

THE BROWNING CUSTOM SHOP

RICHARD RAWLINGSON TRAVELS TO LIEGE IN BELGIUM WHERE THE FAMOUS BROWNING SUPERPOSED IS STILL IN PRODUCTION



THE SHOWROOM WELCOMES VISITORS.

The sense of history around the Belgian city of Liege is palpable. Where else would you find a firearms museum that reflects a history of gunmaking stretching back for hundreds of years? Or be able to dine at the restaurant where John Moses Browning had a permanent reservation whenever he was in town? Browning and the Liege industrial giant Fabrique Nationale, situated in the suburb of Herstal, were close partners for the last 30 years of his amazing life. How a gunmaker from Ogden, Utah came to be involved with a company thousands of miles away

is beyond the scope of this article, but that partnership brought the shotgun world two of the most influential designs ever produced – the semi-automatic Auto 5 and Browning's final masterpiece, the B25 Superposed over-and-under. For clay target shooters the Superposed in particular is massively significant. Over 75 years on, direct descendants of the original gun still outnumber all rivals wherever the sport is staged, the modern versions still showing clearly the hallmarks of Browning's genius. Shifting economic patterns may mean that

Japan, not Belgium, is now the source of most modern Brownings, but the heritage remains firmly rooted in Liege where the Browning Custom Shop has kept the tradition of fine gunmaking alive since volume production ended in the mid 1980s. The city is also the center of operations for Browning International, the sales and marketing arm of the business.

With the Japanese guns now the core of Browning sales, the B25 is now a bespoke model, competing with rivals such as the premium Italian makers and Krieghoff. After a period when it was perhaps seen as a lower priority, marketing of the Custom Shop products is being given new impetus and direction. A key element in the process has been the relocation of the Shop within the main Fabrique Nationale complex, from the back street site

it had occupied for some 25 years. Both physically, and you suspect psychologically, it feels much closer to center stage. The new workshops and showroom now house around 30 craftsmen plus administration staff, producing some 700 guns each year. Currently about a third of those guns are the final limited editions of the Auto 5 which is now coming to an end after 100 years in production, plus small numbers of rifles.

The B25 however is the star of the show, still meticulously hand crafted by workers whose skills are the result of four to five years training, a significant investment for the company. Hundreds of hours of this skilled labor go into every gun, making every single example that leaves the Custom Shop unique, indelibly marked with the signatures of the men and women who worked on its

creation.

Every B25 starts with a comprehensive specification document, with all the decisions taken by the customer. A master book shows the possible variations in all the key details, covering not just the obvious variables such as barrel length and stock dimensions, but all the minor parts. Rib size and style, trigger blades, checkering patterns – all these and more are the personal choice of the buyer. The factory welcomes visitors at this stage, offering personal fittings with a try gun if required and the chance for the customer to select his own stock blank.

This build sheet travels with the gun through all its stages. Because every part is individually fitted and cannot be interchanged, all parts are marked from the beginning and again will stay with the gun as it passes through the

various stages of production, starting as a collection of pieces that become slowly more identifiable as a B25 as they progress. Also accompanying every gun is a quality control document in which every stage is recorded and signed off. At the end there is a complete record of everyone who has worked on a particular gun, quality assurance coming from individual and collective responsibility.

STEP BY STEP BARRELS

The barrels start life as raw tubes, produced by the specialist barrel making division of FN. These are made on the 'demi-bloc' system and are silver soldered together before receiving the side and top ribs.

The internal bores are created by polishing at the boring bench,

The barrels start life as raw tubes, produced by the specialist barrel making division of FN. These are made on the 'demi-bloc' system and are silver soldered together before receiving the side and top ribs.



BEHIND THE SCENES



(LEFT) CUTTING THE CHAMBERS. (RIGHT) BARRELS ARE STRUCK OFF BY HAND.



