

BEST GUNS

— LARRY'S SHORT STORIES #145 —

The British refer to shotguns simply as guns. During the 19th century, London's top gunmakers began using the term "best" to indicate that their guns were made to the highest standards of design, materials and craftsmanship; thus a "best gun" was the best shotgun available. The term stuck; interestingly, it takes about 700 hours of skilled hand labor to make one.

Best guns were originally made for Kings and Queens of England, members of the court and other affluent people. Word got around, production increased slightly, and others, who could afford the best, were customers for a best gun.



Thomas Boss (in business since 1826), introduced their "best" over/under in 1909 – the world's first over/under. This one from 1935.

The design of a best gun is based on driven birds, a shooting style in England for grouse, pheasant and partridge. While Americans

were walking up game birds, using pointers and setters, affluent hunters in England were positioned at the end of large fields and the birds were driven to them. The lightweight game gun was developed for this type of driven bird shooting; it's typically a 12 gauge side lock, with 28" barrels, straight grip stock, double triggers and automatic ejectors — and weighs only about 6 pounds 12 ounces. This weight was designed to comfortably handle a 7/8 ounce load of shot (standard 12 game load in England).

Being a serious student and shooter of American side-by-side shotguns, it was just a matter of time before I was exposed to English guns. It happened at the Tulsa Gun Show in March of 1994. There on a table was an English



The epitome of "best guns" is a matched pair of Purdey side-by-sides, such as these; two guns, made entirely by hand to be as close to identical twins as possible.

box lock side-by-side; with permission, I picked it up and my life was changed forever. It was a William Cashmore with 26" barrels, weighing only 5 pounds 13 ounces and had a feel and balance that simply begged to be shouldered and fired.

It was tight, in very good condition, and for \$1,750 it was mine.

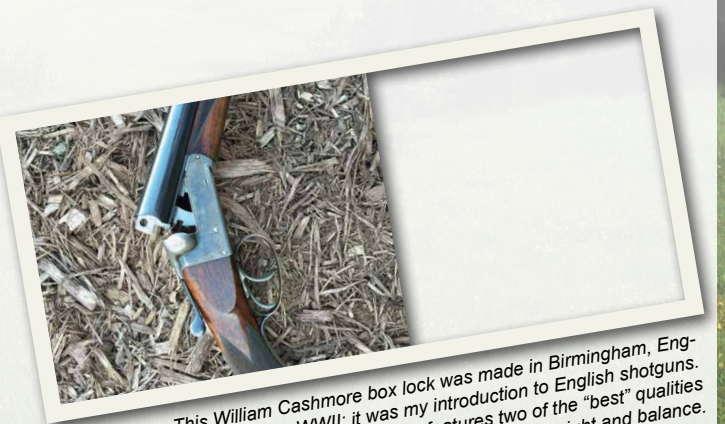
"...originally made for Kings and Queens..."

Studying British guns began to occupy more of my time, and it's always easier to study with one in hand. I bought a couple more guns by Cashmore, and finally my first best gun, a Purdey 10 gauge made in 1872. But the real prize, the lightweight game gun, eluded me until I bought a pair at the Safari Club Show in January of 2006. They were made by Thomas Boss in 1962; it's a humble feeling to hold and shoot them — knowing the handwork involved and the long tradition of best guns.



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This William Cashmore box lock was made in Birmingham, England, prior to WWII; it was my introduction to English shotguns. Although not a "best gun," it features two of the "best" qualities — weight and balance.