

The A. A. Brown Supreme de Luxe

by Vic Venters *c. Shooting Sportsman Magazine Nov. / Dec. issue 1996*

Distinguishing between a fine gun and a best gun can be a bit like encountering the ice traps that plague explorers in the Arctic. At first glance that little gash in the snow appears only a short jump across, but poke your axe through the ice and under the skim a yawning chasm falls away on either side. See you in the nether world. Which is not to say a fine gun is a bad gun. Most of us

don't have enough wallet to commission a new best, and the minor shortcomings of a fine gun often go unnoticed in the field. Many fine shotguns, after all, can match the balance and handling of the world's best. They will shoot just as straight and pattern just as pretty. Likewise, the wood on a very fine gun may almost equal that of a best, and the visible fit and finish might be only slightly inferior, if that. Functional reliability should not be an issue, at least not for quite some time. In other words, \$7,000 to \$10,000 will usually buy you one smashing smoothbore.

But for \$40,000 and going you deserve more than fine—you need perfection. It's here that the definition of best quality begins and ends. A best, in the purest sense of the word, is a gun in which every component is as perfectly designed, shaped, fitted and finished as is humanly possible. To achieve this by traditional methods takes two things: an inseparable pairing of extraordinary gunmaking skill and commensurate wads of that gunmaker's time. Neither comes cheap. To exemplify best quality in a modern double game gun, I've reviewed a traditional English sidelock side-by-side—not because the

British produce the world's only best guns (they don't) but because their handiwork still sets the standards by which all others are judged.

I could have gone to a storied old London firm, for their work today lives up to that which established their reputations in decades past. But break new ground that would not. It would ignore English gunmakers of equal skill—both outworkers and small firms—who don't necessarily have addresses in London's West End. Instead I chose a sidelock from A.A. Brown & Sons, of Birmingham, whose staff I am admittedly a huge fan of. Let me state frankly that although I consider director Robin Brown a good friend, the company's guns can stand on their own merits—period.

A.A. Brown & Sons was founded in 1938 in Birmingham by action filer Albert Arthur Brown and sons Albert Henry and Sidney Charles.

In the following decades the three would form the cadre of a firm that would not only transcend troubled times in Birmingham's gun quarter but would also bypass the roadblocks of prejudice thrown in the path of any gunmaker from oft-maligned "Brumagem." Like other Birmingham



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trade firms, A.A. Brown's bread and butter was building actions and guns for retailers and other gunmakers to sell under the commissioners' names, per standard British practice. Though the 1950s and '60s saw the decimation of much of Birmingham's trade, these were, paradoxically, boom years for A.A. Brown. The company took on apprentices, lured older skilled workers from larger firms and made the technological investments necessary to build guns almost entirely in-house. At Brown's production peak, the maker built 30 guns a month, mostly quality boxlocks at first, then sidelocks in their entirety for many of London's best names. In 1974 Albert and Sidney announced a dramatic change in business strategy. The Brown Brothers, as they were called, finished off their trade orders, left Birmingham for the quiet medieval town of Alvechurch and began building best sidelocks in-house under their own name for private clients. And for the last 22 years they've continued to do just that, prospering with virtually no advertising, attracting a largely British clientele mainly through word-of-mouth recommendation. You can count on one hand the gunmakers who've been able to establish a best reputation from scratch in the 20th Century, especially outside London.



Sidney's son, Robin, is today the company's managing director, though Sidney still punches the time clock daily, the pair sharing between them about 90 years experience at the bench. On my trip around the gun trade earlier this year, it was my treat to shoot and examine A.A. Brown's house gun—the Supreme Deluxe, essentially the maker's version of a Holland Royal self-opening sidelock (which may also give you an inkling of one of the firm's better customers in the 1960s). The Royal is one of three side-by-side actions considered a suitable carriage for a traditional English best sidelock (the Beesley/Purdey and Boss actions included). All are elegant, durable and utterly proven, but the Royal is the least complex mechanically—hence its widespread adoption by other gunmakers, British and Continental.

As a small bespoke firm building six to 10 guns per year, Brown doesn't make guns for inventory. On hand for review, however, was gun 79766, a 12-bore built in 1991, shot for only one season and essentially new. Bespoke bests are just that—made for an individual and that

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person's idiosyncrasies. Gun 79766 had been ordered by an elderly English gent afflicted with arthritis. He'd asked for 26-inch light-weight barrels and a semi-pistol grip in a gun weighing 6 pounds 4 ounces. Idiosyncratic? Somewhat, but specifically built to provide aging reflexes a fast-handling gun, with a pistol grip to aid ailing hands. Bespoke. Robin Brown sculpted the gun with the typical features of a Royal—flattened beaded fences, fluted sides and double bars sweeping down the action's underside.

About five years ago Robin redesigned the Supreme de Luxe—rounding the action a bit—to create a distinctive Brown house style. Unlike a Boss round body, which has no flutes and only hints at the bar, the round-bodied Supreme de Luxe retains both, but the edges are softened as are the drop points and head of the stock around the lockplates. Brown still builds both styles, but to my eyes the round-bodied Deluxe is the Spitfire of English sidelocks, especially in the small bores. Otherwise the Supreme Deluxe has the features you'd expect on almost any British best of its type: chopper-lump barrels, Southgate ejectors, Anson pushrod. semi-swamped game rib, disk-set strikers, fine checkering at 24 lpi, and figured Turkish walnut fetching enough to launch a second war for Troy.

