

ERIC CLAPTON

As befits an über-legend, the first time Eric Clapton ventured into the shooting field, he was carrying his very own, brand new, bespoke Purdey - yet it was not 'bespoke' for him. Another Purdey client had commissioned the gun. "I was taking lessons with Alan Rose at the West London Shooting School," Clapton tells me, "and I said to him one day, 'What would be your ideal gun if you had no constraints at all?' He said, 'A Purdey over-and-under.'" A nod from an expert is as good as a wink to Clapton who thought to himself: "I'll go to Purdey's, and see what they've got." Here Nigel Beaumont takes up the story. "It was May, 2003, and a client had cancelled out on a commission. This 12-bore over-and-under was literally being finished when Eric Clapton saw it, and it was fortuitous that he liked it, and the dimensions were right for him. It became his first serious gun. I think it treated him well - well enough for him to come back and commission other pairs." The embellishment adorning that first Purdey over-and-under took the novice shooter's breath away. "It was extraordinary," he recalls. "The action was steel carved - very flamboyant. I was quite overwhelmed. There I was, a new shooter going into the field with a gun that was quite 'bling'... but I don't mind going in at the deep end. I used it a lot, and was very attached to it until I realized I needed a pair more than a single gun, and started to collect pairs. Now I have to let it go; I need the space," he explains.

Anyone bitten by the collecting bug is a restless spirit. Clapton describes himself as "a kit junkie", and confesses to "a magpie tendency", so it was almost inevitable that the Purdey o/u would herald a sizeable gun collection of exceptionally high quality. "It's following the same pattern as when I collected guitars, cars and watches," he says. "I start out with a fairly broad spectrum - got obsessed, then engulfed, and finally narrow the collections down. I built a gunroom that can house a certain amount of guns, and now I have to clear the decks for the new guns I have on order. Also, a custodian has a certain responsibility to keep things ticking over. I like to keep my collections to manageable proportions; I feel uncomfortable about owning things that don't get used." Clapton is one of life's pragmatists. He is also a perfectionist, and these magnificent guns reflect these traits. "I found that when I started to shoot, I wanted to shoot beautiful guns," he tells me. "I was also baffled by the fact that nobody really used English guns out in the field. Although we have a tremendous history of gunmaking in this country, it seemed that most people used Spanish guns or Brownings... And I just thought, 'Well, I'm not going to go down that road. I'd like to get some guns made by just about every British builder that I can'.

"I went to all the best London houses to have guns made, and this little collection I am selling represents a cross-section of them. Having got to know a few shooters, I get recommendations on what sort of specifications to use - length of barrel; the gauges... but while all these things are important, I try to couple my decisions to whatever artistic sense I have." Design and craftsmanship both "intrigue and interest" this former art student who was raised by his grandfather, Jack Clapp, a master builder with a strong work ethic. "I grew up around people who worked with their hands," he says, and when I suggest that he is drawn to Boss guns because of the elegance of their line, Clapton agrees. "And they have tremendous charisma - if you can call a gun charismatic. They have a fabulous history, and there's an element of the underground about Boss, too. Everyone knows about Purdey and Holland &

Holland, but you can even say to another shooter, ‘What do you think of Boss...?’ and he won’t know what you’re talking about. There’s a certain mystique, a certain caché about them. In future, I think Boss guns will make up three-quarters of my collection, although I don’t have a cast iron agenda. There will always be guns that just catch my eye along the way.”

This collection affords a fascinating opportunity to plot the formation of a novice shooter’s taste. Quiz Clapton on what contributes most of all to his relationship with his guns – is it, perhaps, the engraving? - and the clues emerge. Engraver Marcus Hunt personalised Clapton’s pair of William Evans 20-bores in a manner that duly filled the owner with awe: “Beautiful work,” he says. “Marcus was recommended by William Evans. It was a good choice because he’s a very keen fisherman, and we spent quite a bit of time fishing together.” Clapton has been the keenest of fishermen since he was a boy in the Surrey Hills, and Hunt worked from the photographs he took as they fished. I begin to suspect, was the most enjoyable aspect of the engraving process for Clapton was the sport. “If you really want me to be frank,” he says, “I am in two minds about engraving. I respect what master engravers do, and I like what Marcus did a lot, and it adds fun to gunmaking. It’s great to own things that are really personal, but at the same time I prefer things to be anonymous too. My favourite presentation of a gun is if it’s nicely engraved with its house scroll, with colour-case hardening over it so that it is almost plain, so that you have to look quite hard to see the detail. I like subtlety in beauty. Guns with very elaborate finishing look like museum pieces to me. I want nothing flashy or distracting so that when I’m in the field no one’s going to be looking at it all the time. I like a gun to look like working tool, but if you look closely you can see it’s a magnificent piece of art as well.”

It becomes clear that that for Clapton, being out in the field is the chief attraction of owning his fine, traditional, best English guns: “It’s the shooting of the gun,” he confirms. “I’m just an average shot; I’m never going to be a great shot because it’s not my first interest. Playing the guitar is my prime interest in life. That’s what I do. Shooting and fishing are hobbies, and you can ever really become a master at a hobby.” A right-thinking shooter, he cleaves to his duty to the quarry. “I do like high pheasants, but I’m a common or garden shot and I like common or garden shooting. I don’t understand, or enjoy, shooting at pheasants that look like they are out of range. I’m just not good enough for it, and I don’t see the point. If shooting was my main occupation, I might feel differently. But because I only do it once or twice a week, I prefer to shoot at birds I know I can hit.” He alternates his side-by-side, and o/u guns – “the one thing I can’t get my head around is going from a single-trigger to double-trigger.” Clapton and his wife, Melia, impose a limit on their sport by vowing to eat what they kill. “A tall order,” he says, “nevertheless we try. I find shooting a much more social pastime than fishing, and I value them both because I’m not really that gregarious, and shooting with groups of people up and down the country has taught me a lot about how to get on with my fellow human beings.”

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