

# For bespoke, the McKays have it

Colin McKelvie visits David McKay Brown, a gunmaker who has been described as the only truly innovative gunmaker working in Scotland today

THEY WERE wise words, lodged firmly in the memory since boyhood. “A top-quality shotgun should feel like silk and have a life of its own when you pick it up.” That was my Great-Uncle Tom, who was the first to place a shotgun in my youthful hands, and that Dublin-made Rigby best-grade sidelock did have a seductively lovely feel to it, even to my untutored senses. It exuded inherent life and the aura of an exceptionally finely crafted artefact, and it became the yardstick by which I have judged guns ever since.

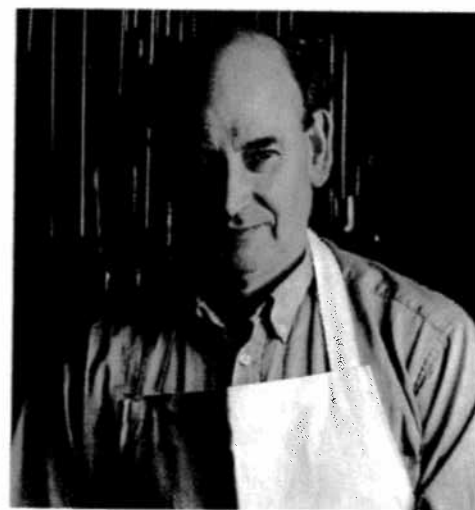
Dublin once had an extremely fine tradition of quality gunmaking, often equalling London’s very best; but Scotland, especially Edinburgh and Glasgow, has the greater and more enduring claim to provincial excellence – if provincial is not a demeaning term to apply to an ancient national capital and a city that was once one of the greatest workshops supplying and powering an empire. And it was, after all, a Scot, Alexander Forsyth, who in 1806 – and rather improbably for an Aberdeenshire clergyman – devised the revolutionary percussion cap method of firing a gun, thereby consigning flintlocks to history, gaining a handsome Parliamentary reward, and taking a giant step on the path that led to the development of the modern breechloader.

Rather moribund in the Forties and Fifties, the Scottish gun trade has recently undergone a renaissance, with the reinvigoration of Dicksons of Edinburgh and its associated names of MacNaughton, Henry, Mortimer, Martin and Fraser, all makers of fine-grade, often uniquely actioned game guns and rifles.

But when one man is described to you as “the only truly innovative gunmaker Scotland has had since the war”, and that remark has come from the lips of the late, infinitely experienced Geoffrey Boothroyd, further investigation becomes imperative. The gunmaker in question is David McKay Brown.

It was with the long-established Glasgow-based firm of Alex Martin that David started his gunmaking apprenticeship in 1957, after early experience in engineering draughtsmanship in the heavy machinery world of Strathclyde manufacturing. When Martins was acquired by Dicksons the celebrated name moved to Edinburgh and David’s training was completed there, giving him the benefits of learning his craft in two of the finest Scottish gunmaking ateliers. Now, at Bothwell, south-east of Glasgow, David’s own company is entering its 37th year of bespoke shotgun and rifle production, including large-calibre double rifles for big game and some beautifully crafted bolt-action stalking rifles. His work stands four-square in the best traditions of Scottish gunmaking excellence, having introduced both mechanical and stylistic innovations, and is enjoying a reputation second to none.

Geoffrey Boothroyd, armaments adviser to Ian Fleming for his James Bond books and the inspiration for the character of “Q”, a doyen of British gun historians, and especially interested in the traditions of gunmaking in his native Scotland, was a particularly enthusiastic admirer, describing his guns as “some of the finest in design and workmanship to have



**Above** David McKay Brown  
**Right** The lockwork for a round action gun

emerged in the post-war period”. Much of the McKay Brown work has been founded on a distinctive style of shotgun mechanism, once generically referred to as the “Edinburgh action”, which can be traced back to a patent granted to James MacNaughton of Edinburgh in 1879. Dicksons modified and developed this into its most widely known, much admired and occasionally imitated form, its “round action” or “trigger-plate action”. Superficially it may look rather like an unusually ►

