

MODERN GUNMAKING

This year's CLA Game Fair was notable for many reasons, but perhaps most interesting and innovative was the presence of new gunmakers Longthorne Guns from Lancashire.

Jim and Elaine Stewart, a husband and wife team, have set themselves the not inconsiderable challenge of producing a 100 per cent English-made 12 bore over-under sidelock shotgun. Retailing for £12,500, it has an impressive list of standard features, including multi-choke 30" barrels with 3" chambers which are proofed for steel shot, auto safety, single selective trigger, replaceable hinge pin, oil finished straight-hand or semi-pistol grip walnut stock and English scroll engraving.

This compares very favourably to other similarly priced over-under guns offered by other English gunmakers which are in fact side-plated boxlock actions made in Italy to English specification by the likes of Batista Rizzini and Caesar Guerini. The Longthorne Hesketh is a true sidelock and is 100 per cent English made.

The Stewarts have run their own precision engineering business for 25 years in both England and Australia. They have 30 years experience of manufacturing precision engineering components for the chemical, automotive, auto sport, aerospace and medical industries. Over the years they have also constructed parts for other firearms manufacturers and work to tolerances of plus or minus three micrometers, which is about a third of the width of a human hair.

Solid experience

Jim's engineering CV includes designing and developing a prosthetic device for a Japanese company to help paraplegics to walk. He designed and manufactured a range of high-end bicycle components which were sold throughout Australia. As a highly-skilled and entrepreneurial engineer with an extensive knowledge of metallurgy and engineering practices, he recognised the requirement to invest in the best quality equipment available in order to guarantee the consistently

high tolerances required by his specialist customers. That investment is now paying dividends in the form of the quality of engineering evident in the shotgun barrels and action on display at Ragley Hall.

I asked Elaine what motivated them to take on the challenge of producing a true English sidelock.

"Jim enjoys a challenge, loves shooting and takes great satisfaction in overcoming engineering problems, of which there have been many on this journey. It started with an idea in June 2006; after a conversation with a shooting friend, Jim saw a gap in the market for a quality, wholly English-made shotgun within this price bracket and believed we could do it.

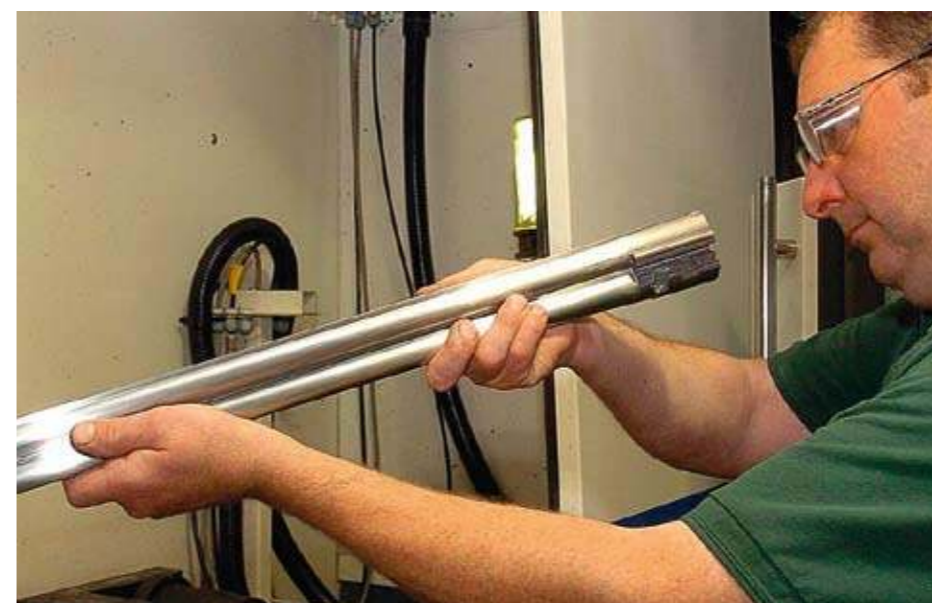
"We wanted to produce a gun with all the qualities of the guns of a bygone age, but at a more affordable price. Friends from the shooting fraternity have been incredibly supportive, especially when the going got tough. The first hurdle we had to overcome was securing a Registered Firearms Dealer (RFD), and John Batley of the Gun Trade Association (GTA) was both helpful and enthusiastic, so naturally we joined the GTA.

"The difficulty came when we decided to launch the Hesketh at the Game Fair. After a conversation with Richard Mabbitt at the London Proof House the barrels were tested on the Friday prior to the show. Jim worked through the night the Thursday before to make sure all the

New blood

After making their public debut at the CLA Game Fair, Longthorne Guns are setting out to revive gunmaking in England. **John Newton** investigates the latest addition to a historic and traditional industry.

