

A 'BEST' GUN ALL SEASONS

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*Holloway & Naughton
reinvents the English
over/under*

This is a bit of a touchy subject in certain quarters, but what we've learned to refer to as "best" guns often aren't, at least in one important way: Most cannot, as a general rule, withstand the pounding that comes with seasons of American-style clays shooting. This only makes sense. Although one might reasonably expect a gun that costs as much as a house to do absolutely everything imaginable relating to shooting plus make good coffee on the side, here the word "best"



COURTESY OF HOLLOWAY & NAUGHTON

Andrew Harvison made his name as a world-class competition shooter before turning his attention to shotgun design nearly 20 years ago. Today engineering, build quality and fit all come together in his new Britannia over/under.

for

has more to do with stripping away than piling on, focus rather than general utility. Who uses an Aston Martin to fetch groceries? A racehorse to plow?

A typical English best gun, whether side-by-side or over/under, is a thoroughbred whose every piece has been designed (often long ago), fabricated, assembled, proofed and finished to do one thing extremely well. One thing, not everything. That one thing is nearly always “kill upland birds.” An upper-echelon British shooter—the client for whom such guns were created—does 40 driven and a dozen walk-up days per year, at home and in Spain, and fires possibly 6,000 rounds. A guy with that much time and disposable income on his hands invariably shoots a pair of guns—in fact, he has a light pair for grouse and partridge and at least one long tom for skyscraper pheasants. (If he does any wildfowling or clays, it’s with different guns entirely.) So those rounds are spread out over several guns—which, in the old days, went back to the maker every year for a strip-down cleaning and maintenance.

Over here, if we’re lucky enough to own a best-grade gun, the temptation is to force-feed a lot of rounds through it—pride of ownership and all that. (And we all know people who grind up 10,000 clays in a year.) Bad move. The people who can afford best guns also have Krieghoffs and Perazzis, Berettas and Brownings—machines built to do what elite game guns cannot.

Naturally, this gets up the skirts of best-gun makers, or at least some of their clients. But why would Aston Martin want to build a grocery-getter when the world is awash with them already? Then again, consider an Aston Martin that could be a daily driver. A prominent competition shooter from Leicestershire, England, named Andrew Harvison seems to have created such a thing—a modern,

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Thanks to generous bearing surfaces (top) and replaceable components, the Britannia locks up like the Bank of England. Even the forend is improved, with a shallower lug and two places to adjust for any wear. The custom-honed choke tubes almost disappear into the muzzles and are absolutely concentric with the bores.

best-grade British over/under that can be optimized for any kind of wingshooting, even serious competition, with no loss of classical elegance, cachet or handling dynamics.

Mind you, this segment was ripe for improvement.

A Brief History of the Over/Under

1909: John Robertson introduces the Boss, still the most mythical O/U of all. Some years ago, the master of the Bowmore Distillery appeared at one of my shoots in a 1930s Bentley; in the boot was a pair of similar-vintage Boss over/under 12s, also inherited from his father. He was too nice a guy to hate, but this is the rarified atmosphere in which these guns circulate. The Boss can be fragile and shouldn't be "wasted" on the rigors of weekend clays. Although a few heavier versions were made for the pigeon ring, the Boss was meant as a light-weight game gun and the design has never evolved. The side-mounted joint allows a profile that has become classic and still is worshipped, even by the Italians. With a single trigger, new ones start at £83,500 (\$125,000)—and that's for export, without the UK's 15-percent Value Added Tax.

1923: John M. Browning is granted a patent for the Superposed, his boxlock over/under—designed by an American, made in Belgium and, with its hinge under the barrels, notably taller than the Boss. Still, it handles well, can be ordered up for all sorts of uses, and has proven outstandingly reliable. It's not British, but judging by the number of early examples as well as new Belgian B25 models seen in gun lines and on clays courses, it could be. It's the world's other seminal O/U—but, like the Boss, its design has not kept pace.

1993: Holland & Holland acknowledges clays shooting by launching its triggerplate-action Sporting Gun, mechanically a derivative of a Renato Gamba over/under. Suffering ensued. Enough early Sporters had problems that the gun's reputation was threatened. Today it has been de-bugged and, like any H&H, is made well. (H&H's other over/under, the best-grade Royal, is a far more costly traditional sidelock gun with sidelugs.)