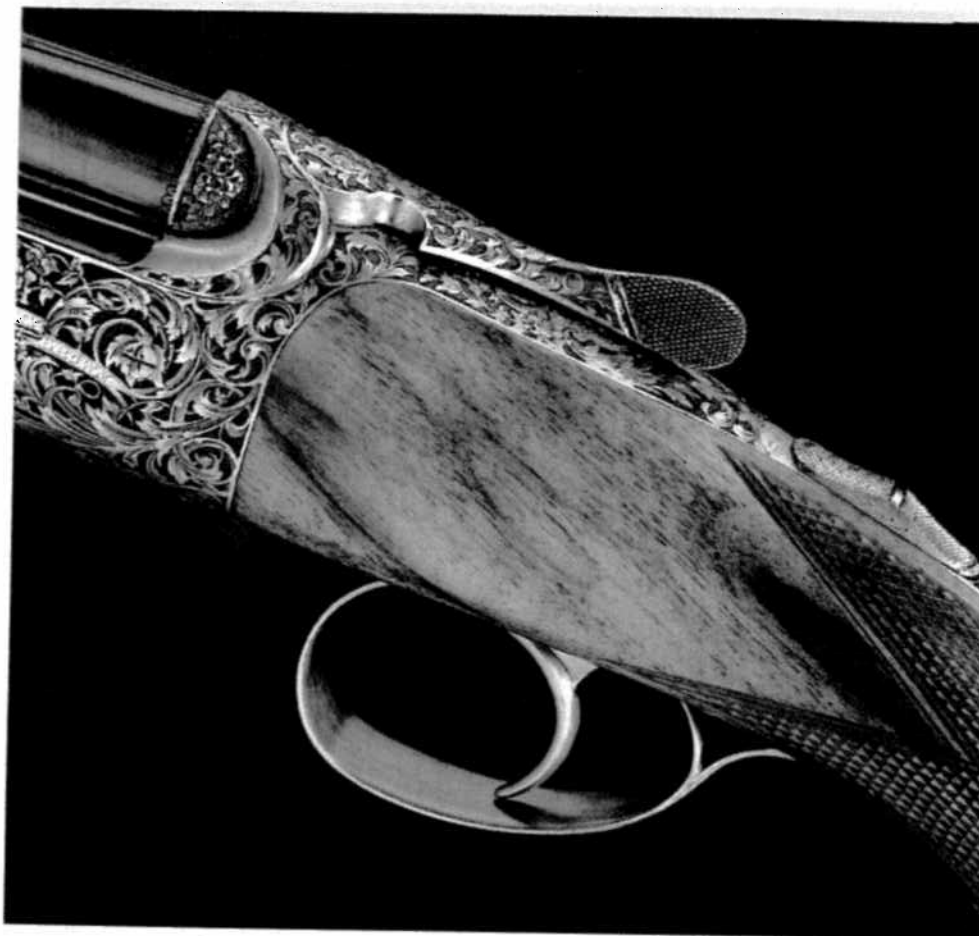


stylish and streamlined round-bodied boxlock hammerless ejector, but its structure and inner workings are fundamentally different. The perfected Dickson-style round action has an inherent strength and restrained elegance superior to both the functional-looking chunkiness of the typical boxlock and the rather slab-sided appearance of the typical sidelock. There is also a unique combination of sophisticated workmanship and a large dose of mechanical simplicity and subtlety that makes it immensely reliable and a delight to those with an eye for elegantly functional efficiency in matters mechanical.

That inbuilt strength means it requires less additional breech bolstering than most sidelock actions when it is used as the basis for a double rifle, which is subjected to much higher internal pressures and heavier recoil. Efficiency and dependability in the spring-assisted opening of the gun, the cocking of the action and the working of the extraction and ejection systems are allied to an exceptionally crisp, consistent quality of trigger pulls, while the gold plating of critical working parts combined with an action that is largely enshrouded by the butt-stock wood make the workings largely impervious to wet conditions.

A major, fairly recent McKay Brown innovation has been the development of a modified round action for guns built with an over-and-under barrel configuration. The design, officially registered in June 1992, retains all the distinctive strength and elegance of the side-by-side round action, and the finished gun has a sleek grace far removed from the heavy, deep-sided appearance of so many over-and-unders built on back-action sidelocks. The assisted opening facility remains, allowing the gun to be broken and the spent cases ejected with a one-handed movement, while the shooter is reaching for fresh cartridges with his free hand, thereby allowing the gun to be reloaded very quickly when necessary. On firing, the striker pins drive forward at an almost perfect 90 degrees to the cartridge case head, unlike the more angled strike of back-action firing systems, and when the gun is broken, the lower striker pin automatically retracts into the standing breech, eliminating any fouling or dragging on the head of the fired case.

The rounded contours of the action fences tend subconsciously to lead the shooter's eyes forward as the gun is mounted, and make a contribution to what all shooting instructors agree is the inherently greater "pointability" of the over-and-under compared with the side-by-side. This, when combined with the increasing popularity of over-and-unders in recent decades among gameshooters, in addition to that configuration's total domination of



**Above** A 20-bore over-and-under

**Left** All of David's four-man team have worked with him since leaving school and served their five-year apprenticeships under his tutelage

**Above right** Italian engraving on an over-and-under 20-bore

**Right** A renaissance scroll on a 20-bore side-by-side

the competitive clay pigeon scene, makes a heady combination, and has won golden opinions for the McKay Brown design.

First as head of Sotheby's Sporting Guns Department and later as a director of Holland & Holland, the late James Booth had probably handled more of the finest sporting guns in the world before he'd reached the age of 40 than most of us could shake a stick at in a long lifetime. The McKay Brown guns delighted him, and the particular qualities – mechanical, stylistic and user-friendly for balance and liveliness – of the round-action over-and-under were a guiding light when he was involved in

the finalising of the Holland & Holland "Royal" 20-bore over-and-under, which he went on to love and use to such outstanding effect. Being a sidelock, the H&H gun has a totally different type of action, of course, but it was the McKay Brown gun's quality of lively balance that James particularly aspired to matching. Years ago, he confided to me: "I bet any of his guns would pass your 'feels like silk' test" – and he was right. They do have that special feel, that balance and soul that is so very hard to express in words, but which you immediately sense as soon as you have one in your hands.

