

Even if Sir Ralph didn't intend his remarks to be quite as scornful as they sound when taken out of context, his castigation of the Birmingham gun accurately reflected an attitude that persists even today. You don't have to search long to find London craftsmen who look down their noses at "Brummy" gunmakers—nor for that matter, to find Birmingham men willing to rant about the "snobbish Londoners."

Because a London address was almost as important as a quality product, a great many Birmingham makers opened London shops. Westley Richards, in fact, became so widely associated with the London trade that it scarcely was thought of as a Birmingham firm. W.W. Greener opened his first London shop in 1869, at 68 Haymarket, and occupied several addresses in Pall Mall from 1879 till the company was sold to Webley & Scott in 1965.

Other Birmingham makers who operated retail shops in London at one time or another include Thomas Bland, Calisher & Terry, William Greener, Isaac Hollis, Robert Hughes, Henry Needham, William Needham, Charles Osborne, W.&C. Scott, James & William Tolley, and John Wilkes. A few, such as Bland and Wilkes, eventually closed down their Birmingham operations and worked solely in London.

In the late 1980s, when I wrote the first edition of this book, the Birmingham trade had dwindled to only about four makers, one of whom—A.A. Brown—I inadvertently left out altogether. Otherwise, William Powell, Westley Richards, and W.&C. Scott were about all that remained, along with a few outworkers.

In the strictest geographical terms, the Birmingham trade is no larger today. Having purchased W.&C. Scott in 1985, Holland & Holland closed the company down several years ago—but W.W. Greener is back in business again, at least in a small way. If we expand the scope outside Birmingham itself, however, and include the whole West Midlands and nearby Staffordshire, the list of current Midlands gunmakers nearly doubles, thanks to Holloway & Naughton, and G.E. Lewis.

And Sir Ralph's Monstrous Horrendum—which wasn't the Birmingham gun itself but rather the "ready-made" gun—no longer exists at all. What you get from the Birmingham trade today are bespoke pieces that even Sir Ralph would have to admire.

A.A. Brown & Sons

Not long after the first edition of this book appeared in print, I made the acquaintance of James Codell of Winchester, Kentucky. As we talked during a round of skeet, he mentioned that he had commissioned a

pair of best-quality English guns in commemoration of Matthew Boulton, the great eighteenth-century English engineer and silversmith. Jim and his late wife had been collectors of Boulton silver.

"Holland & Holland?" I asked. In the past thirty years, Holland's has built more commemorative, one-off guns than anyone in the English trade.

"A.A. Brown," Jim said.

And I said, "Who?"

I learned a long time ago that I'll never know everything about any subject, but even so, it was a bit of a shock to learn that there was a top-quality English gunmaker that I'd never heard of—and one long established, at that. It was some consolation, though not much, to discover that scarcely anyone else outside England knew of A.A. Brown & Sons, either. Until very recently, theirs has been a quiet presence, indeed.

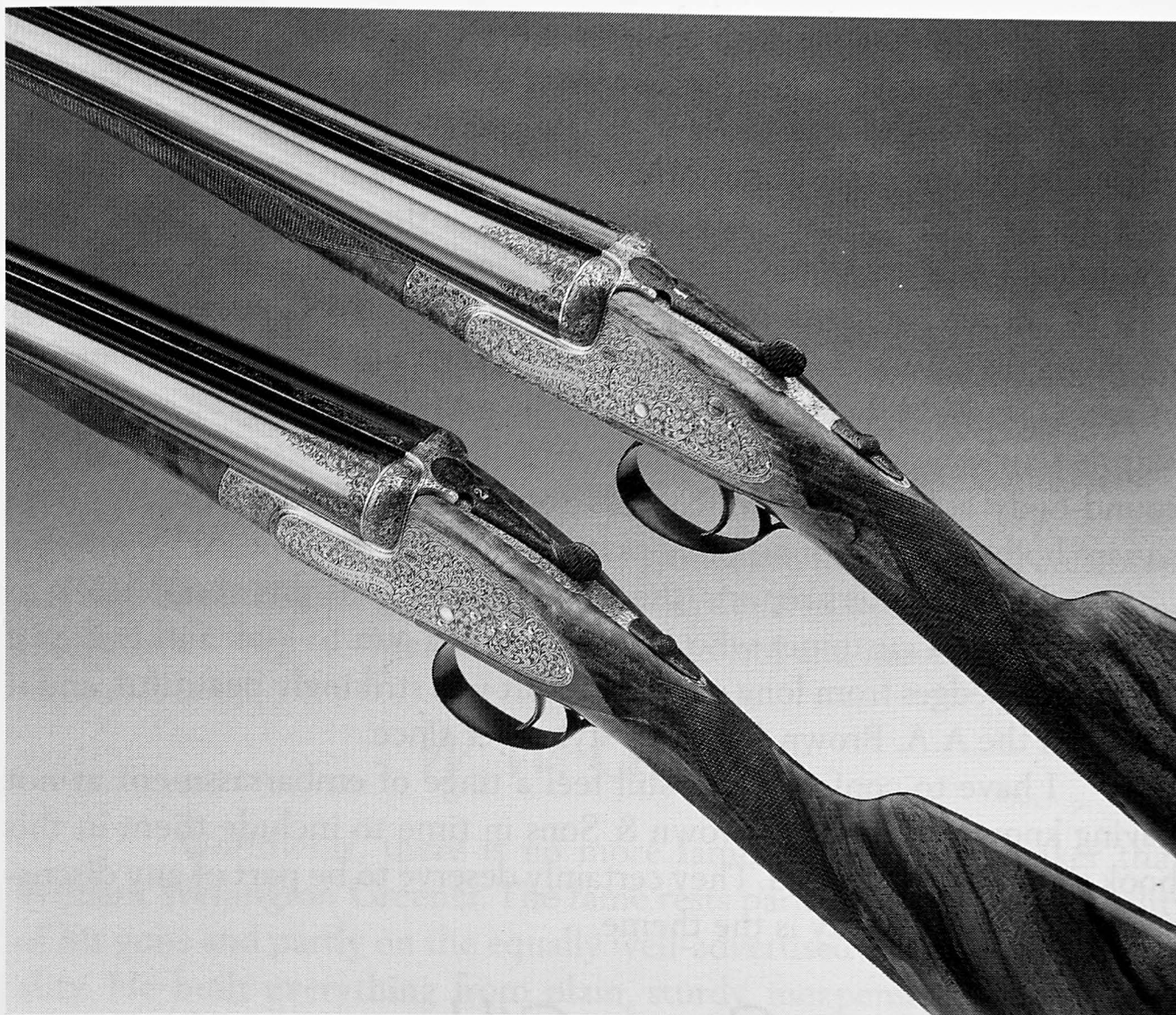
John Joseph Brown was born in 1853, one of eleven sons, five of whom worked in the Birmingham gun trade. One was an engraver, another a stock finisher, and three, John Joseph included, were action filers. Two of John Brown's sons became gunmakers as well. The one most relevant to this story was Albert Arthur Brown, who worked for the Birmingham action makers F.E. & H. Rogers of Loveday Street.

