

# The Once & Future Gunmaker

Holland & Holland is adapting—and thriving—with the times

*by Jack Strallan*

COURTESY OF HOLLAND & HOLLAND

Holland & Holland offers its Royal model as an over/under or side-by-side shotgun as well as a double rifle.





◀ Engravers at the Kensal Green factory are willing to go to great lengths to make clients' visions reality.

▼ A recent commission inspired the firm to come up with a new colorizing technique.

▶ Holland & Holland's double rifles are the embodiment of the firm's craftsmanship.



C ompanies that fail to adapt to modern developments in technology and regulation pretty soon cease to exist. Holland & Holland has done more than consistently manage to survive the changing face of economic and social life in the sporting world; the company has thrived.

That doesn't seem about to change anytime soon, with the recent acquisition of the firm by Beretta Holding. That did not prevent many commentators in the UK from sending up howls of anguish on various forums regarding what they considered to be the potential for damage to one of the oldest and most venerated brands in the history of the London gun trade. They cited the close of the Bruton Street premises as evidence but, as is often the case from people with no financial skin in the game, they failed to look deeper and grasp that 33 Bruton Street was owned by the fashion brand Chanel—Holland & Holland's previous owner—

and it was never going to be part of the company's future. Almost as a symbol of the new order, Holland & Holland's new London premises is on St. James' Street above the Beretta Gallery. This is in addition to the firm's shooting ground, located north of London, which has undergone a complete refurbishment, making it one of the premier shooting venues in the world.

Holland & Holland, which recently was granted a Royal Warrant under King Charles III, has always changed with the times without losing its cultural DNA. It is one of the reasons the company went from strength to strength even during historic lean times of war and economic downturns.

The basic ethos of how Holland & Holland builds guns has not changed. The company continues to use the same processes that have served it well during the past century and a quarter. It builds chopper-lump barrels for its guns, because they have proven to be the strongest and most durable barrels. When you have a reputation for building the best bespoke double rifles in the world, that longevity matters. Holland & Holland makes barrels to the exact bore diameters and specifications that clients want, as opposed to using a large-scale manufacturing process. Bespoke barrelmaking is more expensive, but it is done

because guns are being built for discerning clients. This is not to deny the success of the monobloc barrels built by the parent company for the modern market. It is to clarify an important distinction: that one relies on volume, while the other relies on very specific high build quality to satisfy the needs of each client. What the Beretta Holding acquisition means for Holland & Holland's gunmakers is that they now have access to 500 years of research and development at the cutting edge of gunmaking in Italy. If during the development phases of new-gun builds members of the team at the Kensal Green factory have problems to solve (as can be the case when dealing with custom requirements of discerning clients), they can now bounce them back and forth with their Italian counterparts. That level of knowledge of both the ancient and modern, in English and Italian, can only be a benefit to Holland & Holland and the company's desire to advance bespoke gunmaking into the next era. That flow of information is not one way, either, as Beretta goes to the London gunmakers for their ideas and input.

Holland & Holland prides itself on being one of the few makers that bores its own barrels in-house. The firm is the only best-quality English maker to offer something for every quarry. It can make any caliber and any bore, the only limitation being barrel length. It will make barrels up to 32 inches for shotguns and has yet to take an order for greater than that in the modern era of nitro powder. It is the same with steel-shot-proof barrels: Any caliber and dimension can be undertaken, and the company is having unusual success with getting its barrels proofed for high-performance steel shot, the most effective and reasonably priced non-lead shot. This is "unusual," because rigors of the proof-

house testing regime are deliberately strenuous. The barrels are stressed with a charge  $1\frac{1}{4}$  times greater than they would be subject to in normal use—and not all manufacturers are having the same pass rate. The actions, too, must pass this test, as the stresses exuded by the detonation of the charge flex the action during the rapid expansion of gasses. It is not only the barrels that must contain it.

All this effort is a result of the British game-shooting sector transitioning away from lead shot to non-lead alternatives. For many this means steel shot, and Luke Davison, Sales Manager at Holland & Holland, confirms that clients from overseas are ordering guns with a view to using them in the UK for driven-game shooting. Holland & Holland can make any sidelock configuration—side-by-side or over/under—in any chamber length, and it will pass steel-shot proof. The only reason the maker has not made a steel-shot-proof gun with  $3\frac{1}{2}$ " chambers is that it has yet to take an order for one. The company is also able to offer these guns with fixed or multi-chokes. This is an indication of how confident Holland & Holland is that its processes are fit for the new era. Interestingly, much of the research and development work to meet this changing need was done before the acquisition of the company by Beretta Holding. After the transition, it culminated in the scrapping of any partly finished barrels and actions that did not meet the new requirements. That, too, is an indication of how completely Holland & Holland believes in its own processes. There simply is no time to complain about a new regulatory landscape, as one must adapt successfully to be able to stay at the forefront of relevant design.

The factory itself has undergone something of a reorganization. At the time of the handover to new ownership there was a changing of the guard, as many of the gunmakers who were due to retire did so. It may have seemed fitting for them after a lifetime of service to choose their time to leave



the stage. It is clear now that there is a recruitment drive going on, and although some might think that it is because too many gunmakers left at the change of ownership, the need for new recruits is purely down to an increase in orders.