**David McKay Brown  
Gunmakers**

**Side-by-sides** begin at £28,000.

**Over-and-unders** begin at £35,000.

**Double rifles** are £55,000 to £60,000, depending on calibre.

Unusually for a bespoke maker, David charges no premium for matched pairs or trios, regarding the inevitable additional work as an appropriate discount for his customers. Trios, which involve no small outlay by the purchasers and a considerable degree of craftsmanship in making three guns that look and handle exactly the same, figured significantly in the McKay Brown output in 2002, and garnitures in 16-, 20- and 28-bore were made.

**David McKay Brown Gunmakers,**

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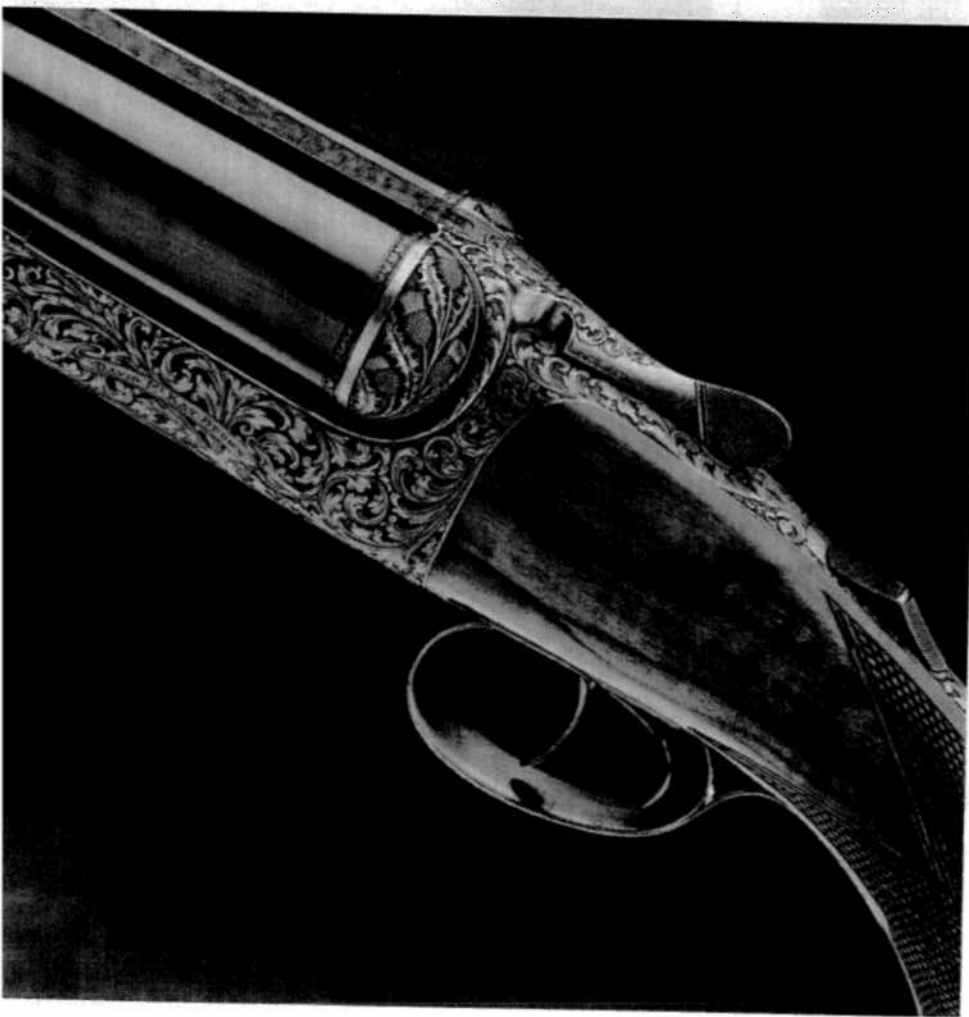


The son of a sporting father, with a passion for shooting since boyhood, David McKay Brown may have a dedicated commitment to mechanical design but it is directed towards the objective of effectiveness in the shooting field. His own pheasant, partridge and grouse shoots give him good proving grounds for the guns that emerge from his workshop, where state-of-the-art computer-aided design is allied to long-established bench-top craftsmanship. The smoky blacking lamp that reveals tell-tale high spots and tiny flaws in metal-to-metal fittings, as used in the Regency workshops of Manton and Greener, plays as important a role as the silicon microprocessor.

Anyone who is a stickler for precision and excellence looks for colleagues with similarly high standards of skill, and David's own 47 years of experience are complemented by a further total of 83 years of experience from his four-man team of an actioner, a stocker, a lock-maker and a barrel-maker, all of whom have worked with him since leaving school and served their five-year apprenticeships under his tutelage. With one apprentice in training and David on the lookout for another promising candidate, David laments the scarcity of real talent and commitment to excellence and sustained effort. "There is a great shortage of skilled labour, and our government offers no worthwhile help for in-house training. Over the years I have had about 20 apprentices, most of whom were failures. A passion for gunmaking is useless by itself, and must be accompanied by reliability and a hard-working, accurate approach."

Traditionally, the building of bespoke guns involves long waiting lists, but David sympathises with customers' impatience. "Collectors or customers who wish to spread the financial outlay over a period may be prepared to wait. But older guns want to get going quickly in the seasons that remain to them, while young men are naturally impatient, won't wait, and may go elsewhere." But precision work can't be unduly rushed, and unless some special engraving or other refinement is stipulated, the customer's gun will be in his hands within a remarkable 18 months of placing his order, and sometimes within a year.

