

THE WORLD'S MOST FAMOUS GUNMAKER HAS FINALLY ENTERED THE SPORTING CLAYS ARENA AFTER 195 YEARS. **RICHARD RAWLINGSON** FINDS OUT IF THE WAIT WAS WORTH IT

As invitations go it was right up there with being invited to tee-off with Jack Nicklaus at Muirfield Village or join Springsteen on stage at Madison Square Garden. Would I like to join Richard Purdey at the famous West London Shooting School for a private test of the company's new Sporter? A nanosecond's thought was all it took to say yes and a few days later we were strolling across the manicured lawns in the genial company of Senior Instructor Alan Rose.

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most recognizable name in gun making – and Richard Purdey is the sixth generation of the family. It is a name even non-shooters know and it carries with it connotations of quality and prestige that only a handful of brands achieve. Few though have ever owned (or even shot) a Purdey, for the company has probably made fewer guns in nearly two centuries than one of the big factories turns out in a year.

It is one of the main reasons that Purdey has largely ignored

the target shooting market for most of its history. When you have a single quality (best) and a simple pricing strategy (expensive), chasing after incremental sales outside your main area of expertise is not a priority. With production limited as much by the availability of skilled labor as anything, it made sense to sell every gun for the highest possible price and in current terms that means you have to budget for a minimum of around \$90,000 to secure a traditional Purdey.

PURDEY'S

Italian Adventure



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PURDEY

Market Changes

Nothing is set in stone however, and several significant changes have taken place in more recent times that indirectly led to my presence at West London on a glorious spring morning. Purdey, until fairly recently, had effectively been in the ownership of two families – James Purdey and his descendants until 1946, and then the Beaumont family until 1994 when the company was sold to the Richemont Group, the Swiss-based luxury goods conglomerate.

Richemont was able to make the financial commitment the previous owners could not, taking Purdey into the modern age of gunmaking with significant investment in computer-aided design and manufacturing technology. From being the most traditional of makers, Purdey was now at the cutting edge.

Its customers were changing too. Although the classic London sidelock still held its market, potential Purdey owners are just as likely to look to Italy for an over-and-under gun from the likes of Fabbri, Piotti or Fratelli Rizzini. As well as game shooting, they are keen to use their guns on the sporting clays range. Out and out target shooters are also not averse to a little luxury with guns from the premium end of production of Beretta, Krieghoff, Gamba and Perazzi to name but a few.

Purdey therefore saw both a threat and an opportunity. It already has an over-and-under in its repertoire of course, having acquired Woodward and its legendary design as long ago as 1949. Wonderful though it is, however, the Woodward o/u is complex and hugely expensive to make and can never be produced in large numbers. What was needed – if a 'budget' Purdey was to be



offered – was a fresh approach.

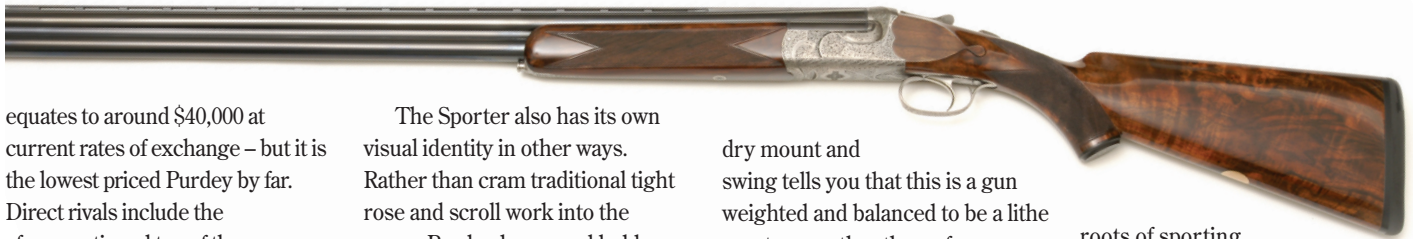
That search ended at the door of Perugini & Visini, a young boutique maker formed in 1968 by two former Perazzi employees, Vincenzo Perugini and Darko Visini. P & V had a ready made gun, already proved in competition by a long association with Tony Kennedy of Kennedy Gunmakers in England, and had grown to around 20 workers, giving them the capacity to take on the Purdey work.

International Effort

The Purdey Sporter is a genuine international effort. It is not simple 'badge engineering' with the Purdey name stamped on a stock

Perugini & Visini gun. Purdey's designers and CNC specialists took the P & V action and substantially reworked it both cosmetically and mechanically. I am told there are no fewer than 84 detailed changes in the receiver, ejectors and lockwork alone. Purdey makes all these parts in their London factory and then ship them to Italy. Perugini & Visini supply the barrels and fit them to the monobloc, fit and finish the stock and do the first stage engraving by laser. The guns then return to London for final assembly and finishing, hand finishing of the engraving and proof testing.

The resulting gun is still not exactly cheap – the quoted list price



equates to around \$40,000 at current rates of exchange – but it is the lowest priced Purdey by far. Direct rivals include the aforementioned top of the range Berettas, Perazzis and Gambas and also the similarly specified Holland & Holland Sporting (which has been available for about ten years now) and the products of Browning's Custom Shop in Herstal.