The Woodward "under-and-over" appeared in 1913, but the maker wrote that, because work on it began in 1908, "we

can claim to have made the first hammerless ejector gun on this principle" In Harvison's estimation its design has never moved ahead either. (Purdey acquired Woodward in 1948; today's Purdey sidelock over/unders are essentially Woodward's.) Since then many British gunmakers have dallied with the vertical-barrel design, but none has achieved the prominence of Boss. Meanwhile, the over/under has overwhelmingly become the dominant design in competitive wingshooting and the product of high-volume industrial manufacturers outside Britain (and the US).

"Over/under design has evolved significantly since the 1920s," Harvison likes to point out, "while the side-by-side gun has stayed the same for a century—it's a much simpler mechanism." Over/under barrels are easier to regulate than side-by-side barrels (there are no convergence or "flip" problems), but the vertical distance between the bore centers in an O/U makes ignition and lock-up more problematic. It also leads to tallish action bodies and vertical displacement between the hands and eye, which affect gun handling and target acquisition. (Think about where the toplever spindle has to go, too, when the strikers are on the centerline.) Single triggers, which became standard on O/Us when the US adopted the design, can be troublesome in any sort of double gun. Harvison was of course well aware of all of this when he became Holloway & Naughton.

Holloway & Who?

Thomas Naughton started in the gun trade with Charles Maybury (or Mayberry) on Birmingham's legendary St. Mary's Row in the late 1870s at the ripe age of 10. In his late teens he shifted to George Bonehill's Belmont Gun Works and then moved again, to a gunmaker named James Carr, in the late '80s. George Holloway was a hardware retailer who wanted to be a gunmaker, and he hired Naughton to establish Holloway & Company. After about 15 years the firm was sold to H. Ludlow England, who owned the huge Midland Gun Company. Naughton stayed on as manager and, in 1909, bought back the firm and christened it Holloway & Naughton. In 1911 H&N bought J&W Tolley, the maker of big-bore wildfowlers and heavy rifles.

The company built sidelock and boxlock guns as well as double and bolt-

action rifles and was successful from the start. Up until 1940 H&N reportedly produced about 90,000 guns and rifles, many of them sold to the US, India and Australia. Sporting-gun work stopped for the war, and then a bombing raid on Birmingham (the industrial heart of the UK) destroyed the plant, its blueprints, its machinery and its records. Afterward only a few boxlock guns were made. Naughton had died in 1921; his son, Thomas J., ran the business into the early 1950s. Then, like most UK gunmakers, the company sank into the welter of postwar consolidations, contractions and closures. As John Gregson wrote in these pages three years ago ("Holloway & Naughton," Jan/Feb '06), H&N was resurrected in 1992 by Andrew Harvison as a "flag of convenience" under which to build an over/under gun called the Premier. (Holloway & Naughton also builds a side-by-side Premier on the Beesley action.) Much has happened in the three years since.

The Premier O/U is a true Boss action, and Hartmann & Weiss, Peter Nelson and Boss itself build similar guns. "The Boss is complex and requires hundreds of hours to produce," Harvison said. "For example, it has rotating 'axles' threaded into the action walls, whereas most other makes have simple fixed stubs for their joints." The Premier also has the Boss-style locating pegs on the barrel lumps, which drop into slots cut into the rotating pins. The Premier differs from the Boss primarily in its modern inertia trigger. In 1894 Boss introduced the first single trigger that wouldn't double when the shooter's finger inadvertently hit it a second time during recoil. Without the Boss's original indexing turret, the Premier trigger cycles much faster.

The Premier O/U, now £65,000 (\$97,500) in the US, has sold fairly well. Its most important contribution to H&N's fortunes, however, may be that it led to the development of a new, slightly simplified over/under called the Britannia.

The Britannia

Andrew Harvison has the shooting skills and technical head of an international clays champion and the eye and heart of a best-gun aficionado. Although he comes from an Isle of Arran fishing family, one of his grandfathers shot for the UK at the Monte Carlo live-pigeon championships in the 1920s. Now in his late 50s, Harvi-

son grew up with a gun in his hands but earned his bread & butter in the fashion textile business. "It was not a lifestyle," he noted wryly, but it produced enough income for a family, with something left over to sink into H&N. (Harvison is also a golfer and proudly building a special commemorative gun for the 2010 Ryder Cup.)

Ironically, as Americans were rediscovering the side-by-side, Brits were beginning to gravitate toward over/unders. As a competition shooter and shooting coach, Harvison knew the benefits of the stack-barrel configuration; as a gun man, he knew the limitations of the few best-grade English O/Us. As a businessman, he saw an opportunity: Build a world-class target gun to English best standards, or build an English best that could take the abuse of sustained target shooting.

