



Aiming for the perfect gun



MIKE MONTGOMERY visits an English gunmaker that is successfully marrying modern technology with traditional craftsmanship.

In this age of digital technology and mass production, it's comforting to know that in UK gunmaking there is still a place for craftsmanship and bespoke personal service.

So it is with Longthorne Guns, which was founded in 2006 in Lancashire by engineer James Longthorne Stewart and his wife Elaine with the aim of invigorating British gunmaking through a combination of innovative modern manufacturing techniques and traditional craftsmanship.

After a few years' development their first shotgun was launched at The Game Fair in 2010. Immediately it drew favourable comment and reviews for its stylish quality and revolutionary engineering approach. This is perhaps best illustrated in the patented barrel design.

Most double-barrels are made from two separate steel tubes soldered together. This is a critical stage of manufacture as the barrels have to be aligned so the shot paths converge about 30-40m in front. Not only is this difficult to achieve consistently, heat from the soldering can distort the barrels, affecting accuracy. Also, blacking chemicals can get lodged in the solder joint, leading to corrosion.

Longthorne overcomes these issues by

machining both barrels, and rib, from a single block of steel using computer-controlled cutters with precise tolerances. This allows a thicker-walled, stronger, perfectly straight barrel combination with just enough metal between the barrels to ensure rigidity while keeping weight low.

Coupled with a very low-profile action and bespoke stock using the best materials, this all makes for a streamlined yet practical and robust shotgun, which is both attractive and, having low recoil, a delight to shoot.

Order a Longthorne gun and they'll show you around the factory and discuss your preferences of barrel length, choking, stock and forend shapes, choice of wood and engraving design. You will be presented with a specification sheet and estimated costings. You'll also be measured for some rough stock dimensions and you can choose your wood from around 700 pieces of prime Turkish walnut kept in stock.

On payment of a deposit, they start on the component parts of your gun and, if you have decided on engraving, James and Elaine's daughter Chloe will start work on the design. You could have anything, but popular themes include your dog or

family crest. The engraving is carried out using various methods from photo-etching to full hand engraving, depending on how much time and money you want to invest in it.

Once the barrels are proofed, the next stage is to black them, complete the engraving and start fitting the gun together. At this point, you will be invited for a final fitting to ensure that the gun will shoot where you are looking and is a perfect fit every time you mount it. Your stock is then checkered and finished and fitted to the assembled action.

The process usually takes around nine to ten months but this is only an estimate. As Longthorne say: "We prefer to take our time and create a perfect gun."

I was shown around the firm's factory on a small industrial estate on the outskirts of Northampton by Elaine Stewart, who looks after marketing and administration for the business while James concentrates on the engineering and technical side.

Elaine said: "We carry out all manufacturing processes,



Perfectly balanced and incredibly tactile

BASC chief executive Ian Bell writes:

A few months into my role as chief executive, I was getting invitations to shoots and realised I was going to need something better than my trusty Holloway & Naughton non-ejector. Unknown to me, word got to Jim and Elaine at Longthorne and out of the blue they offered to lend me two shotguns. I was invited to their factory to experience the gunmaking and fitting process and a month later I was presented with two fitted guns; a Celtic and Hesketh Deluxe.

I used them for both driven partridge and simulated game days; the guns were a genuine pleasure to shoot. Wonderful to handle, perfectly balanced and incredibly tactile, they had different weights and a different feel. I preferred the Celtic; I shot equally well with both and cannot put my preference down to any particular reason; I just liked it better. I was very sorry to give them back...



assembly and finishing in-house. And we make all our components ourselves from scratch – that way we can ensure the quality and supply. We use materials above normal specification, for instance, our steels are harder and more durable than those used by most gunmakers.

“Our guns are premium products, but not unaffordable; our range starts at £17,400 including vat and Renaissance model is very popular at around £38,000 or £75,000 a pair, which we think is very good value for bespoke shotguns.

“Most of our clients are UK-based but we are expanding to overseas markets; we now have dealers in the US, Belgium and soon to be Switzerland. At the moment, we have nine employees, including apprentices, but are currently looking to take on more staff. We are looking for CNC programmers and operators, a polisher and an admin assistant.

“Good engineers are very difficult to get hold of, especially ones with the passion and enthusiasm for the job.”

And it looks like there’ll be plenty to keep them busy as the

company is now working on producing a rifle built with the same attention to engineering excellence.

This commitment to quality and innovation has won Longthorne guns many fans among high-profile shooters, including BASC chief executive Ian Bell.

When James and Elaine heard on the shooting grapevine that Ian had been invited to a prestigious grouse shoot but did not have suitable guns for the occasion, they quickly offered to lend him a pair of their Celtic 12 bores. He relays his impression of the guns in the panel above.

The continuing success of this pioneering company and its dedication to quality, innovation and training the craftsmen and women of the future can only bode well for the UK gunmaking industry as a whole.

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