

Westley's new home

Westley Richards is proud to remain the last true Birmingham gunmaker after its big move across the city. **Ian Valentine** explores the lavish new Pritchett Street premises

Relocating a gun- and tool-making engineering works across a sprawling metropolis was never going to be simple, but Westley Richards is now open for business at its new Pritchett Street address, in Birmingham.

Managing director, Simon Clode, admitted that there has been the odd teething problem, especially when it came to extracting the long-serving gunsmiths from the old place, but the effort has been worthwhile. "Very soon, we would have been there too long," he said. "Separating the gun- and tool-making made sense, too. There was never any question of leaving Birmingham and we are delighted to remain the one true Brummie left in the industry. We are also one of only a handful of companies that make guns from scratch on one site."

The red-brick former enamelling factory that Westley Richards now calls home hides an opulent shop to rival those in Mayfair. It is stuffed with superb trophies of African adventures that act as an enticing background to the stock of double rifles, shotguns and clothing for the modern hunter. If you have pencilled in your Christmas shopping for the centre of Birmingham, then this quiet corner could be the perfect place to escape the crowds.

Should you have any enquiries, manager Anthony Alborough-Tregear — known as Trigger — will be on hand to help. He took me on a guided tour of the factory, pointing out the



▲ (Inset) Simon Clode; (above) the new shop rivals the best that Mayfair gunmakers can offer

workstations where all the intricate pieces for the new guns are produced and assembled.

It seemed a bit too clean to be a gun factory. "The last place was blackened by soot from the oil lamps," said finisher Chris Egginton, who has worked for Westley Richards for several decades. "I suppose it won't be long before we get it back to that state. The view from the window isn't so good, but no doubt we'll get used to it."

Trigger waited until we were out of earshot, before explaining. "They all loved that old place, so they'll grumble for a while yet, I'm sure."

"The old factory was certainly getting a bit tired and tatty," admitted engraver Rashid El Hadi. Creating exquisite patterns on four Westley Richards guns and rifles a year keeps Rashid working flat out. "The light at this new place is so much better for what I do. Everything is very tidy at the moment, but that won't last long."

All the finished components end up in a central hub that looks like a wood-panelled golf club's changing room. Long vertical lockers stretch above drawers that bear the name of the client and contain the individual parts of the jigsaw. By coincidence, another of the firm's engravers, Pete Spode, was bringing in parts for storage. His latest commissions include a set of seven matching handmade shotguns (.410, 28-, 20-, 16-, 12-, 10- and 8-bore) modelled on 1910 designs. Each will have the same

scroll adornment and gold inlay, with game scenes of the quarry for which each gun is intended. It will take Pete the best part of two years to complete the set.

Trigger had a nugget of information about the provenance and intended use for every gun in the factory. "Westley Richards made its name in Africa as a reliable and affordable rifle among professional hunters," he said, pulling out a beefy .600 sidelock for big-game. "Our trademark detachable locks are still hugely popular. If you read the old stories by the professional hunters such as Captain James Sutherland, who used a .577 Nitro Express, a detachable lock could be a lifesaver in such a tough, rugged environment, where a misfire could be fatal.

The final stage of the tour took place in the tanning room, where Helen Leedham produces Westley Richards' bespoke range of leather goods, made in a variety of natural materials from buffalo hide to ostrich skin. Helen studied fine art and saddlery and, though she has been commissioned to create imaginative items such as a gunslip from an elephant's trunk, she has yet to be stumped. "There is pressure when dealing with such precious skins, but no two jobs are the same, so it is extremely stimulating," she said.

The move has paid off for Westley Richards. "Order books are full," added Simon Clode. "For us it is still business as usual." ■

Westley Richards guns are now made entirely at the old enamelling factory



For more information, visit www.westleyrichards.com or tel 0121 3331900.