ALL PARTS ARE FITTED TO 'A THICKNESS OF SMOKE' TOLERANCE.

paper until the pieces marry perfectly together. As well as the visual indication, the gunsmith will also use both sound and feel – the distinctive noise of a perfectly fitted and timed B25 action coming together is one of the great features of the design.

WOODWORK

The stock and fore end wood is selected and matched together. Standard sizes may be selected from an inventory of pre-shaped stocks, but individual orders will be cut from the raw walnut blank. Traditionally the B25 has used French walnut but, in common

CHECKERING CALLS FOR A STEADY HAND.



THE SHOP HOLDS MOUTHWATERING STOCKS OF EXHIBITION GRADE WALNUT.

using rods tipped with lead and emery dust. These lapping rods are individually made in the barrel shop, using molten lead poured into molds. The chamber cutting and choke reaming are also done at this stage.

The outside of the barrels receive attention next, with the removal of any residue from the brazing operations and the 'striking off' of the tubes. This highly skilled work is done entirely by hand by the 'garnisseur' – using hand planes that he will have designed and made himself.

ACTION ASSEMBLY

The finished barrels are now joined by the other main components, the action frame and fore end iron, to be fitted together. Long life and smooth operation depend on a perfect fit and this is achieved using the time honored lamp black technique. The key areas are covered with a fine layer of soot from an oil lamp, just a few microns thick before trial assembly. Any friction between parts is shown up by the removal of the soot layer and will be regulated with files and emery

with most other makers, it is now Turkey that supplies the majority. The inventory includes a selection of mouth-watering exhibition grade blanks for those with deep enough pockets.

Once the basic shaping is complete, the stock and fore end are fitted to the action, using a technique similar to the actioner's smoke. Applying flames to expensive walnut is clearly not a good idea so a red dye is substituted, applied to the action frame before fitting. Any high points are clearly visible and regulated using a series of tools



RED DYE REPLACES SOOT IN FITTING WOODWORK.

that again each stocker will have designed and made himself and which are personal to his own way of working. He will continue with the fitting of the fore end and trigger guard.

Once fitted, the woodwork is ready for final shaping and finishing to the required measurements. Any minor blemishes will be repaired and the surface meticulously sanded and treated with repeat applications of grain filler. It is then ready for numerous coats of linseed oil until saturation is achieved.

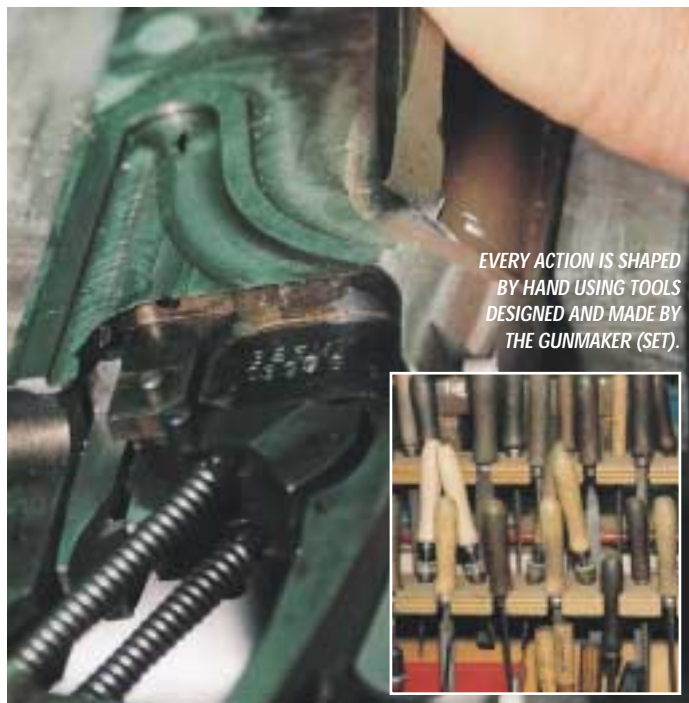
Checkering is the final stage, the area to be cut being marked out with a pattern and a dusting of talcum powder. All the checkering is hand cut, with a swiftness and sure touch that seems astonishing given the value of some of the blanks being worked on.