With his finger on the pulse of national and international demand, David detects shifting trends among gameshooters. He made seven 16-bores in 2002 alone, and the 16 does seem to be making a worldwide comeback, but 12-bores and 20-bores predominate, with .410s and 28-bores going primarily to American quail shooters, although now there is also an element of UK interest in 28-bores. And yes, they do all handle like silk, so Great-Uncle Tom would definitely have approved. ■



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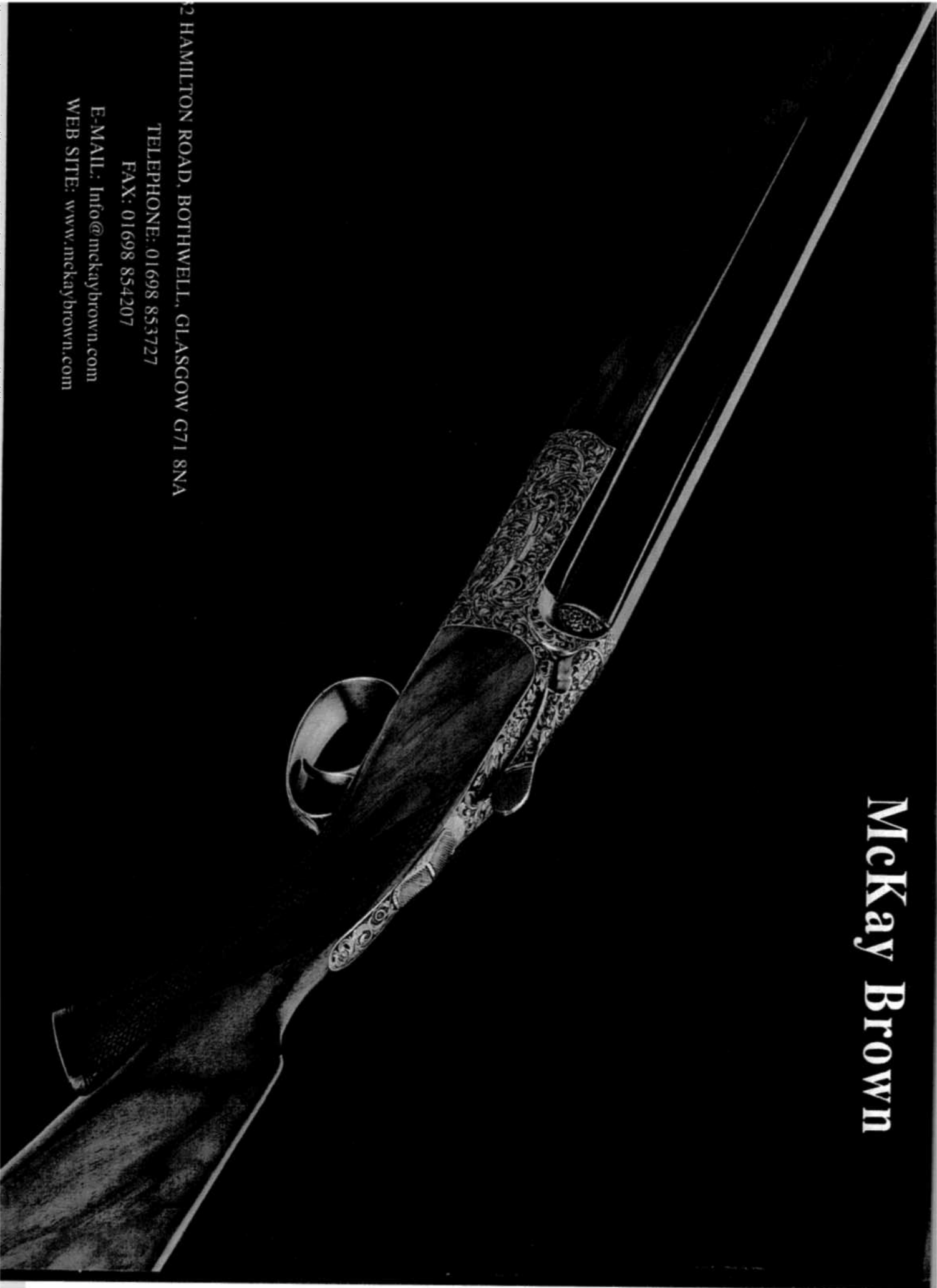
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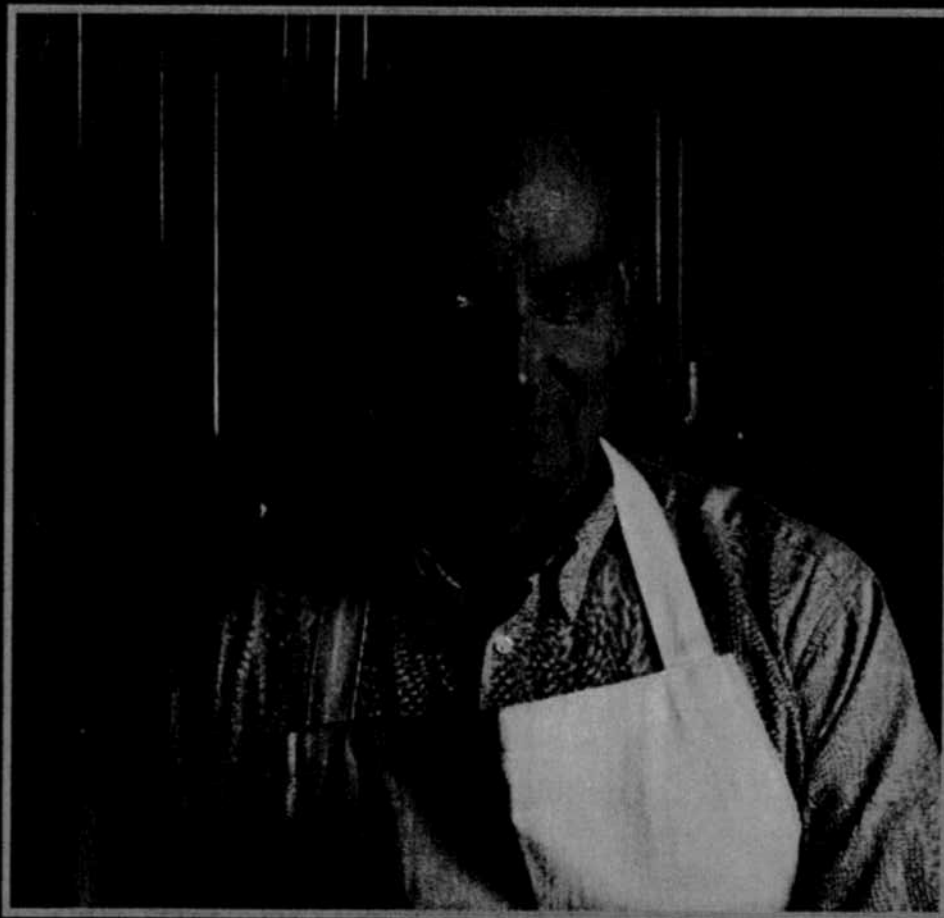
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# Guns of Scotland

