



Stepping into the light

When one thinks of best-quality English guns Westley Richards is not one of the names that springs immediately to mind, however change is afoot. ALEX FLINT visits the Birmingham gunmaker to discover a firm steeped in history, which is taking firm strides into the future.

Purdey, Holland and Holland and Boss are names that instantly conjure images of finest English sporting guns, of hushed rooms drowning in baize and years of proud history in the development of the shotgun. While this might inspire envy in those of us of a weaker disposition, Westley Richards have been happy to move along in the background for almost 200 years. Though the name may not be quite so famous, it carries with it some of the greatest advances in gunmaking; William Anson and John Deeley for instance, were foreman and manager at Westley Richards when their patent for the boxlock action, now found in guns the world over, was granted.

Simon Clode, managing director of the firm, is not keen to dwell on the past, however: "William Westley Richards was alive 200 years ago, and all the men behind the most famous

names in gunmaking are dead and buried. The credit should now go to the craftsmen who are still able to build these things; we aren't just resting on our laurels and living off a big name."

It is with this firmly in mind that Westley Richards have turned to face the future, with a move to their new premises on Pritchett Street in Birmingham. The moment you step through the large glass doors of the factory there is a feeling that they do things rather differently, as you are greeted by the sight of a huge elephant skull on a plinth, shot by Simon Clode himself with one of his firm's double rifles. The building, a former industrial enamellers, is a melding of Victorian heavy industry and clean modern lines, but decorated with 200 year's worth of shooting ephemera, from Royal warrants to buffalo heads. More importantly, it is buzzing with life - quite different from the reverential hush of a London gunroom, where you are ►

Every one of these tools will find some use on the long journey to creating Birmingham's finest guns.

Simon Clode, managing director of Westley Richards.

A huge variety of leather goods are made in-house.

Former foreman Ken Halbert has 20 years of service at Westley Richards - working on even after his retirement.





Above: The new shop aims to provide absolutely everything the sportsman needs.

Left: Romain Lepinois hard at work on a pair of barrels.

Opposite page: A .600 Nitro Express deluxe double rifle.

to keep your hands strictly to yourself.

This is particularly evident on the first floor, where high ceilings and white walls with huge windows, flood the large workshop with light - far away from the grimy, oily place one might expect. From the noise of machinery and the tinny din of the radio on the factory floor, to the quiet contemplation and rich smells of the leather workshop, there is a discernable feeling of endeavour and enterprise about the place. Watching the craftsmen move in a perfect synergy of the artisan and the machinist would surely bring a tear to the eye of the most severe Victorian industrialist.

This is exactly what Simon wanted for the firm - Westley Richards is a gunmaker which wants to be visited and who is unafraid to show the world the foundation of their art: "The difference between the old premises at Grange Road and where we are now is that it was just a place where guns were manufactured - there were just workshops, and there was no room really for doing any other products. Now we actually have a place where we can say 'Come and see us, see what we do and how we do things.'"

The company produces a full range of shotguns, double rifles and bolt-action rifles, catering for every conceivable quarry.

Each of these guns has upwards of 700 hours of work put into them, with the double rifles requiring 800 hours of skilled devotion - and this is before engraving. There is absolutely no compromise on quality, so only 30 guns are produced each year.

The manner in which Westley Richards make their guns will be familiar to any keen student of gun manufacture, with CNC machining producing the 'raw' components that are then finished by hand. The components are all manufactured by Westley Richards' sister company, Westley Engineering, located next door. The press tool firm has been part of the company for the last 50 years, producing components for customers as diverse as the Ministry of Defence to car manufacturers.

Simon feels that the relationship between the two sides of his company has been of enormous importance to the firm's growth: "In order to work for automotive companies, everything has to be made to the highest possible standards - every individual component has to be traceable to a batch, a time and an individual so that we can identify any mistakes made. All of our gun parts are made to this same standard -

there's a history to their quality. The best thing about that quality is that it breeds a lot of other things - not least efficiency. It is a lot of work, but it provides a huge amount of discipline - it asks questions of your procedures and policies, and that's something that you won't find at other gun manufacturers."

However, against the advance of modern technology a distinct decision has been taken to preserve the art of the gunmaker: "You can take the labour out by using more machinery, but there's a fine balance between how far you go and how much has to be done by hand. We've got sophisticated workshops which can do anything really, and I think it's a case of knowing when to stop with the machines and when to start with your hands. In reality, the current output from the factory is very similar to the old days when everything was done with jigs.

