

# The long road to Northamptonshire

*Longthorne Guns has established itself as a go-to gunmaker for many high-profile shots, and its recent move to new premises suggests the future is even brighter, as Mary Bremner discovers.*

Is there room for a completely new gunmaker? This must surely have been one of the questions asked during the CLA Game Fair at Ragley Hall in 2010 when Longthorne Guns first appeared. Who was this company that no one had ever heard of? What did it have to offer that was different, or dare it be said, better than what was already available?

Elaine and Jim Longthorne Stewart were complete unknowns when they launched Longthorne Guns in 2010. Their background was in precision engineering and they had nothing to do with the gun trade. They ran a successful engineering company in Australia but decided to return to the UK in 1998, eventually settling in Lancashire. The pair opened a factory in St Helens that had high-precision tools in a business that focused on the high tech end of the engineering market. They had been making gun parts in Australia and supplied equipment for the medical market, as well as racing bike parts and components for the automotive trade. This was not enough for Jim though, who had become disillusioned with never producing an end product. His passion was for design, so he wanted to produce something from start to finish.

Jim has loved guns for a long time, being brought up around them because of his farming background. A

keen shooter and engineer, he has also always been fascinated by machines.

“Jim was a great one for taking things apart and putting them back together again, and was often doing this to guns,” explained Elaine. “He decided he could improve on the traditional shotgun so set about

producing a prototype. We already had the equipment to make a gun and Jim had the engineering experience and knowledge to design one.”

Jim’s design is innovative in that the barrels of a Longthorne gun are made from a single billet of steel, so the two barrels are not soldered together, unlike other shotguns. This makes the guns strong and light with low recoil. The barrels are parallel rather than converging but maintain a tighter pattern for a longer distance.

## SETTING UP SHOP

“We bought a property at Hesketh Bank and set up our business in what was effectively a potting shed at the bottom of our garden,” said Elaine. “We had all of our equipment crammed in and could barely move but Longthorne Guns was established.”

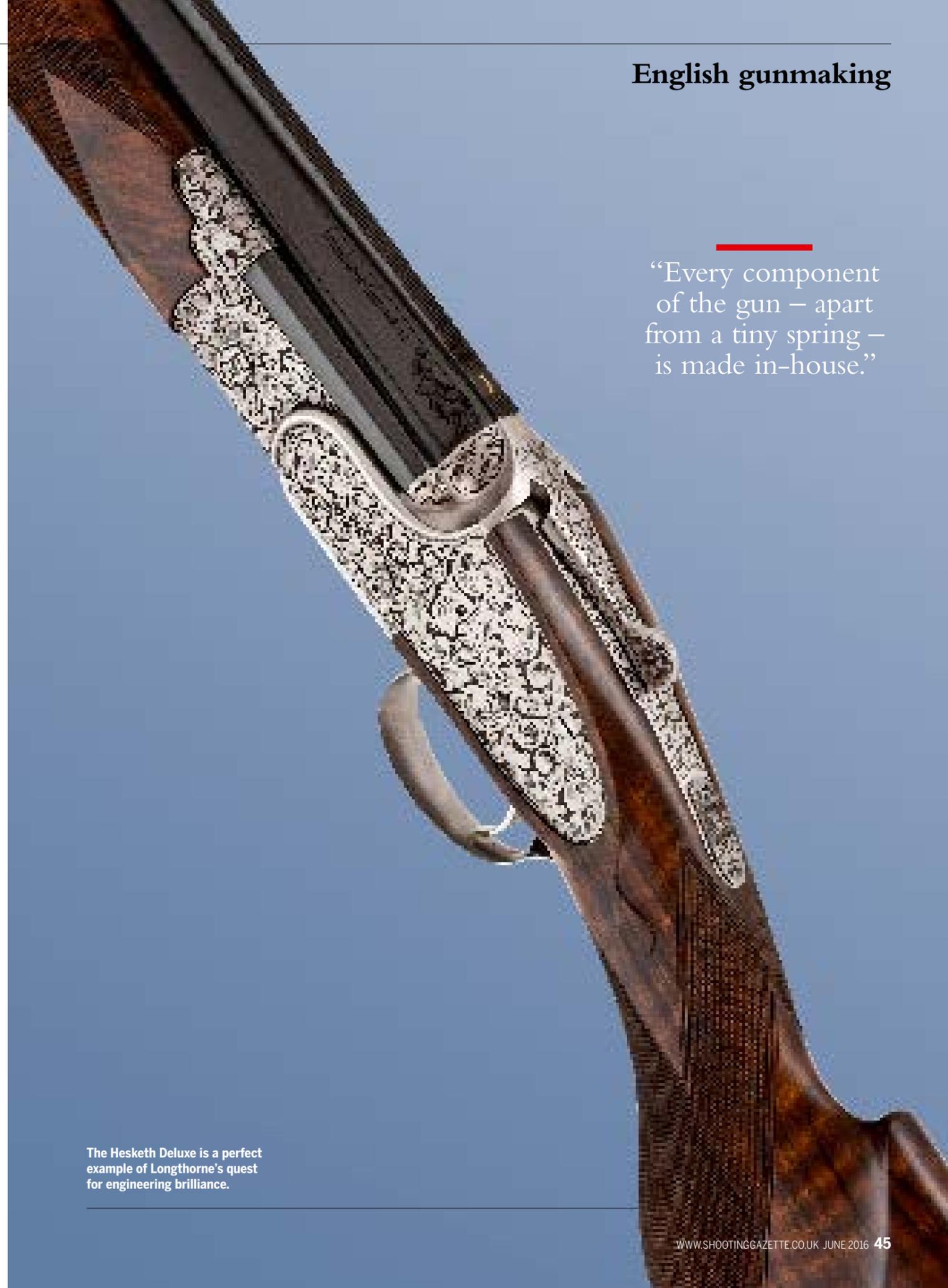
This was back in 2006 and it took until 2010 to get the design right and then a last-minute rush to get it proofed before heading to Ragley Hall to show off their new gun, a 12 bore sidelock ejector. The barrel technology has since been patented.