The gun I tested had double triggers - each breaking without creep at 4 1/4 pounds - though Brown also offers a single trigger (the latter a modern variant of an exceedingly simple and reliable Greener design). Charles Lee, an ex-Purdey's man, engraved the gun with a traditional rose & scroll pattern on its case-colored action.

Lee's work is very clean, very sharp, very understated - typical adornment on a "working" best gun for British game shooters. Customers, of course, can specify the engraver of their choice (Keith Thomas is another Brown favorite). The only gold visible is the word SAFE - inlaid for the safety and a narrow band on the tumbler axle to serve as a cocking indicator. Tucked out of view, however, are a magnificent pair of gold-plated locks. Which brings me to the heart of what makes a best gun a best. Not the gold plating, mind you, but the locks and other unseen innards of the gun. These are bar-action Holland-style locks with intercepting sears - typical best gun fare. Atypical, however, is that Brown builds its locks entirely in-house; most firms outsource them from lockmakers like York & Wallin, in Wolverhampton. This isn't to say that best guns can't have outsourced locks, only that lockmaking is a highly specialized skill that demands an uncompromising understanding of metallurgy plus hands and eyes capable of working to almost microscopic tolerances. Gold plating is merely the gravy to prevent rust from attacking hidden parts, thus keeping the locks working smoothly virtually forever.

At Ian Butler's Hereford & Worcester Shooting Grounds, near Alvechurch, I found out just how smoothly. The Supreme Deluxe is an assisted self-opener; push the toplever over and the gun springs open as quick as the flick of a cat's paw, tripping the ejectors if the gun has been fired. The gun uses, again, a variant of the Holland mechanism patented in 1922, which essentially pivots the gun open around the knuckle by means of a spring-powered plunger. The mechanism rests above the forend between the forend loop and two hardened inserts located at the top of the knuckle. "Luxurious" is the best word I can use to describe its operation; add "practical" if you do a lot of shooting at driven game. When you close a Holland-style self-opener, you're not only compressing the spring-loaded plunger again but you're also cocking the Southgate ejectors.



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On cheaper guns—even on many fine guns—you often get lumpy, uneven closure, the ejector springs offering stout resistance initially, then giving way abruptly as you increase pressure, making the gun slam shut. Not particularly good, and certainly not best. The Brown closed as smoothly as a firm pat of butter squeezed between the thumb and forefinger—uniform and velvety until the underbolts slid home with one elegant click. Best gunmakers achieve this buttery smoothness with superb jointing, and also by the perfect regulation of ejectors and lockwork. This provides not only an aesthetic delight and quicker reloading but also prolongs the life of those critical components and the jointing of the gun.

Aside from engraving and slow-rust blacking, barrel work is virtually the only significant work that is outsourced. Chopper-lump tubes are purchased from Microfinish Gunbarrels Ltd. and are struck up in London as well. "Purdey- or Holland-trained barrel workers are unquestionably the best, so we use London outworkers to file up the tubes," Robin said. "But jointing and work on the bores, chambers and choke are all done in Alvechurch."

Gun 79766 was proved with 70mm chambers and at 850 BARS. I couldn't detect any ripples on the inside or outside of the barrels, and bore diameters measured .730" for each tube. Wall thickness was .029" for the right and .031" for the left 10 inches from the muzzle—spot on for new lightweight barrels. The gun was choked .008" in the right barrel and .013" in the left—an excellent choice for game up to 40 yards.

Frankly, I hadn't expected to shoot this gun particularly well—with a 14 5/8" length of pull, the stock was almost 1 1/2" too short, plus I needed another 3/8" over its 2" drop. What I hadn't factored in was the gun's marvelous between-the-hands weight distribution, its crisp triggers and Ian Butler's excellent coaching. With its light, short barrels, the gun did demand a somewhat more vigorous use of the leading hand than you'd use with a heavy clays gun, but I was soon breaking 40-yard birds off the tower, both incomers and those quartering away overhead. Recoil was quite acceptable with Lyalvale Express 1-oz loads. I haven't made a lot of niggling comments about metal-to-metal and wood-to-metal fit on the Supreme de Luxe. With a best, you don't need to. Practical perfection is what you get for the 850 hours the gunmaker spends crafting each gun.

Victorian gun writers used to speak of a best gun's "lasting capabilities," and this comment is just as valid today. It's a byproduct of components that all work in harmony with each other, wearing together if at all, and not apart. The reward is durability measured not over your lifetime but over your grandson's. This timelessness hints at the transcendent quality that distinguishes best guns from fine ones. And even if they aren't Art with a capital "A," best guns unquestionably speak to the side of our psyche that seeks it. But that, my friends, is fodder for another story. At the time of writing Vic Venters was the Senior Editor and Gun Reviewer for Shooting Sportsman: The Magazine of Wingshooting & Fine Guns in the U.S.A.

(Note 2015 : As this article was written in 1996 some of the details have changed, especially references to prices and deliveries. The text is taken from the Shooting Sportsman article, but the pictures have been added more recently and were taken by Matthew brown Photography.)