This is the heart of the re-emphasized direction of the company. It is not a new direction, because Holland & Holland has always been a bespoke gunmaker; but now there is an increased focus on guns built to order rather than guns on the shelf. If you want to buy a gun off the shelf, there are plenty of highly respected makers that can help you. If you want to be involved in the design and specifications of your dream hunting gun, then there are very few that are up to the task. Holland & Holland's new ownership recognizes that this is what marks the brand as separate and distinct. In addition to bespoke guns, Holland & Holland can cater to shooters' clothing and accessory requirements with a broad range of high-quality products sourced from artisan suppliers. (In the near future this will include the company's own house tweed.) Not only does the firm support traditional makers in sourcing these products, but also the time-honored manufacturing processes ensure longevity in the garments.

**T**he Holland & Holland Royal double rifle remains the principal firearm of enquiry for new guns built to order. Davison confirms that there are more Royal rifles on order than Royal side-by-side shotguns. "From our point of view," he said, "it is the pinnacle of our gunmaking; it is the absolute embodiment of Holland & Holland craftsmanship. It remains the most elegant and one of the highest-performing double rifles on the market."

In addition to double rifles, the company can make bolt-action rifles and Paradox guns (versatile shotguns with rifled chokes), but the Royal remains the benchmark of the brand. It is the model that the company's reputation for strength, reliability and elegance has been based on for more than 100 years.

One of Holland & Holland's recent developments aims to build on that solid foundation. A principal criticism of British-built over/unders is that they tend to be fragile. Many of them spend more time being repaired than they do in the grouse butt. The new Noble over/under seeks to change that. With a V-spring triggerplate action with bolsters, the gun aims to combine sleek lines with robust performance. It is designed and built in London and follows a long line of guns in the Holland & Holland stable that support the headline act of the Royal.

The brief was simple: Create a versatile, strong, reliable over/under for the modern shot with shorter waiting times for new builds than the bench-made bespoke sidelocks. The Noble is mechanically simpler than the Royals but with no loss of performance, and it is hand-finished and—as you would expect from a bespoke gunmaker—customizable.

The barrel technology, which was three years in development, is where the Noble stands out. The barrels are key to the handling of any gun. Get things wrong, and the gun will feel dead in the hands. Get things right, and perfect balance will almost create a conjurer's trick: the gun feeling like it weighs a pound less than it actually does. The barrels also aid the unlocking of hand-eye coordination and fluid shooting that allow one to perform one's best. They are the magic ingredient—and what separates good guns from great guns. Getting the barrel profile right, to find that perfect balance, as well as the gun being able to handle large volumes of high-performance steel loads without incurring excessive felt recoil is no small task. Having shot the second iteration of the Noble, I can tell you that it is one of the softest-shooting guns I have ever used—and that is without it having been fitted to me. Strength and handling are the keys to this gun. Holland & Holland even went as far as to deliberately double-discharge it with high-performance magnum steel loads at the London Proof House as proof that the Noble could withstand the rigors of any situation. The test gun was unscathed.



The entrance to Holland & Holland's completely refurbished shooting ground (top) and the firm's new London premises on St. James' Street.



Holland & Holland's new Noble over/under combines sleek lines with robust performance.



*The Noble is one of the softest-shooting guns I have ever used.*

But it is not only in building bespoke guns on the bench or future-proof over/unders where Holland & Holland is testing the limits. A commission with a very specific request for embellishment was recently completed. Since man created metallurgy, precious metals and gemstones have been inlaid into objects of desire, from weapons of war to those used for hunting. More recently gunmakers have used enamel to add tonal variation to engraving, but that has allowed for only crude blocks of color. One client's request was that her vision of a rainforest scene complete with animals and birds be colorized to bring the engraving to new heights. To achieve this, Holland & Holland looked to emulate techniques that other luxury-goods designers have employed in making watches. Not only did the gun need to look like no other, but also the color had to be durable in the field. (Guns at this level must be functional art, after all.) The medical-grade, UV-hardened, enamel-based resin infused with organic pigments had all the properties that Holland & Holland's finishers required. It allowed them to blend and shade the color to give an effect that had never been seen in gunmaking. It is a

technique that can be added to, almost like a watercolor. Engravers are essentially the artists of the gunmaking world. They had never before had access to such color in their monochrome palette. The client was specific in her request, and the result is an indication of the lengths to which Holland & Holland gunmakers will go in order to satisfy a client's desires. If Karl Fabergé were alive, he may well have been using similar techniques.

Great craftsmanship takes time, and if it doesn't require a client's patience, it may not be truly great. When you order a gun from a premium bespoke gunmaker like Holland & Holland, you are buying into a process in which your involvement is needed to bring the creation to life. If you are in the market for a bespoke gun like no other, the only limitation at Holland & Holland is your imagination. ➔

For more information, visit [hollandandholland.com](http://hollandandholland.com).

Jack Strallan has a lifelong passion for fine guns and their use. He has worked in the British gun trade for more than 30 years and has shot game and clays extensively both at home and abroad.