So, is founder James Purdey spinning in his grave at the thought of this international effort or would he approve? On the basis of what looks right usually is right, I think he would be very happy. Sensibly, Purdey have made no effort to mimic their traditional sidelocks; the gun has a distinctive look all of its own. There are no false sideplates to fool you, but instead a scalloped back to the action that immediately identifies the gun in a crowd. The full potential of the CNC technology has been used to create complex shapes around the fences, while the raised teardrop features on the sides of the receiver are a stylistic throwback to the original Woodward of the Edwardian era.

The Sporter also has its own visual identity in other ways. Rather than cram traditional tight rose and scroll work into the space, Purdey have used bold acanthus scrolls that work with the shape rather than fight it. It is loud and proud in a way we normally associate more with (whisper it) Holland & Holland than the men of South Audley Street, but it works. This is a very striking gun.

On Test

The Purdey Sporter looks the part then, but what of its performance? For some gun collectors this is often of only academic interest; their purpose is to adorn a cabinet in the owner's den rather than see action. But Purdey intend this gun to be shot – and shot hard. It will count for nothing if it does not perform as well as it looks.

The first impressions are good. In standard 12-gauge form, with 30 inch barrels, the gun weighs around 7.5 lbs, at the lighter end of modern competition guns but a good compromise given that it is intended for a degree of dual field and competition usage. The first

dry mount and swing tells you that this is a gun weighted and balanced to be a lithe sports car rather than a freeway cruiser. The balance is completely neutral and the weight is concentrated between the hands, just as a classic London gun should be. It is set up for a fast handling, instinctive style of shooting, with a low polar moment of inertia. If you were looking to grind out scores on today's increasingly technical targets you might consider the handling almost too fast, but for sheer fun on something like West London's simulated driven grouse butt it has few equals.

West London is in fact the ideal venue for the new Purdey. The two have a long association, with the shooting school being an authentic survivor of the many such establishments that grew up in Britain in the late Victorian period. Then, as now, its prime purpose is to replicate real wingshooting with clays – to teach and entertain. Towers simulate fast driven partridge or high soaring pheasants and to shoot here is to return to the

roots of sporting clays. Yes they will throw battues and other new fangled presentations if you ask, but stay close to what they know best if you want to really feel the history. Those of you who shot the World Championship there a few years back will understand what I mean.

As standard, the gun will come equipped with Teague flush fitting chokes, although it can be supplied with any combination of fixed choking to order. Similarly, other barrel lengths are available and I would opt for 32" tubes for serious competition work should I ever find myself in the position to place an order.

20 and 28 Gauge

My already near perfect day was made complete because Richard Purdey had brought with him not just the 12-gauge, but also the Sporter's new-born baby brother. Fresh out of the factory, the

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20-gauge is a perfectly scaled smaller version which comes with the added benefit of optional 28-gauge barrels for the additional cost of around \$7,500. This makes it a very versatile tool indeed, not only for small gauge sporting clays but for a wide range of field shooting, from quail to upland pheasants as well as the traditional driven game shooting of the UK.

I love the challenge of small gauge guns for sporting clays and it was fascinating to be able to shoot the same targets with all three gauges back to back. The difference in weight between the two frames depends to a degree on the customer's specification, but the gun can be built down to around 6.5 lbs at its lightest. Properly scaled small guns are a great test of technique because they magnify errors. Quick to start and equally quick to stop, they can be unforgiving if you are not precise with every shot.

I found it particularly true of the Purdey, the 12's already fast handling becoming razor-sharp on the smaller gun. A slight dip of the shoulder would pull it off the line in an instant and every shot had to be completed. Big slow guns make us lazy; your brain sees the lead and says 'near enough' and most times near enough is enough. With the lighter gun it has to be just right and you must watch the target break, because mentally switching off a fraction early is enough to stop the gun and cause a miss behind.

In handling terms there was little to choose between the 20 and 28, not surprisingly given that the barrels are matched, and, as ever, the ability of even 18 gram 28-gauge loads to powder clays was astonishing. The inherent good ballistics of this gauge meant there was little loss of killing power when dropping down from the 20, with the side benefit of almost negligible recoil. The need for precision is cranked up another notch though and the 20-gauge would be my choice as the ideal all rounder. Once I had worked out its dynamics I managed a perfect dozen from West London's 90 foot tower, with Alan Rose using the random button to change the angle for each target. It earned me a quiet 'good shooting', which those who know him will recognise as high praise indeed.

Purdey may not have much history in sporting clays, but you do not survive nearly 200 years as the world's premier gunmaker without knowing what makes a great gun. Despite its Italian origins, they have managed to take this design and give it an unmistakably English feel – a Purdey feel. Affordability is relative and for most the Purdey Sporter will still be a distant dream – but they have certainly given the sporting clays enthusiast something to dream about. And for me I lived the dream – I shot a Purdey with Mr. Purdey! ■

More information: www.purdey.com