Albert Arthur Brown went into business for himself in 1938, along with his two sons—Albert Henry, born in 1913, and Sidney Charles, born in 1916—at 27½ Whittall Street. A.A. Brown & Sons were action makers to the trade, which is to say they supplied actions in the white to other gunmakers.

The Second World War started the following year, and the Luftwaffe presently began a bombing campaign against Birmingham in hopes of crippling Britain's arms industry. The Browns' premises were damaged in the raids, and they moved out of the city to the village of Shirley. They went back in 1945, to 4 Sand Street.

Because materials for building sporting guns were not available in the first years after the war, the Browns manufactured air pistols of their own design, known as the ABAS Major. (ABAS, for "A. Brown and Sons," is still the company trademark.) When they were able to make guns once again, beginning in 1948, the Browns resumed their work as makers to the trade.

The quality of the work was such that the company flourished even while most of the Birmingham trade struggled to survive and then succumbed to a shrinking market, building as many as thirty guns per month, mainly boxlocks but also best-quality sidelocks for such makers as Holland & Holland, Alexander Martin, E.J. Churchill, and others who found



A pair of recent 12-gauge A.A. Brown & Sons "Supreme Deluxe" assisted-opening sidelocks, with semi-rounded bodies, and Brown single triggers, engraved by Keith Thomas.

it more economical to contract guns from Birmingham than to operate their own workshops in London and Edinburgh and Aberdeen.

Albert Arthur Brown retired in 1957. In 1960, urban redevelopment all but gutted the old Gun Quarter of Birmingham, and the Browns were forced out. Westley Richards offered them working space in their factory at Bournebrook, and that was home to A.A. Brown & Sons for fourteen years, during which time they continued making guns for the trade, including sidelocks for Westley Richards.

Finally, in 1974, Albert and Sidney Brown and Sidney's son Robin, a stockmaker who joined the company in 1961, closed their order books to the rest of the trade, moved to the village of Alvechurch, south of Birmingham, and began making guns under their own name. They've been at it now for twenty-five years, prospering virtually without advertising, building for a largely British clientele a best-quality sidelock in the image of the Holland & Holland Royal Ejector, right down to the Holland-pattern self-opening system. It's called the Supreme Deluxe, and its beautifully sculpted, softly rounded contours are simply lovely.

The remarkable thing is that the Browns build their guns entirely in-house, locks and all. Some of the barrel work is contracted in London, from former Purdey and Holland & Holland workmen, and some of the engraving is done outside, but otherwise an A.A. Brown gun is created all of a piece at 1 Snake Lane, Alvechurch. Not surprisingly, total production amounts to only six to ten of them each year.

I never did get to see Jim Codell's guns in the flesh, though their photographs have appeared in several magazines, but I've had the pleasure of seeing several other A.A. Browns in the past few years. The workmanship is flawless, and I'm quite taken with Brown's interpretation of the round-body action style, which falls somewhere between the standard square body and the round body as it's built by other makers.

As Vic Venters reports, the Browns developed this about 1991, at the request of a customer who wanted his new gun to look and feel as if worn at the edges from long use. The result was strikingly beautiful, and it has been the A.A. Brown signature style ever since.

I have to confess that I still feel a tinge of embarrassment at not having known about A.A. Brown & Sons in time to include them in this book the first time around. They certainly deserve to be part of any discussion where best quality is