CLAIR KOFOED

*Touring three top shops in the space of a day*

**T**hose of us with a penchant for “world shooting” often find our spouses opting not to accompany us on trips for a variety of reasons. When I recently was given a photo assignment in Scotland, however, my wife,

Susan, stated flatly that there was no way I was going without her. Susan had been to Scotland previously and fallen in love with the architectural and natural beauty of the country. She was keen to return, even if it meant subjecting herself to “gun talk” for a day or so.

So the plan developed to visit three of the best Scottish gunshops in the space of a day, followed by shooting and sightseeing for the duration of the trip. After all, who could pass up the Georgian stone architecture of Edinburgh, one of the world’s most splendid cities? Or the vista on the drive from the highland capital, Inverness, down the loch-filled glacial valleys to the coast, where Fort William sits at the foot of Ben Nevis, Scotland’s highest peak, and then on through Glen Coe to Loch Lomond and Glasgow? By the same token, could any bird shooter fail to revel in a glorious day of walk-up grouse shooting on the heathered moors high above the valley of the Tay, looking down on the storybook town of Aberfeldy, where Haggart’s makes some of the best woolens in the world? And need it be said, “Oh, aye,” that everywhere there are distilleries in scenic locales featuring the heady, amber liquid called “aqua vitae” by the Scots?

## David McKay Brown

We began our double-gun tour of Scotia that September morn-

ing in the brawling, sprawling industrial heart of the country: Glasgow. It is here in the southern suburb of Bothwell where one of the modern masters of gunmaking—David McKay Brown—plies his trade. A trip to Brown’s shop offers first the opportunity

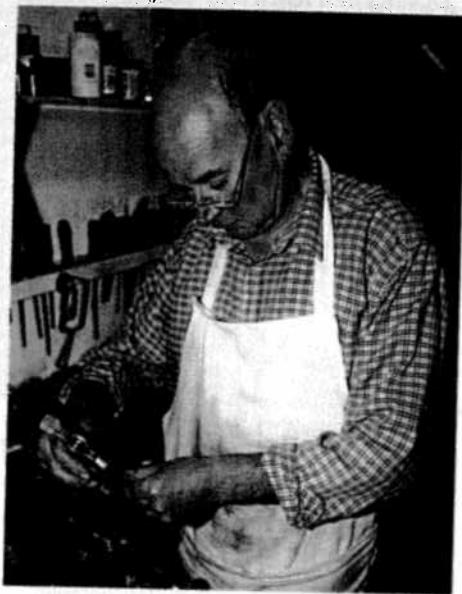
to handle the beautiful specimens adorning the gun rack, but perhaps even more attractive is the chance to glimpse a very personal style of craftsmanship and the unwavering philosophy behind it. Brown has the independence and high standards it takes to successfully compete in today’s high-end game-gun market.

When we visited, the proprietor himself opened the nondescript and heavily barred door wearing a shop apron and carrying a file. That view, in a nutshell, is what David Brown is really all about. His approach to gunmaking is hands-on and personal from start to finish. Not to say that other makers don’t know their wares and don’t give customers individual attention, but for many buyers there is something very satisfying in taking a gun from the hand of the fellow who had the vision and talent to start the company and build the gun.

