

HOLT'S

AUCTIONEERS OF FINE MODERN & ANTIQUE GUNS

Richard Purdey has a stark warning for the gun trade and its customers. “Without new trainees,” he says, “Britain’s sporting gun industry will be an endangered species.” Purdey issues this warning in his capacity as chairman of the Gunmakers Company Charitable Trust (GCCT). Founded in 2003, the GCCT seeks to improve gunmaking skills by offering annual training bursaries, and thus continues the noble traditions of The Worshipful Company of Gunmakers which was given a Royal Charter by Charles I in 1637 to promote and regulate gunmaking. Nick Holt, a GCCT trustee, vests the trust’s principal object with blunt urgency. “It is very simple,” he says. “We are trying to save our trade.”

The reason why British gunmakers and gunsmiths are worthy of support is self-evident. “We are the best in the world,” says Michael Louca, who owns *Watson Bros*. “If you look at any London gun, the quality of the workmanship is fantastic.” He adds, tellingly, “gunmaking, in my opinion, is where engineering meets art.” For John Browning, one of the GCCT’s original trustees, there lies the challenge. “The sporting gun industry boasts both traditional crafts and state-of-the-art technology,” he says. “And it needs to innovate in both areas in order to survive. What is unique about the English gun trade is that a lot of the really interesting companies remain very small in size. This makes the issues of getting training, maintaining skills and sharing knowledge much trickier, and creates a need for a body such as the GCCT to offer constructive help.”



The chairman’s rallying call is “charity begins at home”. To facilitate top class training and bring new blood into the sporting gun industry, the GCCT will appeal to the generosity of the Livery of the Gunmakers Company as well as to the trade and its customers to fill its coffers. The hope is that aficionados will want to see the guns they love continuing to be made traditionally in Britain rather than being outsourced to mass manufacturers abroad. “If GCCT funds rose to £500,000,” says Purdey, “we could provide up to six £5,000 bursaries to suitably qualified companies or individuals. Bursaries will normally run for three years, and their key purpose is to provide some degree of compensation to the training company or the individual for their loss of revenue earning productivity while undertaking training.”

When *Watson Bros* hired Bradley Hodgson, a welder, to retrain as a gunmaker in 2007, he became the very first GCCT beneficiary. “Without the GCCT I could not have funded him,” says Louca, keenly aware that his preference for more mature

entrants to the trade calls for higher wages than would be expected by school-leavers. “The great thing about the charitable trust is that it gives people a chance to earn a liveable wage while they’re retraining.” As a traditional gunmaker, he regards the GCCT idea of sponsoring apprentices – people – rather than offering grants for improved machinery as thoroughly enlightened. He recalls wondering at a dinner for The Long Sufferers, a welfare association for those who have served more than 25 years in the gun trade, if eventually the room would be full of machines. A melancholy prospect indeed.

Westley Richards followed suit with Stewart Richards, another welder. “Youth is our future,” says Keith Thomas, *Westley’s* factory foreman who, together with production manager Chris Soyza, has doubled the workforce on the bench in the last four years. “As far as I am concerned,” says Thomas, “the only way forward is to increase it even further. I can’t see a flaw in the GCCT scheme, and Stewart and Mickey Louca’s guy are good examples of what it can achieve.” *Holland & Holland’s* Russell Wilkins mentors Stewart, and when Thomas eagerly details the route taken by each apprentice through the art of gunmaking in order finally to master “an understanding of the gun,” he is conjuring up every schoolboy’s dream. Passionate enthusiasm is always infectious; even I get excited.

“I do all the shooting and regulating,” says Thomas. “Apprentices must try to match my consistency with left barrel, right barrel... and on the big bore stuff, the double rifles – I’m talking .577; .600 here – the recoil is quite a thing,” he chuckles. “It takes a person quite a time to get the mental side of it.” Well-tutored himself by Paul Willis and the late Dave Perkins when he was an apprentice at *Rigby’s*, Thomas clearly relishes an opportunity to return the favour. “I’ll teach anybody anything,” he says, “and there’s nothing better than getting a youngster who is interested in the guns themselves. I came from Zimbabwe where my dad is a professional hunter. I started shooting when I was six years old, and saw amazing guns all my life through the people who hunted with my dad. All I ever wanted to do was work with guns.”



J. Roberts’ apprentice, Jamie Johnston, hopes to become the next GCCT beneficiary. “With apprentice numbers dwindling, the GCCT scheme is invaluable to the gun trade,” says Paul Roberts. “It’s a year or two before these apprentices get productive, and the cost for the gunmakers lies in putting staff aside to teach them. None of us can really afford this.” Roberts makes a practical point that illustrates the size and scope of work that is available for newcomers into the trade. “We are training our guy up to be a finisher; this is an area in which the trade is devoid of talent – there are so few finishers left. With so many good second-hand English guns around, there’s going to be a tremendous demand for people who can keep them running.” No computer can do this work, and it opens up a fascinating prospect for any youngster keen to deal with an infinite variety of systems that would include *Roberts’* own bolt-action rifles.

The GCCT is easing the trade into the future with perfect timing. Britain’s luxury goods market is currently booming according to the UK Luxury Benchmark

study by *Walpole*, the luxury industry's lobby group. *Walpole's* Guy Salter has confirmed that heritage, craftsmanship, refinement and quality are the attributes the market associates with our luxury brands and which artefact better fits the bill than a best London gun? Indeed, with the *FT* reporting a retreat by investors from conventional stocks and bonds that verges on "a stampede", the astute investor, with a brave new world to conquer, is responding to the appeal of fine quality English shotguns and rifles.

Original guns made by best English makers are a sound mid-term investment, set to increase in value by 15 to 20 percent over a period of five years. "Investment" is a word that sets Nick Holt flag-waving for the gun trade as never before. "Sell your investment at a profit," he says, "and that profit is completely and utterly capital gains free. It is also exempt from inheritance tax. My way of selling the top trade now is as an investment – a piece of art; a wonderful bit of handmade excellence. Yes, of course you take it out and shoot it, but at the same time it is an exquisite artefact to be admired and envied. And we need experts to build these wonderful pieces."



Ask Michael Louca "how's trade?" and his reply is a buoyant: "we've never been busier - it's crazy..." In his 2011 budget speech, the chancellor declared that "Britain will be carried aloft by the march of the makers". If Richard Purdey and his trustees contrive to be sufficiently dynamic in their fundraising efforts then our world-beating sporting gunmakers will march proudly among the "makers" George Osborne has in mind. "This is a product worth fighting for," says Holt.

Consider the alternative. Imagine how we would feel if we allowed this particular endangered species to become extinct for want of a little cash.

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