

Jules Whicker spends time with the Hesketh Deluxe from Longthorne and discovers a shotgun that combines tradition with state of the art technology...

When you think of a bespoke English gun, your thoughts probably turn to the classic designs developed in the late 19th or early 20th Centuries by the grand London firms, or by their more productive if less feted counterparts in Birmingham; and to modes of manufacture handed down from master to apprentice from even earlier times. The world of the fine shotgun, it can seem, is all about striving to recreate the past.

What is too easily forgotten is that what drove men like Atkin, Beesley (Purdey), Robertson

(Hollands' and Boss) and Scott (Purdey and Boss) was the pursuit of perfection, and they seized avidly on every new invention that offered to bring it within their grasp. Indeed, if anything held them back it was less likely to be the technical challenges they faced than the cautious conservatism of their customers. But why am I banging on about bespoke guns here? Which of us can afford them? And who is prepared to wait the year or three it may take from order to delivery?

Before you sigh wistfully, or shrug resignedly, however, take heart and pay attention, because I've just been shooting

something really exciting: a bespoke English gun that combines classic looks and traditional fit and finish with cutting-edge technology; that can be delivered in a matter of months and that doesn't require the sale of your firstborn! Better still, it's in my favourite gauge: the unfairly overlooked, but very sweet 'sixteen'.

It's a family affair!

This very special gun comes from the 'new' firm of Longthorne (which unbelievably is already celebrating its 10th anniversary this year). Like many of the great gunmaking concerns of the past, it's a family business,



The test gun showed ported barrels. Note how the barrel set's construction enables the sighting rib to be at once solid (as befits a game gun), broad, and light

established by James Longthorne Stewart – an avid shooter with an impressive background in aerospace and autosport engineering – his wife Elaine, and their daughter Chloe, whose



Bespoke Beauty

remarkable eye for design and skill at engraving ensures that the aesthetics of a Longthorne gun will please the shooter as much as its performance.

The marriage of modern technology with traditional craftsmanship that the Longthorne represents is in itself nothing new. Italian firms such as Ivo Fabbri and Rizzini Fratelli arguably pioneered this approach, but several big English names have followed suit in their own way for a couple of decades now, and this path has been energetically (and successfully) followed by Boxall and Edmiston since their founding in 2009. So how are Longthorne different? Well, if you think you know what perfectionism is, meeting James will redefine it for you. He's a man who can focus intensely on the finest fractions of a micron or an angle and

yet keep the whole gun, and the whole shooting experience, in view at the same time. In fact, for him, they are the same thing. This means that the gun opens and closes with the greatest of ease, but without even the slightest hint of play; and that sears can be tuned to offer precisely the breaking point and weight the customer desires.

What epitomises a Longthorne gun, however, are its barrels, which are machined from a single billet of steel, complete with their lumps, loop, ribs and choke. On any other gun, the barrel tubes are bored, profiled, aligned and joined to and by their ribs in separate processes. These employ solder, and heat, and require one barrel to be bent towards the other to ensure they converge at the appropriate distance. As can be

The wood on the test gun was flamboyantly beautiful. Longthorne have a wide selection of first-rate walnut blanks available for customers to choose from

imagined, it takes immense skill on the part of the barrel-maker and joiner to produce barrels that are truly straight. Moreover, this process requires the steel to be flexible, and this 'softness'

requires a certain thickness of the barrel wall. This is why light barrels are commonly taken to be a mark of a best quality gun. Finally, soldering means that the contact between the barrels and ribs is typically less than entirely consistent, and can have a localised effect on the temper of the steel, making for uneven heat transfer and inducing distortion as the gun warms up with each shot fired.

Longthorne's process, the principle for which was envisaged by Whitworth in the 19th Century but never successfully put into practice, has taken some years to perfect, but now produces what are plausibly the most accurate barrel sets in the world. Because all the elements are integrated and perfectly regulated from the start, they don't have to be coerced into position. This both ensures that the barrels remain perfectly



This beautifully engraved rose on the trunnion head is one of several that lend further character to the Hesketh Deluxe's ornamentation



Two pigeons taken moments apart: the first curling over high, and the second busting from cover at the shot. The Hesketh handled both with an aplomb I can rarely muster

Resplendent in fine walnut and opulent engraving, Longthorne's Hesketh Deluxe sidelock O/U is also a masterpiece of precision engineering

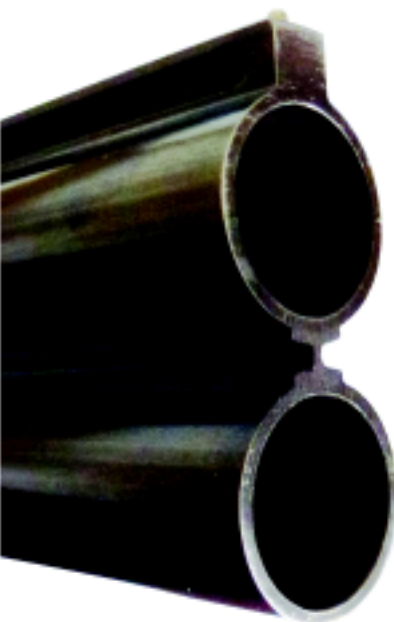


straight and permits the use of stronger steel – strong enough to proof for magnum steel up to extra full choke. Furthermore, Longthorne's unique method of barrel manufacture, which reduces the amount of metal required in the ribs, means that their guns are naturally lighter, so that a Longthorne 12-gauge handles more like a

conventional 20-gauge, and a 32-inch feels like a 28-inch.