Three years ago Harvison introduced his new Britannia, with which he intends to shove the British O/U several generations up the evolutionary ladder and well into the 21st Century. Development now complete, it meets the criteria for a best-grade gun, yet it stands up to heavy-duty clays use and costs about £18,000 less than the Premier.

The Britannia first had a triggerplate action intended to help distance it further from the Premier in price. However, just as British gunmakers discovered with boxlocks and sidelocks decades ago, Harvison found that a high-quality triggerplate gun costs very nearly as much to make in England as a sidelock does. He bowed to the inevitable and redesigned the gun. With sidelocks, the Britannia is £47,000 and change (\$70,000) in the US, little more than triggerplate O/Us from Purdey and Holland & Holland and many of the top Italian sidelocks. "The market will determine whether this is good value," Harvison said. "Remember that you're also buying the knowledge of the people in our company." He returned from this year's Safari Club International Convention, in Reno, with orders for six Britannias, a remarkable showing for an "unknown" boutique maker and a new gun in a damaged economy.

"We're too expensive to get into the volume market," Harvison said, "and we don't yet have a name—we have no laurels on which to rest. We've been told for 15 years that we're not Boss, we're not Purdey, we're not Holland's . . . we've got to work harder to produce a best gun and to a price.

"The Britannia is an evolution of our

Premier, which is to say the Boss. It is made with exactly the same materials, engraving and level of finishing as the Premier; we save money on the simpler design. With both our product ranges, we've taken the modular approach to production. We have no expensive factory or machinery to support, and we pay only for product received. All our parts are made here, in Leicestershire, by first-class machinists from outside the trade, then assembled and finished by our own gunmakers."

Something Old, Something New

Today the overall shape, weight and balance of a fine break-action gun as well as the general geometry of its lockwork and ejectors remain much the same as they were in Edwardian times. Internally, however, modern metallurgy and computerized design and machining allow clever engineers to make improvements, small and large, that usually go unseen (but not unfelt) by the shooter: The sear notch in a trigger blade that once withstood 50,000 let-offs before degrading should now endure 250,000. Barrels made of modern, high-tensile yet elastic alloy steel can handle millions of rounds of even nontoxic shot, shrugging off heat and abrasion and endless cycles of expansion and contraction without damage. W.W. Greener and John Robertson never had it so good.

The heart of a double gun is its barrels, and the tapers and thickness of their walls are as important to a gun's dynamics as they are to the action of a fly rod. Harvison created H&N's barrel profiles to "settle into the bird and then move ahead easily." Britannia and Premier barrels come from Bruce Maskry's Aston Engineering, Ltd., and are precisely ground before the final swamped profile is struck, or draw-filed, by hand in the traditional way. Harvison worked with Maskry, Jon Corner and Nigel Teague for four years to develop not only his barrels but proprietary chokes as well. (Corner and Harvison both helped bring to market Teague's unique barrel-honing and relining process.)

To guarantee concentricity and true points of impact, H&N barrels shuttle back and forth between Maskry (for boring and external profiling, chambering, recessing and threading, and for those gorgeous ribs machined from solid) and Corner (honing and custom choke tubes) before going to H&N for final striking and assembly with the gun. Demi- and monoblock barrels are available on the

Britannia; with the latter, there is no awkward seam ahead of the chambers because the tubes are glued and invisibly laser-welded to the breech unit. The target Britannia has heavier barrels (.032" wall thickness; .035" for pigeon guns) than the game gun (.028") and a heftier stock. The weight of a 12-gauge varies from 7³/₄ to eight pounds.

Unlike most best-grade guns, all H&N models are available with interchangeable chokes—but these are bespoke by the client and engineered to unusual standards. "After 30 years of international competition as well as game shooting," Harvison said, "I knew that I should offer my customers the benefits of multi-chokes. But it is essential to align them with the chamber, forcing cone and bore axis. The leading edge of the tube must also mate perfectly with the barrel ID. The step, or transition, in our tubes [to the barrel ID] is no more than two thousandths. We are also very, very careful about chambering and rimming our barrels to achieve absolute concentricity and alignment between cartridge and bore. Together these things make for a very smooth-shooting gun and even reduce felt recoil."

Nowhere is it written that a best gun must have fixed chokes. The reality is that a best gun must *not* have the blunderbuss muzzles or thick barrel walls that come with most mass-produced choke tubes. Unless a client specifies extended tubes for a dedicated target gun, the only evidence of interchangeable chokes in a Holloway & Naughton are the fine lines inside the muzzles that delineate these slightly recessed, thin-wall, custom-honed tubes from the barrels themselves. There aren't even any spanner notches; H&N supplies a special friction-fit wrench.

