



Left: Gun room manager Alastair Phillips has been surrounded by rare guns throughout his career.

Opposite page: Many of the second hand guns which come to William Evans have a full and rich history.

GUN BUYING

If only guns could talk...

If you are looking for a top quality English gun but the budget won't stretch to a new one then William Evans have the answer, as WILL HETHERINGTON discovers.

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There is something undeniably attractive about an English side-by-side, particularly one that was made the best part of 100 years ago and, as such, has a wealth of history. As they say, if only guns could talk. Imagine the stories of sporting days in the great Edwardian era of game shooting prior to the First World War. A time when the shooting party established itself as the ultimate weekend break and the tools of the trade were the envy of the world, both in terms of glamour and of engineering nous.

Inarguably the spiritual home of the sporting firearm, the streets of London these days play home to a number of gunmaking names, including all the greats such as Purdey, Holland & Holland and Boss. And it was the gun room of William Evans that I was drawn to in this quest to discover more about buying second hand English guns.

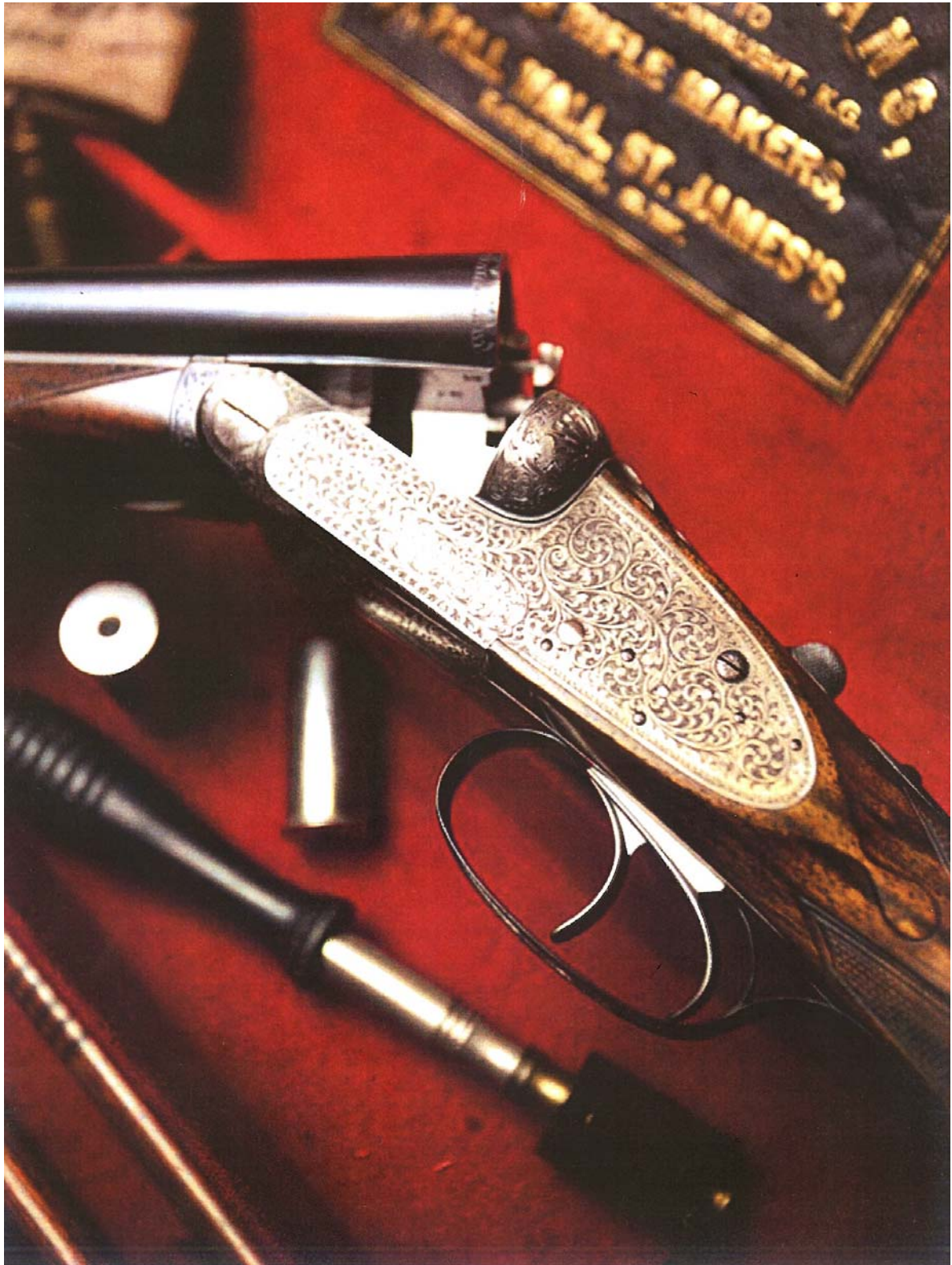
Gun room manager Alastair Phillips has the privilege of spending much of his

