



I Shot The Sheriff

Eric Clapton's Shotgun Collection

As befits an über-legend, the first time Eric Clapton ventured into the shooting field, he was carrying his very own, brand new, bespoke Purdey - yet it was not made specifically for him. Another Purdey client had commissioned the gun.

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Images: HOLT'S AUCTIONEERS; GALLO IMAGES/GETTY IMAGES

"I was taking lessons at the West London Shooting School," Clapton tells me, "and I said to my instructor one day, 'What would be your ideal gun if you had no constraints at all?' He said, 'A Purdey over-and-under (O/U)'. A nod from an expert is as good as a wink to Clapton, who thought to himself, 'I'll go to Purdey's, and see what they've got.' Here Nigel Beaumont of Purdey's takes up the story. "It was May 2003, and a client had cancelled out on a commission. This 12-bore O/U was literally being finished when Eric Clapton saw it. It was fortuitous that he liked it, and that the dimensions were right for him." The embellishment adorning that first Purdey O/U took the novice shooter's breath away. "It was extraordinary," Clapton recalls. "The action was steel carved - very flamboyant. I was quite overwhelmed. There I was, a new shooter going into the field with a gun that was quite 'bling'. But I don't mind going in at the deep end. I used it a lot, and was very attached to it until I realised I needed a pair more than a single gun, and started to collect pairs."

Anyone bitten by the collecting bug is a restless spirit. Clapton describes himself as "a kit junkie" and confesses to "a magpie

tendency," so it was almost inevitable that the Purdey O/U would herald a sizeable gun collection of exceptionally high quality. "It's following the same pattern as when I collected guitars, cars and watches," he says. "I start out with a fairly broad spectrum - got obsessed, then engulfed, and finally narrowed the collections down. I built a gunroom that can house a certain number of guns, and now I have to clear the decks for the new guns I have on order. Also, a custodian has a certain responsibility to keep things ticking over. I feel uncomfortable about owning things that don't get used."

Clapton is a perfectionist, and these magnificent guns reflect these traits. "I found that when I started to shoot, I wanted to shoot beautiful guns," he tells me. "I was also baffled by the fact that nobody really

used English guns out in the field. Although we have a tremendous history of gunmaking in this country, it seemed that most people used Spanish guns or Brownings. And I just thought, 'I'd like to get some guns made by just about every British builder that I can.'"

"I went to all the best London houses to have guns made. Having come to know a few shooters, I got recommendations on what sort of specifications to use - length of barrel, the gauges, etc., but while all these things are important, I try to couple my decisions with whatever artistic sense I have." Design and craftsmanship both "intrigue and interest" this former art student who was raised by his grandfather, Jack Clapp, a master builder with a strong work ethic. "I grew up around people who worked with their hands," Clapton says.





When I suggest that he is drawn to Boss guns because of the elegance of their line, Clapton agrees. "And they have tremendous charisma – if you can call a gun charismatic. They have a fabulous history, and there's an element of the underground about Boss, too. Everyone knows about Purdey and Holland & Holland, but you can even say to another shooter, 'What do you think of Boss' and he won't know what you're talking about. There's a certain mystique, a certain cachet about them. In future, I think Boss guns will make up three quarters of my collection."

Quiz Clapton on what contributes most of all to his relationship with his guns and the clues emerge. Engraver Marcus Hunt personalised Clapton's pair of William Evans 20-bores in a manner that filled the owner with awe. "Beautiful work," Clapton says. "Marcus is

a very keen fisherman, and we spent quite a bit of time fishing together." Clapton, too, has been an avid fisherman since he was a boy in the Surrey Hills, and Hunt worked from the photographs he took as they fished.

It becomes clear that for Clapton, being out in the field is the chief attraction of owning his fine, traditional, best English guns, "It's the shooting of the gun," he confirms. "I'm just an average shot; I'm never going to be a great shot because it's not my first interest. Playing the guitar is my prime interest in life. Shooting and fishing are hobbies, and you can never really become a master at a hobby." A right-thinking shooter, he cleaves to his duty to the quarry. "I do like high pheasants, but I'm a common or garden shot and I like common or garden shooting. I don't understand, or

enjoy, shooting at pheasants that look like they are out of range. I'm just not good enough for it, and I don't see the point. If shooting was my main occupation, I might feel differently. But because I only do it once or twice a week, I prefer to shoot at birds I know I can hit."

Clapton and his wife, Melia, impose a limit on their sport by vowing to eat what they kill. "A tall order," he says, "nevertheless, we try. I find shooting a much more social pastime than fishing, and I value them both because I'm not really that gregarious, and shooting with groups of people up and down the country has taught me a lot about how to get on with my fellow human beings."

For further information on the guns, contact Nick Holt at Holt & Company on +44 1485 542822 or email nick@holtandcompany.co.uk 🌐