Jim and Elaine pride themselves on the fact that every component of the gun – apart from a tiny spring – is made in-house and believe they are the only company in the UK that does this. The guns are English made on high-tech equipment but hand finished. ➤



Elaine and Jim Longthorne Stewart have come a long way since the day their gunmaking company was founded in 2006.

“Every component of the gun – apart from a tiny spring – is made in-house.”



The Hesketh Deluxe is a perfect example of Longthorne’s quest for engineering brilliance.



The 400-strong stock of walnut was chosen by Elaine and Jim.



Longthorne's barrels are manufactured using a single billet of steel.



The company is now able to produce 250 guns a year.



It's a family business, spearheaded by Jim and Elaine, plus daughter Chloe.

Each 'standard' model from the initial order to completion takes between nine and 10 months to deliver.

**A SHOTGUN FOR LIFE?**

Many in the gun trade were cynical, some were hostile but others were supportive. Most thought the venture wouldn't last, but six years down the road Longthorne Guns is thriving. It's also interesting that there are no Longthorne guns available on the second-hand market. People who buy these guns keep them. "The guns are light, reliable and pointable. They work so our customers keep them and use them," said Elaine.

There are now 120 or so guns in the field, so to speak, mainly in the UK, but they have sent products to Australia, the US, Egypt and Europe. A member of an unnamed royal family has six of them, the Duchess of Rutland four and the Earl of Leicester

**"All of these guns have the precision and accuracy of a Swiss timepiece."**

owns a pair. Many of the sales are led by word of mouth and word is spreading. Initially the guns were all sidelock ejectors in 12, 20 and 16 bore but, excitingly, Longthorne is now making a side-by-side. The Duke of Westminster will have one of the first ones manufactured. Twenty-eight bores and .410s are now in the production schedule and this year Longthorne plans to introduce a cheaper boxlock to the market, too. All of these guns are designed by Jim and could be described as having the precision and accuracy of a Swiss timepiece.

**UPPING STICKS TO NORTHAMPTONSHIRE**

Longthorne Guns has been very busy. So much so that by 2013 the company had outgrown its premises in Hesketh Bank and was on the lookout for new ones.

"We decided we wanted to be more central and needed to be where we could find skilled staff who could operate our machines. Northampton proved to be the perfect location as it's so central, near lots of major motorways and, most importantly, being the centre of the automotive trade, there would be lots of experienced engineers who could operate our equipment," said Elaine.

It took nearly two years to find the right premises but in October 2015 Jim and Elaine were able to move the business, lock, stock and barrel, to Northampton. It was a mammoth task: 14 machines weighing up to 25

tonnes each had to be dismantled and taken 160 miles to the new premises. It was very stressful and there were teething problems, as to be expected, but it all looks to be working out now with new machines purchased and new staff employed.

When Longthorne Guns left Lancashire it employed two people. That figure has now risen to seven and by the end of 2016 this number will have increased to 20 or so. The move has given the company much more room and the factory really is state of the art. Walking around the premises, it was interesting to see a room full of blocks of walnut, 400 of them, all hand-picked by Jim and Elaine. "We went out to Turkey and I was terrified as the factory was very near the Syrian border," Elaine explained. "We got some fabulous walnut though, and we will have to do it all over again in a year or so to get more."

At the moment Longthorne Guns uses laser-bore sights to test the fit of the guns but the factory is large enough that it will be able to have a 40m-pattern plate installed. But the most exciting machine in the factory, from an engineering point of view, is the robotic cell. This is made up of several machines including a spark eroder and a robot. The robot moves the parts between the other two machines so there is no risk of human error. This means the gun parts will always fit perfectly. This high-tech piece of kit, the expansion plans and capital investment of more than £500,000 on two of the machines alone has attracted an award and a development grant of £53,000 from a leading university.

Longthorne now has the capacity to produce 250 guns a year across its whole range, and has orders for more than 100 for this year already.

"We are going through some very exciting times," Elaine explained, "and it's fantastic to see after such a lot of hard work."

The business is still very much a family concern. Elaine and Jim are the directors but they have an extra member of staff who deserves a mention. Chloe, their daughter, is a talented artist and designs all of the engraving that goes on the guns, as well as bespoke designs that have included crests for the various aristocrats and a memorial gun for a customer who wanted a portrait of his late wife and dogs included on the breech.

It would appear these "new" kids on the block are here to stay – Longthorne certainly deserves to. 🦋

For more information on Longthorne Guns, visit [longthorneguns.com](http://longthorneguns.com)