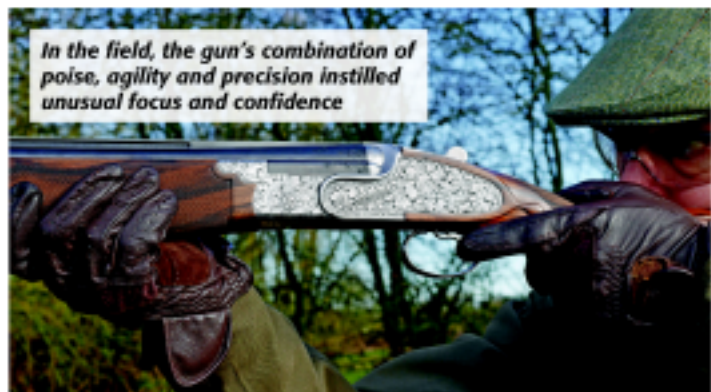
Further consistency is provided by the fact that Longthorne's bores are 100% concentric with the tubes, as opposed to a traditionally constructed barrel set in which steel bars have to be bored internally and then profiled externally: if either operation isn't perfectly executed the barrels will bend as they heat up. Moreover, the fineness of the ribs and the absolute consistency of their relationship with the barrels means that heat is dispersed evenly as well as quickly along the whole length of the barrel.

Many volume shotgun manufacturers get around the fact that their barrels may not be perfectly straight and even by over-boring them and using long forcing cones and parabolic chokes to give the shot extra leeway throughout its journey from chamber to muzzle. With a perfect barrel, none of this is necessary, as the bore guides the wad and shot tight, straight and true from start to finish.



Perfectly straight, remarkably light, and extraordinarily strong:

In the field, the gun's combination of poise, agility and precision instilled unusual focus and confidence



Consequently, a Longthorne gun typically has short cones and minimal choke, yet produces wonderfully even patterns right out to the point where the shot loses its killing power.

Masters of the art

So, why doesn't everyone make their barrels this way? Perhaps one day everyone will, but for now, only Longthorne have the means and the expertise. Make no mistake, what Longthorne do is exceptionally sophisticated and exceptionally difficult. There are no short cuts here. The pursuit of perfection isn't like that. A word should also be said about the lockwork since, although the shape of the components

is largely conventional, Longthorne have applied their expertise in machining complex components to making the bridge – the part that aligns and supports the moving parts of the lock – integral to the lock plate. The squareness and straightness of the bridge in relation to the plate is fundamental to the operation of any sidelock and represents a major test of the lock-maker's skill, yet Longthorne's integrated approach ensures that this crucial factor is perfectly executed every time.

So, what of the gun on test? Well, it's the first 16-gauge Longthorne made, and James' personal gun. It

is stocked in richly figured, traditionally oil-finished walnut, and beautifully engraved with a luscious acanthus-leaf pattern, which makes the most of the action's sinuous lines, and whose opulent medievalism recalls the work of the great Victorian stylists Augustus Pugin and William Morris. The detailing is beautifully done too, with Lancastrian roses on spindle, screw and trunion heads that pay homage to the firm's original home at Hesketh Bank –from which the gun takes its name–, prior to their recent move to larger premises at Northampton.

I'll not go further into the details of finish, fit or proportion, because on a bespoke gun these will always be to the customer's requirements, but I will say something about the way the gun shot. Firstly, it's a real killer, and at surprising distances. Tight patterns mean it's not a gun that forgives sloppy shooting, but its combination of poise, agility and precision means that the more you shoot it, the better your shooting seems to become. My own skills are typically modest, and my form patchy, but the Longthorne had me shooting like someone who knows what he's doing. An elating experience!

Conclusion

When I took the gun roost shooting in late February I made another discovery too: it's as good on a close curling bird as it is on a high straight one. What's more, the Longthorne exhibited the least muzzle flip

of any gun I've shot; it may have something to do with the vented barrels (a bespoke feature) but I suspect that once again it's down to those tight super-straight bores. It's certainly a great aid to maintaining your concentration when presented with the opportunity for a right and left! (or bottom and top?).

So, is there anything I don't like about the Longthorne? Not a thing, except perhaps the extent to which I'm tempted to raid my savings to acquire one! The Hesketh Deluxe on test would retail from just shy of £20K, and the less ornate Hesketh model from £15,200. This is a lot in the world of everyday mass-produced guns, but an absolute steal for what is genuinely a 'best English' sidelock gun. Consider that a side-plated (not sidelock) B&E 16 gauge over-and-under will cost upwards of £29K, whilst Churchill's Imperial sidelock starts at £42K. Remember too that all the great names started somewhere: Boss in 1812, Purdeys' in 1814, Hollands' in 1835, Atkin in 1877, Churchill's in 1891... and I've got a strong feeling that just a decade on from their establishment in 2006, and just six-years on from launching their first gun, Longthorne now have their foot firmly in the door of gunmaking history.

Okay, then, what's it to be, a new VW Golf that will be worth next to nothing in 10-years' time, or a new Longthorne that will not only hold its value but comes complete with the promise of more than a lifetime's worth of joy? **GM**



The Hesketh Deluxe wears its name with pride, and deservedly so



The quality of the engraving and chequering attests to the fact that each Longthorne gun is unique, made to meet the specific requirements of its buyer



The raked semi-pistol grip suited the gun, and me, perfectly, as did the curve and width of the trigger blade

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATION

Model:	Longthorne Hesketh Deluxe
Calibre:	16 bore
Barrels:	30-inches, as tested
Action:	Break-barrel sidelock
Type:	Over and Under
Stock:	Sporter
Weight:	6lbs 10oz
Chokes:	Fix 1/4 both barrels
Price:	£19,970
Contact:	Longthorne Gunmakers Ltd www.longthorneguns.com