working life surrounded by rare creations of sporting excellence and has overseen an increase in the sales of refurbished shotguns in recent years. To the tune of a rise in sales of 25 per cent over the past year. The more time I spent in the wonderfully traditional subterranean gun room the less that figure surprised me. As Alastair showed me an exquisitely refurbished William Evans in its case which had originally been made for the Duke of Connaught. The appeal of owning such a piece was magnetic. In truth I would be scared to damage such a weapon by taking it out in all weathers and in another truth I am unlikely to be able to afford even this more feasible option in the Best London gun trade.

Alastair explained the route which many of the guns will take on their way into these all too tempting display cases: “Typically a customer will come in with a gun that his grandfather or father bought and look to do a part-exchange to either upgrade or downgrade. For instance, a lot of modern cartridges are quite harsh on the older gun. If someone brings a gun in for a service and finds they don't want to pay for some necessary repairs then we will often be in a position to buy the gun, have the work done and then re-sell it.

“There are a lot of people in the sport of shooting who have a great appreciation for its traditions and who wish to own a top quality English side-by-side. Also a lot of people come from outside the UK and will have equipped themselves with all the appropriate gear and want to ensure they have a gun that fits the bill too.

“For instance a customer recently brought in a 1924 William Evans sidelock for a full renovation. It was in a fairly rough state with a beaten stock, ribs that needed re-laying, strikers that needed replacing etc. and in the end we bought the gun from him. We have a workshop in Middlesex where we send



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the guns for repair and so we sent it out there for the necessary work to be done. We actually already had a buyer in mind so we could get the gun fitted to the new customer's measurements at the same time. And basically that was that, everybody was happy and the buyer got a custom-made 1924 William Evans sidelock for a great price.

"Another example was a Westley Richards 16 bore boxlock ejector with Damascus barrels which we got at auction. It came with a presentation case which was in very poor repair and the gun was also in poor condition. A good original presentation case can add a huge amount to a gun and we find that a cased pair will often sell in a couple of weeks where as a non-cased pair could take a couple of months. Anyway with the Westley Richards we sent the case to one of our experts and he did a great job in repairing it. And with the refurbished gun it was something I was really proud of – an unusual English shotgun with its case which had been restored to former glories.

"A case can add so much to a shotgun. Even the simple addition of a feather from a pheasant or a woodcock stirs the imagination and begins to tell more of the story of the gun. As William Evans traditionally supplied army officers with their sporting guns, cases will often have regimental colours on them and railway tickets and the like stuck to the leather are great signs of an eventful history."

Alastair started out in the gun trade working with Nick Holt at Holt's auctioneers, a business which has grown rapidly over the last decade and is now a leading light in the shooting world. And as he explains this gave him the perfect grounding in the gun trade, from top to bottom: "I couldn't have got a better insight into the trade than I did working as Nick's right hand man. I experienced the full range of shotguns, from Baikals to Purdeys and I got to know the gun trade very well at the same time. Cataloguing guns for sales is an education that cannot be replicated anywhere else." This experience has clearly helped him give him the confidence to man the gun room at William Evans at what is a very



A good presentation case can add value to a pair of guns and also aid in the speed of their sale.

busy time for the company.

There are other ways to furnish yourself with a classic English gun. You could shell out for a new one but these definitely fall into the 'if you have to ask the price you can't afford it' category. Otherwise there are the auction rooms but in reality unless you have quite a good basic knowledge of what to look out for this is a risky way of doing it. If you buy a refurbished William Evans sidelock from £7,000 upwards you are

getting a beautiful piece of gunmaking history which also comes with a year's guarantee after the sale. Added to that there is the enjoyment of visiting the shop where all the gunmaking records are held in the original log-books. This tangible connection with the gun's origin only adds to the appeal. Having thought about it I think I would dare to take one of these great examples of gunmaking genius into the field, after all that's what they were made for. ○