From his early career at Alex Martin and John Dickson to his present-day status as a major British gunmaker, it is

clear that Brown has created his version of “luck” through hard work, skill and typical Scottish determination. Not to mention the steadfast support and organizational talents of Mrs. Alexe Brown, David’s partner in business and life. While Susan and Alexe chatted, David and I discussed his history.

Like many of the best, Brown started out a “gun nut” right from the shell. And in his case, the nut did not fall far from the



**David McKay Brown (above) is a hands-on gunmaker who runs a small but efficient shop specializing in round-action shotguns and double rifles.**

tree; his father was a very keen shooter and always brought home game to the family. In fact, David never actually tasted chicken until he was nine or 10 years old. "I was totally disappointed," he said incredulously. "It had no taste a'tall."

After schooling, at which Brown admits he never excelled, he apprenticed as a draftsman at a boilermaker's. "And of course, in no time," he said, "I was drawing out guns on my board." Beginning in 1957 he did a variety of gunwork for the Alex Martin firm ("Rifles, shotguns and an awful lot of repair"), but he always managed to spend his weekends shooting. Later John Dickson bought out Martin's, and Brown went along with the new owners. It was at Dickson's that he learned to make the company's round-action gun and to appreciate its virtues. He came to realize that not only was the action ergonomic in form—as a requisite to good design—but also the function was superlative. Brown previously had spent two years in Scotland's harsh field environment as a professional deer-stalker, and he had come to believe that gun function and reliability were of paramount importance. He appreciated the action, with its coil springs for the toplever and ejectors, as the Dickson design largely eliminated the

plished thanks to state-of-the-art modern machining, as Brown outsources the initial machine work to shops with computer-assisted milling equipment. Then he and his staff of six do the handfitting and finishing in-house. "For our volume, it's just not economical to own the CNC machinery," Brown said. Even at that, the Brown personal touch remains. David uses his training as a draftsman to create his own parts and design specifications at home on his CAD program. His new, completely scaled-down .410 (see "Scottish Smallbores," Jan/Feb 2000) is a case in point. "It was quite a challenge," he said. "All of the geometry for timing for the action and locks needed to be changed." Through the efficiency of computer-assisted design, the gun was completely redesigned without becoming too expensive.

An even more ambitious design project was Brown's round-action over/under shotgun, which debuted in 1991. Brown says his production methods now have reduced the time required to



**This new 28-bore McKay Brown over/under was engraved by G.S. Pedretti and imported by Hi-Grade Imports.**

make a lock. The old way took three weeks; the new takes just 35 hours. One only needs to look at the semi-finished parts to realize the extensive handfitting and -finishing still required by Brown and his employees. The Brown shop does all of the wood and metalwork, except for the

potential for breakage and vastly simplified spring replacement. The mainspring, as well, consisted of a robust, single long limb that flexed over its entire length, with an end roller contact point for great durability. The action bar was unusually strong (making it suitable for his Nitro Express double rifles), having no cocking-rod slots and thus allowing the "round" profile. Bolting, too, was triple and strong, with a toplever third bite on the opening-assisted action.

Eventually, as often happens with skilled and self-directed gunmakers, Brown wound up on his own. As the Dickson patent had long expired, he started making round-action guns in 1974—the first of which, his own personal gun, is heavily used and going strong 30 years later. Brown remains incredibly fond of shooting, and he rarely misses the chance to spend a day afield testing his handiwork.