Clays-crushing aside, with optimized chokes married to superb balance and handling plus target-gun pointability and a precise trigger, a Britannia proofed for 1¹/₄-ounce loads and stocked appropriately might be the best 70-yard-pheasant artillery out there.

Harvison and I were sitting at a banquet in the clubhouse at West Wycombe, the shooting grounds on the Dashwood estate, west of London. Scattered around us were several H&N over/unders in various states of disassembly. An instructor came by to greet Andrew. "We've shot these guns to death," he said, "and there's just no wear on them." Harvison pointed out that the Britan-

nia has extended locking lugs that nestle into deep pockets in the action body and that the wrist pins (replaceable) provide a large swept area for the barrels to pivot on. Also to help keep a Britannia from shooting loose, there are replaceable cams hidden in these lug pockets, at the foot of the breech face, to draw the barrels snugly on face.

The barrel selector is unique—a beautifully ribbed button that pivots in a channel at the back of the safety catch. Thanks to a roller bearing underneath, which won't let it stay at top dead center, the selector can't "midgate," or hang up. Furthermore, once the safety has been clicked ahead into "fire" mode, the barrel selector is locked and its setting can't be changed. The Britannia's single trigger (adjustable or fixed; double triggers are an option) is the same as the Premier's.

Even the Britannia's Deeley-style forend latch has had extra attention, in the form of two adjustments to counter wear. The forend itself is unusually shallow, because H&N developed a shorter mounting stud on the bottom barrel. This puts hand, eye and bores still closer to the same line and contributes to the Britannia's sleek and streamlined look—which contribute to its handling and ability to soak up recoil.

Holloway & Naughton rivals the best from Northern Italy (Fabbri, F.lli Rizzini) and Germany (Hartmann & Weiss) when it comes to such a technical approach to building fine guns. "Every detail on our guns is locked down for a specific kind of shooting," Harvison said. "I can talk for hours about trigger shape or guard design, and we just won't compromise on quality." In the hands, a Britannia feels like certain very modern high-performance cars (M-Series BMWs and AMG Mercedes come to mind): hewed from ingot rather than a hundred bits screwed together, and crisply capable of far more performance than we mere mortals know what to do with.

It Begins with Fit

Harvison's mantra is: "I sell the most expensive gunfit in the world, I'm proud to say, and a gun comes with it." Then he adds: "We simply won't sell a gun that doesn't fit." His gunfitting goes far beyond length of pull and drop at comb. "We look at grip diameter and shape, comb thickness and other dimensions that a try-gun doesn't cover—the distance from the center of the trigger to the front of the comb, from the trigger to the

back of the grip, and so on." H&N's fitting sheet (viewable on the company's Website) specifies 22 stock dimensions. Harvison is keenly aware of the different needs of game shooters and competitors and how over/unders and side-by-sides should be fitted for each. After years of teaching shooting in both Britain and America, Harvison also knows a dozen different shooting styles.

His concept of allying old and new in gunmaking has been carried over to sales and service too. A client may book a fitting by text message or e-mail, but Holloway & Naughton offers, according to Harvison, "old-fashioned, proper, integrated service—fitting and gunmaking and shooting instruction by a highly qualified and dedicated staff, as was done in London 75 years ago. We are not three generations removed from the guy who designed the guns we build and sell. We can actually talk about the handling characteristics of our guns, and we spend a huge amount of time with each customer to make sure everything is right and that he can shoot the gun. It *must* shoot right."

"We" in this case refers to H&N's team of seven gunmakers, all in the English Midlands, who work on their own premises and have signed confidentiality agreements. With now about a dozen guns in process at any moment, several of them going to repeat buyers, H&N can look ahead to establishing its own works—someday. Perhaps. Cash and the markets willing. Harvison has broader horizons, though. Referring to his Premier and the Britannia, he said, "We've done the Rolls and now the BMW-Mercedes. Next I'd like to do the Ford"—that is, a much more competitively priced gun that can be sold more or less off the rack. "We'll design it the same way. We'll start with the necessary shape—to get the handling characteristics to make the gun shoot properly—and then fill in the mechanicals to suit, concentrating on the details as we go . . ." He really *can* talk for hours about trigger shape and guard design.

After nearly 20 years of hands-on work and investment plus 20 years of shooting experience previous to that, Andrew Harvison and Holloway & Naughton seem poised to become an overnight success.

Author's Note: For more information on the Premier and Britannia, contact Holloway & Naughton, 01144-116-259-6592; www.hollowaynaughton.co.uk.