'MARCHE EN BLANC'
(ASSEMBLY 'IN THE WHITE')

We now have a fitted action, barrels and fore end and at this stage the gun is prepared for proof by assembling the lockwork, with the exception of the ejection system. The gun is submitted for proof before the final action filing and engraving. The gunsmith will make any final minor adjustments at this stage to ensure the mechanism is working perfectly.

FILING AND POLISHING

Although perfectly fitted internally, the action is still unfinished at this stage. The next - highly skilled - stage is vital to the final look of the gun and involves the creation of the final shapes of the action with chisels, files and emery paper. The shaping of the fences and action frame are all done free hand by eye, making every gun subtly different from any other.



EVERY ACTION IS SHAPED BY HAND USING TOOLS DESIGNED AND MADE BY THE GUNMAKER (SET).



IN-HOUSE ENGRAVER DANNY MARTAGNE AT WORK AND (BELOW) ONE OF HIS EXHIBITION PIECES.



When the shaping is complete the final polishing is started, delicate work that cannot be allowed to alter the profile of the parts. Once again individually made tools are used. The parts are now ready for the engraver.

ENGRAVING

The engraving may be to one of the many standard designs, or could be by special commission to the customer's requirements. Outworkers are used for much of the standard production, but there is also an in-house engraver, Danny Martagne, who specializes in bespoke and exhibition pieces. One of his special talents is the creation of animal portraits using inlaid gold of different colors.

FINAL ASSEMBLY AND FINISHING

Once engraved, all the parts are hardened and are ready for final assembly. The internal parts are 'mirror polished', with up to seven grades of abrasive papers, the final degree of polishing depending on the grade of the gun being built. Higher grades are polished to the very highest level.

At this stage the barrels are still 'in the white' and receive their final polishing on a buffing wheel ready for bluing. Traditional rust bluing is used, the barrels receiving at least six applications of an acid liquor that is allowed to oxidize in a steam cabinet. Each rust layer is brushed until the lustrous black color called 'crow black' is revealed.

The completed gun, with its quality control 'passport' is now almost ready for dispatch, but has still to pass the rigorous inspection of the Quality Control Manager. He will check not only that the gun operates perfectly, but that all the



ENGRAVED, HARDENED AND POLISHED - THE PARTS READY FOR FINAL ASSEMBLY.



FINAL POLISHING OF THE BARRELS.

THE SUPERPOSED COULD BE CONSIDERED, AS ONE EXECUTIVE TOLD ME, "BROWNING'S BEST KEPT SECRET."...THE B25 SUPERPOSED IS HOWEVER BROWNING'S MASTERPIECE IN ITS PUREST FORM AND IT IS GREAT TO THINK THAT IT HAS A SECURE FUTURE.

details meet the original specification exactly.

A SUPERPOSED OF YOUR OWN

The Superposed could be considered, as one executive told me, "Browning's best kept secret." But changes to the way the Custom Shop products are marketed are currently being introduced. A number of 'Gallery' dealers are being appointed who will hold a small inventory of guns for customers to view. They will be able to act as the link between customer and Custom Shop in placing special orders and also arranging visits to Herstal. In addition, the Shop is now making photographs of guns in progress available via the Browning web site for prospective buyers to browse. Information on ordering Custom Shop products can also be obtained by calling 1-800-333-3288.

John M. Browning's great design is undoubtedly one of the

most influential sporting clays guns of all time. Through the application of it to industrial production in the Citori and B325/425/525 series guns, it has brought tournament winning

potential within the reach of any shooter. The B25 Superposed is however Browning's masterpiece in its purest form and it is great to think that it has a secure future. ■



READY TO SHIP - ANOTHER B25 PASSED FINAL INSPECTION.