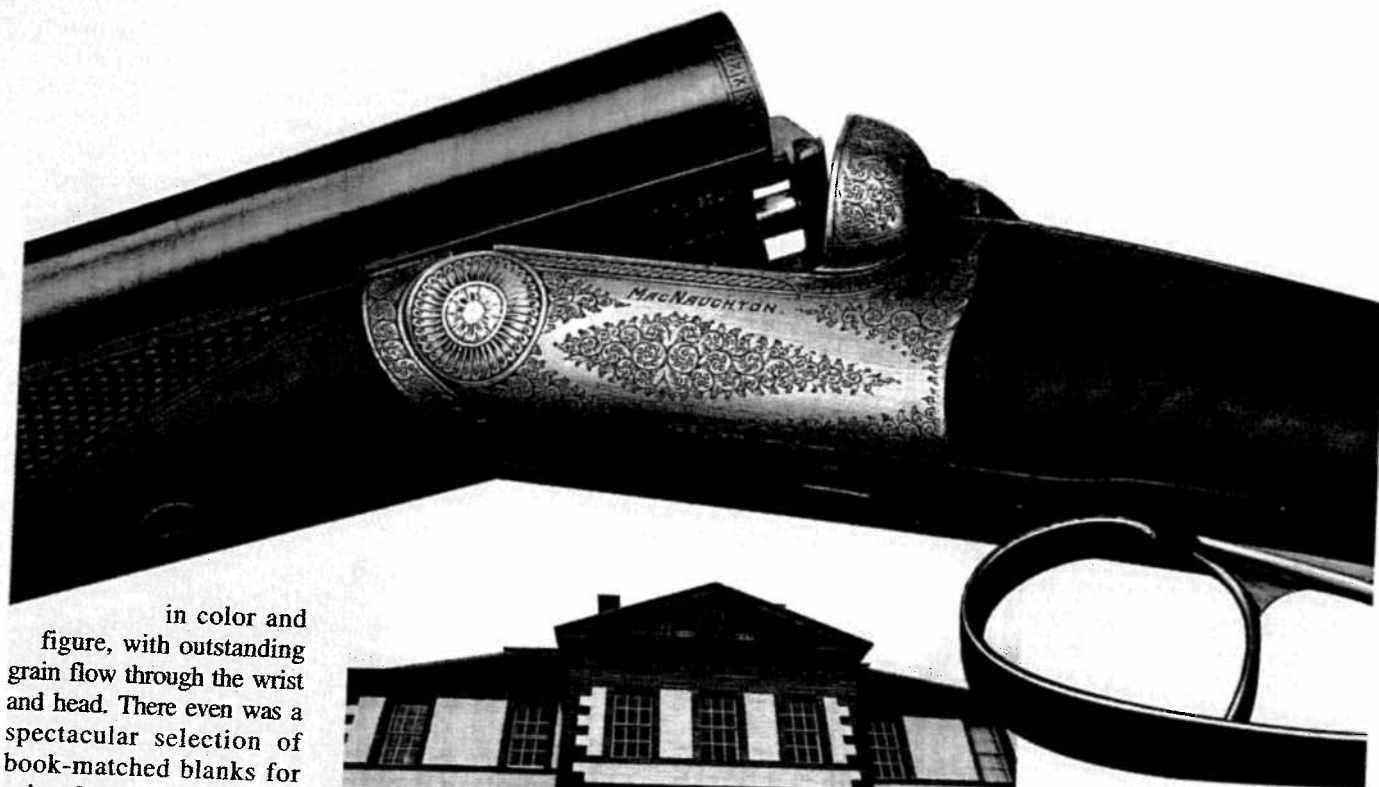
A tour of Brown's working Bothwell facility reveals that almost all of the operation is under one roof. "We're small but very efficient," Brown said. "We have to be to stay competitive and still make a profit." There is no large conglomerate backing the Brown shop, yet the firm still manages to be among the top producers in Britain—some years making 35 or more side-by-side and over/under shotguns and double rifles. That feat is accom-

plished thanks to state-of-the-art modern machining, as Brown outsources the initial machine work to shops with computer-assisted milling equipment. Then he and his staff of six do the handfitting and finishing in-house. "For our volume, it's just not economical to own the CNC machinery," Brown said. Even at that, the Brown personal touch remains. David uses his training as a draftsman to create his own parts and design specifications at home on his CAD program. His new, completely scaled-down .410 (see "Scottish Smallbores," Jan/Feb 2000) is a case in point. "It was quite a challenge," he said. "All of the geometry for timing for the action and locks needed to be changed." Through the efficiency of computer-assisted design, the gun was completely redesigned without becoming too expensive.

An even more ambitious design project was Brown's round-action over/under shotgun, which debuted in 1991. Brown says his production methods now have reduced the time required to make a lock. The old way took three weeks; the new takes just 35 hours. One only needs to look at the semi-finished parts to realize the extensive handfitting and -finishing still required by Brown and his employees. The Brown shop does all of the wood and metalwork, except for the engraving, in-house. Even the lock parts are plated on-site in the basement—first with copper, then nickel and finally gold for rust protection. In similar fashion, the barrels are taken from outsourced chopper-lump forgings and finished by Brown and his workers with machinery in the shop. A long-bed lathe cuts the chambers and extractor holes. Then a high-tech barrel hone cuts inside diameters and chokes to necessary tolerances, and the bores are mirror-polished. In contrast, alongside the 21st Century barrel hone sit the old hot irons that were—and still are—used to heat the tubes for soldering. They look as though they came straight out of Birmingham Bowery.

With further careful attention, Brown personally undertakes all the selection and sea-soning of the walnut for the stock blanks. He has a man in the Middle East sending him mostly Turkish wood, which he carefully monitors in his own humidity-controlled drying room. One of Brown's staff also does all of the stocking—after Brown has carefully selected the layouts. "Some of our customers want wood that is so heavily figured in the head that it's unsound," Brown said. "But we do have to insist on proper layout."

With all of the difficulty finding good wood today, Brown does a masterful job. All of the blanks I observed were first rate



in color and figure, with outstanding grain flow through the wrist and head. There even was a spectacular selection of book-matched blanks for pairs of guns.

After seeing all of the shop work, we were able to ogle the wonderful engraving patterns on the array of finished guns. There are some wonderful traditional house styles, including Celtic, and of course patterns can be specified by customers. At that, many Brown guns are engraved in Italy, and the results are spectacular. "We are offering a level of finish today that is the best we've ever had," Brown said proudly.

It's often at this point in the tour that people begin having dangerous thoughts. *Let's see. If I sold all of my other guns and then put off buying the minivan for another year, we could swing the down payment, and then I'd have one really nice gun for all of my shooting. A gun that not only would be a joy to own and use but would appreciate in value with the years . . .*

Luckily, Susan was there to ground me.