"We leave a lot of metal on our components so that when the parts come out of our machine shop they have still got to be filed-up and shaped and fitted entirely by hand - and that's how we'll continue. Some manufacturers will even put the

checking on the safety catch by hand; we would never do that. We've made it as simple as we can, but we still put a lot of hours into machining and finishing them by hand. They will always be hand stocked and hand engraved - they're bespoke guns that can be very simple or very elaborate. We don't make many, and that's the way we like it."

This process of modernisation is one that all English gunmakers have had to go through in order to survive, but unlike the major London firms, Westley Richards remains independent and family-run. This has obviously been of huge importance to the company, and has enabled them to retain an approachable, human side to the business. Indeed, Simon feels

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that this is one of the major reasons for his company's continued success: "Other gun companies have suffered because the accountants take over - they don't understand a business like this and it becomes a numbers game.

"They come in and think, 'We're only making 30 guns, so to make more money we'll make 50 guns', but it doesn't work like that - in order to make

50 guns you have to make 50 cheaper guns. Your choice is to reduce the amount of time spent producing the gun or double the number of people working on it - you can't make a gun more easily and to as high a standard for less money. No one has ever halved the hours and made as good a gun - there's always a compromise if you take hours out. People who really know will tell you that; Joe Bloggs won't know the difference so you can get away with it, but in reality it's not the same. I

◀ suppose you have to wait 100 years to see if anybody wants it or it's worth anything, or whether it's just fallen to bits and been thrown out."

Best English guns are, of course, expensive - but with good reason: no other gun you can buy in the world is produced with the same level of care and devotion, nor does its name carry the same weight of history and innovation. However, recent years have seen an increasing trend towards the major English firms producing cheaper guns in a drive to increase profitability, which has made obtaining a major English-name gun easier. Simon Clode, however, positively bristles at the thought of Westley Richards producing a similar gun: "We would never do that. My whole time here has been devoted to what we used to make, and making it better. I'd never go down that route - making a cheaper gun - and I'd never go to Italy to make a gun. I think it's totally wrong. There's no pleasure in that, it's purely number crunching isn't it? It's making a product and sticking your name on it to try and sell volume - this isn't a volume business; this is a hand-made, really high quality item. Your whole effort has to go into making it better and better.

"If you start having guns made in Italy or Spain with your name on it, then how do you know what's an English gun or a Spanish gun? In all honesty, people don't know. They come to you because they want the name, because they think that they're going to get the very best - but how do they know that mechanically it's actually an Italian gun?"

Simon and his team are committed to providing a bespoke shooting experience, with a dedicated workshop able to make anything from suitcases in alligator hide to traditional leather guncases to your own exacting standards. Almost every member of the team is also a keen sportsman, and this vast pool of knowledge is drawn upon when offering advice on everything from the best places to shoot, to what to pack in your suitcase. On top of all of this, they can offer gun fitting, valuations, repairs and storage. Simon sees this as an integral part of the business: "The gun is a big part of our chosen sport, but the gun is only a part of it. So yes, you've got great guns - now where am I going to go and shoot with them? What am I going to take? How am I going to maintain my gun? Who's going to organise it? There are crooks everywhere in the world, and it's down to us to steer people around the crooks. Good advice is very important for the sport - particularly for those outside of Britain coming in.

"The key to this is that shooting is a person's sport - it's their leisure and their pleasure. Our clients have very little spare time, so the time that they do have is very special and important to them - when they go shooting they want to enjoy it. Shooting is supposed to be an enjoyable experience, and hopefully by having it start here with a gun that is made by people who know the subject and know what a sporting shot needs we can make it so.

"We try to look at our business in that light. It's like any



It has taken several craftsmen hundreds of hours to get these guns to the point where they are almost ready to be engraved.

“A gunroom should be interesting and feel relaxed. The most important thing is that everyone who visits here enjoys it and has access to everything they need to enjoy their sport.”

sport - golf for example; they want to be better at it, and if they can get advice or help rather than just bullshit, then that's what we should be aiming for, rather than making people feel uncomfortable. A gunroom should be interesting and feel relaxed. The most important thing is that everyone who visits here enjoys it and has access to everything they need to enjoy their sport. These are all areas that we have a responsibility to look after.

"A gunmaker would traditionally do this, and we haven't forgotten that we're a gunmaker; we're not trying to be a big fashion brand or something like that. We're supposed to be making a beautiful product with a great

reputation, and that's what we want to be doing - we're not trying to be something we're not."

A decision on Westley Richards' success in providing the whole shooting experience can only be provided by a visit to their Birmingham home; something that I can recommend wholeheartedly - if only to lose yourself among the isles of the newly opened shop. Very few gunmakers will welcome you so willingly into their world, and to share in their passion for shooting is an enormous pleasure. It is time for Westley Richards to step into the limelight and be celebrated among the very best that British shooting can offer. ○