

# COVEY RISE®







# LONDON BEST

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The making of a bespoke shotgun

PART SIX: A CLASSIC CASE OF PERFECTION

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The case starts from scratch: First the wood box and lid are built, then the leather covering is marked to fit using the case's frame.



It's my opinion that a best London shotgun should always be presented in a bespoke oak and leather case with the correct accessories—to do otherwise would be like hanging a Picasso without a frame. Indeed, the traditional oak and leather gun case not only protects the shotgun, but when opened, presents it in the same manner as a piece of art.

In the heyday of the British Empire, the British effectively replicated their way of life in every country they colonized. This meant that every British colony required a full contingent of politicians, government and military officials, police officers, doctors, and engineers. And every one of these members of the extended British Empire had to have their personal belongings shipped with them, traveling either by train or steamship in traveling chests, better known as travel or steamer trunks. They were robustly constructed to be able to withstand the inevitable rough handling by porters and stevedores.

Most of the colonies offered opportunities to hunt both big game and gamebirds and these British professionals took full advantage of the hunting sport on offer. To protect their

shotguns and rifles while in transit on land and sea, they needed to procure suitably durable cases. Since most chests or trunks were just for personal belongings, not shotguns or rifles, the well-built travel trunk was scaled down to become the familiar best gun case that we see today.

Each travel case was made to measure for the individual's shotgun or rifle or pair of guns. Starting with an oak frame, which was dovetailed and glued, the interior sections of the case were custom-fitted to the gun's dimensions, then the interior panels were lined with felt cloth. The outside of the case was covered in heavy bridle leather with brass corners

#### NO ORDINARY BOX

After adhering the leather to the wood frame, each case is hand stitched, securing the leather in place using a needle and an awl. Details are attended to by hand, including punching holes in the case straps. All parts are made to measure for each case, including the internal blocks and lining. Hot glue is used to fix the internal blocks in place.







The case not only protects but presents the gun as a piece of art, complete with its own bells and whistles.



A final fitting of a complex motor case: The finished gun is sent to the casemaker's shop to ensure that all the case specs are precise.

and a secure handle, as well as luggage straps fitted with solid brass buckles. A tailored, leather-trimmed canvas outer cover was supplied to protect the leather case during travel or storage. Thus the sturdy travel trunk became the traditional English oak and leather best gun case.

Many best guns were shipped or sold to the colonies, but so far from Great Britain, competent gunsmiths were rare. So the cases included suitable tools and parts to effect simple repairs, if needed. Now, as then, in most oak and leather cases it is usual to have two or three turnscrews (screwdrivers) in the case to fit all the guns' screw sizes (they are hardened, hollow blades, and the ends are ground to fit each screw slot perfectly). Often fitted with ebony or buffalo horn handles, these turnscrews are elegant, as well as functional. The appropriate turncrew can be used to remove the lock,

allowing access to repair a broken mainspring.

Casemakers often also included a striker key for the removing of the striker disk to replace a broken striker (firing pin). Best guns usually have disk-set strikers, so the striker key is used to remove the disk for changing strikers or springs. A best gun case also holds a set of mainsprings, usually in a leather wallet, along with an ivory pot for spare strikers and springs (also supplied with the gun). Finally, the case would contain grease and oil to clean, lubricate, and protect the shotgun.

These cases and their contents were very heavy, and many sportsmen opted for lighter cases for the field. These were still built for the individual gun but made in canvas or leather. With the introduction and subsequent popularity of the motorcar as a means of transport, the traditional flat gun case was supplanted by a more compact case that better





**FIT TO FINISH**  
The gunmaker supplies a plywood template which is used as a guide to achieve a perfect fit.

fitted the available luggage space; this became known as the motor case. Today, there are lightweight gun cases that are very robust and made in various styles to suit specific needs. You can even have a lightweight gun case fitted in an oak and leather style to enhance the presentation of your gun.

