

Pioneers with big plans

As a modern British business with high ambitions, Longthorne Gunmakers is creating quite a stir, as **Adrian Blundell** discovers.

Established by Jim Longthorne Stewart and his wife Elaine, Longthorne Gunmakers was founded in 2006 and its first gun was revealed to the public at the CLA Game Fair in 2010. Jim and Elaine are engineers first and foremost, and their 35-year history in the trade has seen them manufacturing parts for the aerospace and autosport industries in Australia, where they worked for several years. All their orders were close tolerance, with no room for failure.

It was discussions with a UK-based customer that tempted them back from Down Under and Jim, someone who just has to know how things work and how they can be improved, started to think about applying their expertise to producing shotguns.

“We wanted to do something for ourselves,” is how he puts it. “We originally planned to produce things reasonably conventionally using our CNC expertise, but I soon thought there should be a better way to do it.”

The quest for precision

Being engineers who shoot rather than shooting people who understand engineering, they are unashamedly 21st century, and their use of CNC machinery goes further than many other manufacturers. A few years ago CNC machines were considered a big departure by some and not every venture was successful. But I well remember reviewing the Holland & Holland Royal game gun in the early 1990s, which was one of its early examples of the marriage between CNC and hand-craftsmanship. It was a



Jim Longthorne Stewart seeks perfection in all his gunmaking work.

“Here’s the big difference – the barrels and rib are honed from just one piece of metal.”

real beauty that I loved using and the CNC techniques Hollands employed then are now almost mainstream.

But what about the guns made by Longthorne today at its headquarters in the market garden area of Hesketh Bank near Southport? Certainly the action has all the hallmarks of a high-grade sidelock, incorporating features such as four pins with intercepting sears and rebounding hammers. Its integrated bridle brings rigidity to the lock-work and is apparently very consistent in operation. Longthorne machines, grinds and polishes its sears to such a fine tolerance that each lock can be matched to within less than 1/2oz on the trigger-pull weight and once set, are consistent for at least 100,000 shots prior to any adjustment being necessary. It goes without saying every mechanism is individually regulated.

Every pair of Longthorne barrels is machined from a solid billet of steel, to one third of a micron tolerance. Putting that into context, a human hair or sheet of paper measures around 80 microns. In terms of gunmaking it doesn’t get much more precise than that. We’re also looking at material 50 per cent harder than conventional steel. But here’s the big difference – the barrels and rib are honed from just one piece of metal. That’s a real test of engineering which Joseph Whitworth tried in the 1850s but never really mastered. And whilst Jim is coy about some of the details, he did confide that early tests produced one in 20 up to his standards. That ratio is now reversed, which says a lot about Jim’s dedication to detail. “I’m aiming for perfection,” he told me.

The result is perfectly parallel bores which shoot to 24mm apart from muzzle to the point of pellet energy failure on a 12 bore (closer on smaller gauges). A point which Jim illustrates with great enthusiasm using laser bore sights.

The performance test

The question for me though is more about how Longthorne guns actually perform. As a custom-produced gun it seems pretty pointless to talk about stock dimensions, fit and finish – especially with several grades of gun and over 150 stock blanks waiting for clients to choose from.

I borrowed Jim’s gun to use on clays and my first impression was of a relatively lightweight shotgun with pointability that encourages a natural swing. This was accentuated by the sleek lines of its action, thanks to the use of bifurcated lumps. Allowing for my needing a good degree of cast, I soon had the clays smoking and when I changed guns the fit was spot on for me. A 12-bore Longthorne



Longthorne makes a range of over-unders but a move to larger premises will allow for some big developments, including rifles.



All Longthorne over-unders are custom-produced, giving the buyer plenty of options.

with 30" barrels normally weighs in at 7lbs – but can be pared down to 6¼lbs or up to 8.5lb if required. The guns I shot had low felt recoil and less muzzle flip than I am used to, allowing for a faster second shot.

But what happens if the gun accidentally falls under the wheels of the keeper's truck? Jim laughed and later showed me the photo of his Range Rover parked on top of the gun barrels I'd just shot. Point proved.

Special delivery

Four to five months is the current wait for 12 bores. With prices starting at less than £14,000 including VAT, they are remarkable value for money – a true made-to-measure English sidelock. All the guns are machined, actioned with a 'traditional' smoke lamp, stocked and finished in-house. The three current models of over-under shotgun – the Hesketh, Hesketh Deluxe and the Rutland range cater for most budgets and tastes. The embellishment of the guns can obviously also be specified – with James and Elaine's daughter Chloe taking charge of that part of the process to make it a family affair.

Proving she will become as influential in the business as her father, Chloe worked in consultation with Emma, 11th Duchess of Rutland, on the Rutland engraving, using the symbol of Belvoir Castle – a peacock – as inspiration. The first models were 12 bores, featuring gold-plated single triggers, and are available with semi-pistol or straight stocks. But any configuration can be ordered and Longthorne can offer guns from .410 to 12 bore. Specials can be accommodated too and Ray Ward Gunroom in London is soon taking delivery of a Damascus-barrelled pair of Longthornes.

Rifles and new premises

So far so good, but where next? Jim hates to stand still and as well as tweaking the design of the current guns in response to feedback, he plans to produce his first drop-out trigger and trigger-plate guns. Rifles are also on the agenda: double .500 nitro express or .450/500, .700 nitro express and even a single-barrel rifle based on the tried and trusted Mauser 98 action are planned.

To cater for this, Longthorne is moving production from Southport to

new premises near Banbury later in the year. With 10,000sq ft manufacturing space and 2,500sq ft of offices and showrooms, the business is certainly on the move in more ways than one.

The pioneer spirit

When Jim's eyes lit up as he grabbed 1cm-long top-lever locking pins to show how minute changes made their operation more efficient, it was proof enough that he is "always chasing perfection". In many senses Jim and Elaine are following the tradition of the great British gunmakers of the golden age. How well were pioneers such as John and Joe Manton initially received by the gunmakers of the day when they first set up shop? Were innovators such as Purdey, Holland or Woodward immediately accepted?

How long it might take for Longthorne to move on from being the 'new boy on the block' is anyone's guess. If you want to hold history in your hand, get a Best English by all means. But if you want to grab what could be a bit of history in the making, there is a really credible alternative – and at a realistic price. 🦋