### Graham Mackinlay & Co. Gunmakers

A half-hour's drive north of Brown's at the other end of town—and symbolically the other end of the century—are the premises of Graham Mackinlay, dealer in pre-owned classic game guns, many of them Scottish. Mackinlay's shop is located in the basement of a beautiful Edwardian mansion—Strathleven House—just across Glasgow's Dumbarton Bridge. For a man "North of the Clyde" (a region known for its stubborn residents), Mackinlay has an easygoing manner. His fresh face and lean, athletic build reflect the look one expects to see on a soccer pitch rather than in a gunshop. Yet Mackinlay has a reputation for scoring some of the finest offerings in vintage Scottish guns. Because he lives in Scotland and has connections in the trade, it's only natural that when guns come out of estates or otherwise enter the market, Mackinlay often gets the calls.



Graham Mackinlay (above, on the steps of Strathleven House) deals mostly in pre-owned classic game guns, such as this vintage James MacNaughton (top).

company's sole employee. Typically, Mackinlay spends mornings at the bench doing repair work for others and tuning up his own inventory. Afternoons are reserved for the business of trading in guns. Mackinlay generally is on the phone well past 6 o'clock in the evening.

For the prospective buyer of a vintage Scottish gun, Strathleven house would not be too bad a place to start. Mackinlay has an up-to-date Website listing his inventory and often can locate a gun by a particular maker if he doesn't have one in stock. He also has taken on the label of Charles Ingram and has in the past built a limited number of Ingrams for buyers wanting new guns.

In the nicely appointed showroom, we easily could sense Mackinlay's affection for and knowledge of fine guns as he showed off an extremely rare Damascus-barreled, 20-bore round-action Dickson from his private collection. The gun positively glowed with subtle grace from within the red felt-lined case.

### Dickson & MacNaughton

Just 50 miles from Glasgow on the M8, our tour ended perhaps where Scottish gunmaking symbolically began: in Edinburgh at Dickson & MacNaughton. We left our rental at a car park near the center of town and walked the short distance to the shop. The modern incarnation of this venerable firm is located north of Edinburgh Castle, a couple of blocks off of the Princes Street Gardens at 21 Fredrick Street. Here, trading on the pedigrees of

Mackinlay was trained as a gunsmith, having articulated at Dickson's, in Edinburgh. In 1988 he started his own business, Glasgow Gunmakers, and in 2002 he established Graham Mackinlay & Co. Gunmakers, "Manufacturers, Repairers & Suppliers of Quality Guns." At that he is a very busy fellow, as other than his secretary, he is the



John Dickson, James MacNaughton, Dan'l Frasier, Alex Henry, Alex Martin and Thomas Mortimer, the firm is preserving the names and traditions that have earned such a high reputation in the fine-gun world.

The Edinburgh store offers a wide spectrum of guns ranging from a breakthrough-to-the-past "bar-in-wood" MacNaughton to a newly built rounded-action Dickson. Managing Director Barry Wilcox pointed out the features of a recently finished pair of rounded-action Mortimer guns that had just rolled down the highway from the firm's workshop in Dunkeld. "In the Mortimer we have a side-by-side gun that supports the boxlock portion of our line—to supplement the MacNaughton and Dickson triggerplate actions," Wilcox said. "Engraving options, as on all of our guns, are open to the customer's request."

For the budget-minded shooter with a vertical inclination, there is an Italian-made over/under, the Alex Martin Continen-



The Dickson & MacNaughton shop (above, with Gunroom Manager Archie Nelson at left and Managing Director Barry Wilcox) offers a wide variety of guns, such as this pair of rounded-action Mortimers (top).

tal. It is a gun with English-type engraving and lines, and it is available in all gauges and even has detachable locks. Engraving options range from a gold-name Grade I to sideplated game scenes. English scroll is, of course, a favorite choice.

Besides the guns, the Princes Street store features a full line of accessories and shooting supplies. And up front there is a fully stocked Barbour clothing store. I can almost guarantee that no shooter will escape without making some kind of purchase.

So there you have it: scenery, shooting and shotguns all within easy driving distance. "What's keep'n ya, mon?"



Clair Kofoed is an Editor at Large for Shooting Sportsman.

## TOP SCOT SHOPS

Different shops have different business hours, so prospective visitors should call for appointments. Also keep in mind that gunmakers' time is precious, and individuals like David Brown who don't have regular retail shops have important work to do. For more information on arranging visits, contact the following:

### David McKay Brown (Gunmakers), Ltd.

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01144-1698-853727  
info@mckaybrown.com  
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### Dickson & MacNaughton

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01144-131-225-4218  
www.john-dickson.co.uk

### Graham Mackinlay & Co. Gunmakers

Strathleven House  
Dumbarton, Glasgow  
G82 3PD  
Scotland, UK  
01144-1389-751122  
enquiries@gmackinlay.com  
www.glasgowgunmakers.co.uk

David McKay Brown Round Action O/U

Serial Number : 7524 Mfg: 1993

LOP: 143/8 12 Bore

Wt: 6lbs 11 oz.

Bore Diameter: .738

Chokes: .006 and .007 (both Skeet 1)

Stock: Straight Hand to Checkered Butt

Dimensions: 14 3/8 X 1 5/16 x 2 3/16"

Barrels: Demi Block Construction by his  
barrelmaker Mr. Jim McDonald

Listed by number in the David McKay Brown book  
Action : Trigger Plate with Gold Plated Intern  
als for corrosion resistance.

Case : Custom by Arno Werner Bookbinders-  
Book Binders to harvard University.





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