpler to produce, English makers prefer the former, but both can have their problems in manufacture.

Joining barrels so that they will shoot to the same point of impact involves bending the bottom barrel upwards to the top one, and soldering it in place. This is followed by the fitting of the side ribs, which are also soldered on. It is vital that the barrels converge at a given range, usually at about 40 yards. This is fine if the work is carried out by an expert, but if it is not, the barrels may be found to shoot apart. Longthorne's one-piece assembly, that includes not only the ribs but the jointing of the breech ends and the barrel loop, avoids these complications. Its strength and rigidity is only one benefit of this concept. Accuracy

in terms of placement of the shot charge is another, as with only a 2mm gap between the barrels, they remain perfectly straight and so do not have to be regulated for convergence. My test guns 28½" barrels were beautifully straight, and they were also light at 2lbs 13oz.

When I first shot a Longthorne sidelock, in 2006, I immediately dubbed it "the gun you shoot and nothing happens". By this, I meant there is a very noticeable lack of recoil. Its maker explained at the time that this was another advantage of perfectly straight barrels. Without any distortion created by the heating process soldering separate ribs can create, the shot charge is not hindered in any way from leaving the barrel, which also explains the lack of muzzle flip. The Longthorne

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sidelock can be ordered with any barrel length, but I found my test gun's light, relatively short 28½" barrels a perfect combination for fast driven targets at moderate range.

The 16 bore shotgun has long been a favourite of the French, but like most Englishmen, I must admit to have previously given it scant consideration. My test gun, however, wasn't made for an Englishman, and perhaps he appreciated the ballistic advantages of the 16 bore cartridge that Chris

Batha recently described in the pages of this magazine. It also seems that this foreign gentleman appreciated the recoil reducing benefits of barrel porting – another feature discretely incorporated into the Hesketh De-Luxe.

I tested the gun at two separate shooting grounds. At the first of these, I was shooting at targets of medium range, and with the Longthorne's fast handling characteristics, it was almost just a matter of 'point and shoot'.

I was also interested to find out how this relatively short-barrelled gun handled on longer targets, and so at a ground that provides

just the kind of challenge I was looking for, I put it to the test. The gun was a revelation – so long as I remembered

not to prescribe great amounts of lead in the sky, and simply allowed the Longthorne's fast handling to keep me on-target. I do, though, see this 16 bore as a gun primarily for shooting lots of birds quickly at moderate range. With that in mind, one would be wise to consider a pair for the grouse moor.

The Longthorne sidelock is a fine achievement, although the innovations it represents, both in design and manufacture, are explained by its maker in such an unpretentious manner, it is

as though he dreamt them all up in a moment. This gun is the product of years that its creator spent at the cutting edge of modern engineering. At the same time, it retains an entirely traditional appearance that, combined with its revolutionary barrel assembly, gives the gun a twist that makes it unique.

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS:

- Model:** Longthorne Hesketh De-luxe sidelock
- Bore:** 16
- Chambers:** 3" steel proved
- Barrel Length:** 28½" test gun or to customer's requirements
- Chokes:** Fixed or multi-choke
- Rib:** 8mm – 4mm
- Stock:** Semi-pistol grip or to order
- Forend:** Schnabel or to order
- Weight:** 7lbs
- Price:** £18,890

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