The Hesketh 12 bore over-under sidelock is made in England and retails at £12,500.



The barrels are machined from a single billet and have true solid joining and top ribs.

necessary components would be available for the test. He was less than coherent when a good friend collected him at 4am for the drive to London, but the barrels performed superbly, providing us with the reassurance the guns can now be proofed for 3" steel."

A brand new name

So why didn't the Stewarts resurrect an old English gunmaking name?

"We decided not to buy a name because we wanted to create our own identity. Someone recently commented it could appear that we lack provenance because we had not relaunched a name. We don't see the point in pretending we have a provenance. In time we'll create our own, we hope," said Elaine. ➤

“We’re a modern company with modern ideas and wanted a modern name. Although known as Stewart, Longthorne-Stewart is our correct family name. We decided to resurrect the ‘Longthorne’ and use it as the name of the company as it is a quite distinctive and relatively uncommon name. After much deliberation we decided to call the gun the Hesketh after the part of west Lancashire in which it is produced. We felt the county deserved some form of recognition since the idea was conceived there.”

The inner workings

The Hesketh is a modified Boss-type action with split replaceable hinge pins. It is locked by a combination of draws and wedges and a bifurcated bolt engaging with recesses cut into the sides of the breech of the bottom barrel. The barrels are machined from a single billet so they have true solid joining and top ribs. Elaine explained: “We toyed with many designs for the action, having manufactured them in soft metal to get a feel for the aesthetics. When we look back at the original designs there is no resemblance at all to how the gun looks now.

“After numerous attempts, many headaches and a large pile of barrels which are neither use nor ornament, we finally perfected our manufacturing methods. Our barrels are constructed from a single solid piece of very high specification material resulting in them being extremely strong but also light.

“The action and internal parts are also constructed from very high specification materials and to exacting tolerances, but

hand-finishing is still a crucial part of production.”

I suggested some potential buyers might think the Hesketh is just another factory-made gun due to the method of manufacture, but Elaine holds no such concerns: “We believe equal skill is needed to produce a gun of this quality as is required to produce one wholly made by more traditional methods. It’s not just a matter of pushing buttons and waiting for the gun to fall out the other end.

“A high level of mechanical engineering skill is required besides a good knowledge of design, metallurgy, and excellent programming skills. You have to know how metals will react under different conditions and uses. There are now many high spec materials on the market which would be very difficult to manipulate by hand, and if technology is to progress we need to implement more modern methods. Our products are all hand finished, so we have to have hands-on skills as well, however the end result will be very precise.

“Naturally, we also believe there will always be a market for totally hand-made bespoke guns, and the two methods can compliment each other. We have the greatest respect for those gunmakers who continue to manufacture guns using traditional methods in the UK.

“There are many companies in England who have to use foreign parts manufactured in a similar way to ours to compete in the marketplace, and we don’t see any reason why these parts can’t be made in England and help to revive the British gunmaking industry.”

Many shooters are blissfully ignorant of the internal workings of their favourite gun, but have a preference for a nicely figured and well-finished stock and an appreciation of fine engraving.

“We engaged the services of John Hopkins of H.G. Hopkins to design the shape of the stock for the prototype gun. We wanted something with a traditionally English element but with some modern features. The stock of the prototype gun has been left oversize to allow for future adjustment and custom fitting, although the production model gun will have a range of standard stock lengths.

“We felt the engraving design was very important, as someone once told us “it is better to engrave a good design badly than a bad design well” and we agree with this philosophy. We engaged the services of a person much more knowledgeable in this field than us to formulate the design, and then translated this onto the gun both mechanically and by hand.

“For those who want a more bespoke finish to their guns can refer them to a top engraver. Our daughter Chloe has recently joined the company after completing university. She has a good artistic temperament and hopes to eventually become an engraver.

“Our plan is to have guns ready for trial soon and we envisage an initial lead time of four months, although there could be some amendment to this depending on how many orders we take. There will undoubtedly be further improvements to processes, potentially speeding up the build process.

“A 20 bore Hesketh is next in the development pipeline, but we were asked many times at the Game Fair about working with the gun trade and it would be a pleasure to do so. We were overwhelmed by the amount of interest we received over the course of the fair and are really looking forward to whatever the future holds.”

For more information on Longthorne Guns visit www.longthorneguns.com, telephone 01772 811215 or alternatively email enquires@longthorneguns.com.



The gun has 30" barrels with 3" chambers which are proofed for steel shot.