But for the traditionalist, the preference was and still is for the weight, protection, and presentation of an oak and leather best gun case. The traditional case would not be complete without its maker's label. Many vintage best gun cases would have cleaning and maintenance information included, along with a label stating the size and load of the cartridge to which the shotgun had been regulated and proofed. Specific cartridge requirements and limited or uncertain availability of cartridges in general, resulted in the need for a cartridge magazine. A smaller version of the gun's case—holding several hundred of the correct cartridges—could be transported along with the owner's gun and made to match the original case.

As you can imagine, these gun and magazine cases quickly gathered a patina of shipping and train labels during their travels around the Empire. It is not uncommon to see older

gun cases covered with the labels of Cunard, Peninsular and Oriental Steam Navigation Company (P&O), and other ship and railway lines (see opening spread), marking their passage around the world and through gunmaking history.

#### MAKING THE CASE

When the finisher reassembles the gun after its return from hardening, he prepares a pattern for the casemaker. He takes a thin sheet of plywood and draws a template of the stock and action and barrels and fore-end. He then cuts these out on the band saw and sends it to the casemaker.


Upon receipt of the pattern, the casemaker uses the template to make the case carcass and lid, which are then drilled to facilitate hand-stitching the leather to the oak carcass. Finally, the case is lined, traditionally with red or green felt cloth. The choice of color is personal, and many so-called exhibition cases are commissioned with both their interiors and exteriors lined or covered with exotic leathers, such as ostrich, alligator, or crocodile.

Next, the casemaker cuts the interior blocks to the

IAN TOMLIN  
CASEMAKER







The client's initials  
were traditionally heat  
embossed on the case.

supplied template to achieve the bespoke fit. However, he does not fix these blocks in place at this time. This happens when the finished gun is received at the workshop. Then the gun is placed inside the case and the blocks adjusted as needed, to achieve a perfect fit.

The blocks are then glued into place. The glue used for this is animal glue, employed for centuries in the English gun trade. The case label and tools, snap caps, rods, and brushes are all installed in their correct places.

The lid is closed and the client's initials, ranch brand, or coat of arms is branded onto the leather using extreme heat and foil in the traditional Victorian manner. Finally, the oak and leather case is placed in its protective canvas outer cover and is ready for delivery to the gunmaker or directly to the client. 🦏


#### TAILOR MADE

(Right) The look of the case, down to leather color and thread color, is completely made to order.

#### A LOOK INSIDE THE CASE

The following items were and usually still are included in a best gun case. In all, these tools constitute a virtual Swiss army knife for the maintenance of a fine shotgun, at home and abroad, for both the Victorian gun owner then and modern shooter now.

- › A two- or three-piece shotgun cleaning rod
- › A wire brush, a jag, and a mop
- › A nickel oil bottle
- › A brass chamber brush for scrubbing the chambers of the shotgun
- › A handle made from ebony or buffalo horn, that doubles as the handle for the chamber brush and the cleaning rod
- › A horn striker block, used to release the mainsprings without damaging the firing pins before storing the shotgun
- › Shotgun snap caps of the correct gauge, made of either nickel, horn, brass, or ebony



#### THIS SERIES:

With this installment of the best gun series, we take you past the finished product to where the parts securely find their resting place—a handmade case that is worthy of the handmade gun it holds. Traditionally these cases derived from need and function, but like the best guns they held, the cases were made with perfection and beauty in mind, and certainly built to last. Today the strength of oak and leather is still in style, and the case is no less relevant to the process of creating a best gun.

Speaking of process: Our gun, *Covey Rise Number One of One*, is en route to the stocker. The actioner and barrelmaker have laid the foundation, and the gun is “in the white.” In the next issue, we will take you back to the gun and gunmaking process. Until next time.



"Every issue is entertaining, informative, and thought provoking. I encourage any upland enthusiast and conservationist to give it a read. It hits all the marks: hunting, gear, wine, whisky(ey), cigars, food, travel, wildlife, and on and on. I love this magazine." —ALDEN S., *COVEY RISE* READER



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