

MOVING ON UP

Colin Fallon gets a sneak peek inside Longthorne Guns' new premises in Northampton - and asks whether the 150-mile displacement was worth it



Longthorne's new 10,000sq/ft factory space - there's another 4,000sq/ft of office space upstairs



Elaine presents the new side-by-side barrels, machined, like the o/u, from a solid block of steel

GENUINE RAGS-TO-RICHES stories in the gun trade are a rarity, with most successful ventures having the weight of an existing name behind them to begin with or having big money behind them from another source. Longthorne Guns' provenance might not exactly count as 'rags' - Jim Stewart has a long and lucrative engineering career already behind him and the pair have clearly made a substantial investment in the business - but given how far the company has come since its inception in 2010, you would certainly call it a dizzying rise to prominence. That rise is most evident in Longthorne's new Northampton premises, now operational after the company completed its move at the end of 2015.

As Elaine Stewart shows me round, it's plain that she's happy here. Northampton is a centre of engineering talent and the factory is extensive, that's for sure - but it's the details she's most excited about. The space to install a proper wood room, the trees and stream giving the place a pastoral feel despite its urban setting. Elaine clearly feels at home already, describing Longthorne's previous HQ in Hesketh Bank, Lancashire, as less than ideal.

That might be a bit of an overstatement - I visited in early 2013 and though it had something

of an agricultural feel, it was perfectly functional. The Northampton factory, however, is on a different level. Set over two floors with ample office space, it's got more than double the area of the Lancashire headquarters; and it's built in far more of a modern style, airy and light throughout. Longthorne is still getting fully moved in - Elaine's next appointment in the diary was someone coming to install blinds - but the company is in fine fettle and, crucially, has space to grow.

"We've also invested in an extra two machines, and we've replaced one of the previous ones - we've spent about £750,000 on machinery since we've moved in," says Elaine. The result is an uptick in manufacturing capacity - and once it has caught up, it plans to add a number of new models to the range. "Our sidelock's going to remain our prestige range, and we're going to bring out some less expensive guns as well, some boxlocks. And we'll also bring out some slightly more expensive ones - some really top-notch guns." And, of course, there's the side-by-side, which premiered at IWA and is now nearing full production. "Now we've got the barrel design done, it's very imminent. We've got a few side-by-sides on order now. It's going to be a very different side-by-

side to the conventional ones that are available. It'll be interesting to see how it shoots."

Longthorne has outgrown its status as 'provincial gunmaker with a difference'; it has arrived, in a figurative as well as literal sense, and now enjoys a position as a real manufacturing force. When it moved to Northampton, the council put out a press release to shout about the manufacturing and jobs boost it would bring. The visit of the *GTN* team was preceded a day before by a BBC camera crew, and the day after by ITV. To arrive at the Hesketh Bank HQ, you spotted a small B&B-style sign at the side of the road and turned down a single-track lane; in Northampton, Longthorne's name is writ large on the factory exterior, visible from the main road, while a big sign on the road advertises the positions Longthorne has for hire. On the trade side, Elaine tells me that international business is booming, with the appointment of a French distributor and growing orders from America and Australia.

It sounds like the stuff of dreams - but to an extent, it was planned. "It's not something we've done all of a sudden - it's just taken us time to find the right place," says Elaine. "We did originally have planning permission to build a new building on our last premises, but for staff and location purposes, it was a much better move to come here.

"I don't think in 2010 we thought it would take off as well as it has. I don't know whether we believed we were going to get the clientele we've had. It was a cottage industry before - we wanted to raise our profile. As time went on, we thought, 'We can't stay here, we can't do our clients any justice being here, we've got to provide something better than this.'"

So the big question is: Was it worth it? Moving isn't done with a snap of your fingers - you have to shut your existing office down, pack up all your expensive and fragile machinery, uproot your entire operation and probably lose a lot of staff in the process. And then there are the problems you didn't expect: "The machines decided to play up once they were here. They're very sensitive generally. We had to have an engineer out to rectify most of the machines - that delayed things further.

"The actual move was just a nightmare. It was something I wouldn't want to do again. We had 14

articles plus three trailers, and it took a week - and we've still got a little bit of stuff there now."

In fact, deciding whether to move is just the start of it - you then have to decide when. "We had the building from last March but it's so difficult to say, 'We're going to stop work now, pack everything up and move it all somewhere else.' It's never a good time.

"In the end we were forced into it. One of the machines we were waiting for arrived in October and the other machine it was replacing was going in three months' time. In the end, it was probably a good thing - otherwise we could have been saying 'I don't want to do it yet' forever."

Those machines are clearly fixed now - a hard-at-work Jim briefly greets us on the factory floor and shows us a Longthorne action undergoing heat-treating on its way to becoming a finished product. The balance between CNC machining and hand-work is a touchy subject for many a gunmaker, but Elaine is clear on where she views the human element in the process. "In gunmaking it's a misconception that everybody sits there with a little file now, filing stuff out of billets of steel," she says. "We've got very good machines and Jim's a very clever engineer - he knows exactly what he's doing as far as tolerances are concerned. That helps our processes and helps the parts we're making to be more precise, so when they are being hand-finished there's a little bit less work to do on them. But they are all hand-polished. There'll always be an element of hand work with them."

On top of that, the gun-fitting process is completed by hand in conjunction with the client. Elaine opens a door to a room of stock blanks, each with the name of its prospective user inscribed on it. "I think there's 427 in here," she says offhandedly. "We have quite a bit of money tied up in wood."

This is not a company short on clients, and Elaine is appreciative of that fact. "We're very fortunate, and it's very humbling, to think that those clients who came and ordered guns at our little workshop in Hesketh Bank had faith in us to make them - it's just nice now to be able to welcome them here and show them how we've grown, prove to them we were doing the right thing." **GTN**



All guns still undergo hand-polishing at Longthorne HQ