

COVEY RISE®



LONDON BEST

The making of a bespoke shotgun—an introduction.

STORY BY CHRIS BATHA
PHOTOGRAPHY BY TERRY ALLEN





Many discerning sportsmen regard the “best London shotgun” to be the pinnacle of the art of shotgun manufacture; these sporting guns have become synonymous with beauty, quality, and tradition for more than 150 years. Those privileged enough to order and own a best London shotgun have not only a custom gun—a gun built to their specifications and dimensions, a gun that will allow them to shoot their best—they also have an investment that will last through generations. Such a shotgun represents a piece of history, and an appreciation of the gun’s history is one of the reasons so many aspire to own a bespoke best London shotgun.

Bespoke is a very British word used for a variety of products that are made to measure; traditionally it is applied to custom-tailored clothing. In the same manner, a bespoke best London shotgun is truly unique, handmade to the individual’s specifications and handcrafted to fit perfectly.

The customers are totally involved in this process from inception. First, they choose the action—over-and-under or side-by-side. Then they select the gauge and barrel length, followed by their choice of engraving: traditional rose and scroll or deep relief with game scenes, perhaps with a vignette featuring a favorite dog. Then they decide on

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the finish—either the traditional color-case-hardened deep blue, or the coin-finished and polished-silver look. Next comes one of the most difficult choices: the selection of the stock blank from the many pieces of well-figured Circassian walnut available from Turkey. The custom dimensions are determined through a gun fitting, with the owner using a “try gun” and shooting the pattern plate to ensure that the coming bespoke shotgun fits like a glove and shoots where the customer looks.

Once all these decisions are made, the shotgun will be handmade by time-tested craftsmen and women. Each person touching the gun will have spent five years as an apprentice, and then another five years working under the supervision of a “gaffer” before being allowed to work on a customer’s gun. More than 1,200 man hours are spent on the action alone. With more than 90 moving parts in a shotgun, the gun’s action is comparable to the intricacies of a handmade Swiss watch. In the shaping, polishing, and assembly of the timeless masterpiece that is the best London shotgun, it’s no wonder an appreciative audience and a discerning clientele continue to order these guns today. With every stroke of the file, every coat of oil, the craftsmen add a little bit of their soul into every shotgun they make. In their hands, the balance, handling, and “life” of the gun are created. No modern, mass-produced shotgun will ever have the intrinsic handling and feel—the life, the soul—of a bespoke shotgun.

Let’s back up and take a look at the history of how these shotguns came to be.

The Victorian Era began in 1837 and ended with Queen Victoria’s death in 1901, but many consider its span running from the Napoleonic Wars until the outbreak of World War I in 1914. While there were industries gearing up and using mass production during this time, a strong demand remained for bespoke items made by time-tested craftsmen. These companies did not manufacture their goods in the vague hope of selling them at some time in the future—their clothing, furnishings, cabinetry, and many other personal items were bespoke, made to order per a client’s instructions. These included sporting shotguns.

Royalty and landed gentry have hunted throughout history, but in the 1820s shooting birds on the wing for sport gained great popularity in Europe. The new wave of hunters adopted the French *battue* (meaning to beat) method of shooting. Instead of walking up birds, the guns (shooters) stood in a line while beaters worked though the coppices and woods to drive the birds to the waiting guns. It was discovered that if the line of guns was placed in a low valley and the birds were driven from high cover, they presented more challenging shooting. Soon the country estates were being shaped and replanted to maximize the number and heights of the driven pheasant and partridge drives. But the most prized jewel of all shooting—then



as now—was the heather-hugging flight of the fast and furious red grouse. There was great pride and rivalry over which estate would shoot the largest bag in a day, and the bag-count record grew annually. Through the husbandry of the birds and the management of these estates, guns were offered the most challenging shooting and the bags increased from hundreds to thousands of birds per day. The guns needed increased firepower to achieve these bags, as well as the wealth to purchase the appropriate shotguns.

The demand for better guns, fueled by incredible affluence, created a period of great vision, sublime skill, and subsequent prosperity for the gunmakers. The shotgun was reinvented time and again with many innovative ideas. The guns were tried and tested, rebuilt with new patents and designs, each time improving performance and efficiency, and refining beautiful lines. The side-by-side shotgun as we know it today evolved in the late 1800s, and the over-and-under was introduced in 1909. Such was the quality of these guns that now, more than a hundred years later, a large number are still being shot.

After World War II, however, the London gun trade suffered badly and the Spanish and Italian gunmakers started to make less expensive, quality shotguns. This Continental competition began the demise of the Birmingham gun trade; by the late 1970s, many of the famous London gunmakers were closing their doors.

In the same decade, the surviving London gunmakers began

to see a renaissance in the interest of serious gun collectors who appreciated the craftsmanship, the intricacies of the mechanisms, the patents, and the history of their shotguns. These collectors began ordering guns built to the highest quality. The exquisite engraving on the guns elevated them to the status of metal “canvases” with exhibition-grade walnut stocks to frame them. The collectors’ passion and appreciation for best guns reignited the world’s interest in gunmaking and resulted in the reemergence of many London and provincial gunmaker names, as well as other gunmakers breathing new life into the best-gun trade.

When asked to explain the difference between a handmade and a machine-made shotgun, I always attempt to explain it by the balance: A handmade shotgun has a balance created by the perfect distribution of weight throughout its length, which results in handling that makes the shotgun feel almost alive between your hands. These shotguns are functional works of art—one of a kind, steeped in tradition and history.

Whoever owns one of these shotguns has the pleasure of shooting a gun that only a handful of individuals and companies can produce today. This is why so many shooting aficionados appreciate and desire a bespoke best London shotgun. It is made-to-measure in a time-honored manner, which results in the form and function that enhance one’s shooting. Such a gun is also a sound investment in an heirloom. 🦋



THE MISSION:

With this introductory feature, *Covey Rise* embarks on a series of features exploring the unique and remarkable world of bespoke shotguns, extraordinary works of functional art made to order by talented hands in small workshops in and around London. Along the way, we’ll celebrate the craftsmen who produce these exceptional guns and the skill, experience, and knowledge they have acquired over a lifetime. The processes, tools, techniques, and quirks of making such a small number of guns are the antithesis of modern manufacturing, and almost defy contemporary culture and modern imagination.

These guns are the crux of upland hunting. They reached technical perfection more than a hundred years ago, and they remain relevant and largely unchanged across centuries of industrialization and innovation. Join us on this journey across oceans and issues as we revisit history and rediscover the tradesmen and traditions that keep this working art at the center of the sporting lifestyle.

“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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