

From the inception of game hunting to the evolution of exceptionally crafted guns, **Hugh Francis Anderson** explores Britain's rich shooting heritage

**B**ritain's long association with firearms is well documented. From our colonial empire to our military prowess, Britain's historic dominance was heavily propagated through the use of arms. However, our affiliation is not merely one of Imperial power. Britain has been at the forefront of global game shooting since the 18th century, and with the development of the double-barrelled shotgun in the mid-19th century, the sport, as we know it today, has dramatically grown in popularity, no longer seen as the autumnal pastime of the landed gentry and aristocracy of old. Today, the evolution of gun technology, coupled with carefully managed

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shooting estates and dedicated enthusiasts, has solidified game shooting as a part of our cultural heritage.

Although the inception of modern game shooting can be traced back to Henry VIII, it wasn't until 1637, when a Royal Charter was granted by King Charles I for the creation of a livery company to cater for gun making, that shooting truly began to develop. As the first establishment to legally enforce gun specifications and set industry standards, the British arms trade boomed. Richard Purdey, James Purdey's great-great grandson, former chairman and a current director of James Purdey & Sons says, 'It was these new standards which effectively laid the foundations of Britain's future success as gun and rifle makers to the world,' and why, 'shooting sports in the UK in the 21st century are flourishing'. However, the beginnings of the sport we know and love didn't materialise until the 1830s, with

the development of a fully functional hinged breech and cartridges containing primer, propellant and projectile. British gun makers Anson & Deeley formulated the boxlock action in 1875, which gave birth to reliable double-barrelled shotguns, whose design has remained almost unchanged to this day. From here, the prominence of the British arms industry propelled British-made guns to the precipice of the shooting world, with Mayfair's own James Purdey & Sons and Holland & Holland forming the basis of the luxury shotgun market since the very beginning. It's unsurprising, then, that their level of skill, attention to detail and prestige are well documented, with both holding Royal Warrants. However, the days of a market filled with heritage-only gun makers have changed, with more contemporary bespoke gun-makers, William & Son, which is now 16 years old, counted as one of the finest makers on the market.

Over the years, the growth in game shooting for sport has seen a marked increase. Formerly the preserve for wealthy landowners and royalty, the modern sport has been adopted more widely. So how has the sport developed in Britain? 'The aristocracy and landed gentry led the way: as landowners they had the game and could afford to improve their stocks by employing gamekeepers to manage the game habitats, and safeguard their charges by controlling predators and apprehending poachers,' says Purdey, 'In the wake of Britain's industrial revolution, newly wealthy industrialists were able to emulate the landed gentry by acquiring country estates, now more easily accessible via the newly built railways, and become ardent participants in hunting, shooting and fishing.' The traditional 'walked-up' shoots, where the gunman's dog would flush birds as they walked throughout an estate, gave way to 'driven' shoots, which were first introduced by Prince →



*The heritage of*  
**THE HUNT**

IMAGE: HOLLAND & HOLLAND



*'Shooting is clearly thriving, and as technology becomes more advanced, so do the guns'*

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→Albert, where beaters were employed to beat the ground and undergrowth to drive birds towards a line of gunmen. Furthered by the business boom of the 1980s, prosperous business owners took up shooting as a pastime that not only demonstrated healthy personal capital, but elevated social status too. The influx of money led to vast amounts being invested into shooting estates for the growth, prosperity and conservation of birds, habitat and heritage. Recent studies show that nowadays, almost half a million people shoot in Britain each year, with £2.5bn spent on services,

management and equipment, and 97 per cent of game meat put back into the food chain.

Shooting is clearly thriving, and as technology becomes more advanced, so do the guns.

Purdey, for example, take great pride in the flawless combination of heritage and state-of-the-art technology. 'It is a testament to the soundness of the design that Purdey's side-by-side guns have hardly changed at all over 135 years, though CNC machining technology is now widely used in manufacturing the parts, which highly skilled gun makers then fit and finish by hand,' says Purdey. It is the core value and craftsmanship that sees gun-making develop in a slower, more refined way, knowing that the original designs were so advanced, and so exquisite, that the need to revolutionise the

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traditional process is somewhat redundant.

And where does this glory radiate from? Mayfair, of course. As Purdey says, ‘Mayfair and neighbouring St James’s accommodated many of London’s top and longest established gun makers, because in the 19th century a very large percentage of their customers had their London homes in these exclusive residential districts. Thus the gun makers were most conveniently situated for supplying new guns to their customers, servicing and storing their existing guns, cartridges and shooting clothing and accessories.’ As time has progressed, Mayfair has remained the centre point for exclusivity and panache, and appears to be the last vestige of old British values and traditions.

As a rightful proprietor of British cultural significance, game shooting floats between the realms of contemporary and traditional. It is, at an elementary level, an ecosystem of noble magnitude, a propagation, if you will, of archetypal British etiquette, tradition and sovereignty, and something we should hold on to dearly. **M**



## Top game shooting estates

### ALNWICK CASTLE

**Best for pheasant**

(alwickcastle.com)



### BOLTON ABBEY ESTATE

**Best for grouse**

(boltonabbey.com)



### HOLKHAM HALL

**Best for partridge**

(holkham.co.uk)

