



LONGTHORNE GUNS: AN ENGINEERED SUCCESS

By Tom Jones

English engineering has a rather peculiar stereotype. Whether it's cars or candlesticks, when we think of British engineering it's almost impossible to not think of a small man, perhaps clad in a ragged lab coat or coveralls worn at the elbows and knees, tinkering with something. You probably can't see him using anything more complex than a spanner and a hammer. He's probably in a glorified garden shed and the most important piece of kit, without which he could not work, is the kettle.

This, to be fair, is not far from the truth for most English gunmakers either. Most are more akin to English car manufacturers like Morgan, than Rolls Royce. Totally traditional, using the exact same methods that have made English guns since the invention of the Anson-Deeley lock in 1875. It's very much the 'If it ain't broke, don't fix it' approach. After all, the principles of shooting haven't changed either - and if it was good enough for the Prince of Wales, why not you?

These are, of course, perfectly reasonable responses. Shooting has not changed. Pheasants haven't got faster, nor have grouse suddenly developed an immunity to shot (which would presumably be developed by exposure to smaller, less deadly shot). But, by the same token, nor has the principle of driving - yet there is a reason the Morgan is now considered a quaint weekend car, rather than a pure bred racer. Technology has overtaken them. So as those buying guns looked for newer technology, sadly, they also began to look abroad. The huge British shotgun industry was once a bewildering array of names, producing a broad range of guns to suit almost every taste and budget; these days are long gone. Foreign gun manufacturers, less tied to a sense of heritage, proved more adaptable, more able to provide what customers wanted.

Against this backdrop, of an industry in need of regeneration, Longthorne Guns emerged. Begun by English husband and wife team James and Elaine Stewart, Longthorne aimed to fuse modern, precise engineering methods with the attention to detail that the expert traditional craftsmen methods of British gunmaking require. Both James, an expert engineer, and Elaine, with a wealth of experience in sales and marketing, had run their own engineering companies before.

James had made gun parts beforehand, but saw a gap in the market for an English shotgun manufacturer making innovative, new products - the kind that had killed off many English gun manufacturers in the first place. So in 2006, the pair began making guns in a tiny workshop at the back of the family's home, in Lancashire.

This shed-cum-workshop is where the similarities between Longthorne and other small English manufacturers end, for Longthorne's workshop was filled not just with traditional tools, but million's of pounds worth of engineering equipment. This, really, is where Longthorne's secret lies - all this equipment is designed to give Longthorne guns a killer advantage; their barrels are made from a single piece of steel.

Now I know very little of engineering, so I approached this with caution; was it a modern marketing ploy, or did it give the guns concrete benefits? Sometimes, a picture can say a thousand words; after I was shown such an image, of a Range Rover parked on a pair of Longthorne barrels, then put back into the gun and fired, I got the general gist. Essentially sculpting the barrels from a single, monolithic block of steel makes the barrels both stronger and more accurate.



They're stronger because there are no weld joints - they're proofed at the highest level available in the UK, and the machine that makes them works to tolerances that are almost infinitesimally marginal - the straighter, more flawless the barrels, the more accurate the shot.

The process of ordering a Longthorne is more akin to that of a tailor, rather than a gunmaker; fittings are taken at the Northampton factory, and then you're given the choices. Instead of cloth, cut and cuffs, however, you choose length, choking, shape, wood and engraving pattern.

As each gun is made to order, it can take an agonisingly long 9 months; good things may come to those who wait, sure, but that's no comfort when you want it NOW, is it? Then, much like a Savile Row tailor, you're invited in for a second fitting, before the final flourishes are applied. The gun is chequered and the wood given that incredible, deep lustre that marks fine guns from the rest. Then, and only then, it's all yours.

Longthorne typifies many of the greatest assets of British industry. It's quite prepared to strike out on its own, to do its own thing and hang the competition. I admire that; it takes guts, and guts is what we need. Hopefully, Longthorne's new approach will spur some competition for English gun manufacturing; bringing shots back to British guns is good for all.

