

# Your First Gun

Contributed by Brownbear

Invaluable advice from Brownbear for those wishing to start shooting...

The first thing to be aware of is the legal difference between a shotgun and a firearm. Shotguns are smooth-bore guns which fire a load of pellets, and hold up to three shots in the chamber and, if it is magazine-loaded, the magazine. A shotgun like the Benelli semi-auto holds three shots, but this also applies to pump-action and bolt-action shotguns.

An over-and-under shotgun

Firearms are rifles, pistols (now mostly banned with a few exceptions), and shotguns which hold more than three cartridges, such as the big Benelli pump-action gun which I use for work.

Benelli Nova pump-action

One has the right to own a shotgun unless the Police can show a reason why you cannot have one; in the case of firearms the onus is on the shooter to show that they have a need to own one. 'Need' can mean membership of a shooting club, or ownership of land with a pest species that needs dealing with.

Some rifle cartridges

The firearm needs to be suitable for the quarry, so if you have rabbits you can have a .22 or .17HMR rimfire rifle; if you have a fox problem you can apply for a .222, .223, .22-250 or a .243 (these are heavier or faster loads, used in 'centrefire' rifles as opposed to the 'rimfire' loads in the .22 Long cartridge); if you have deer you can apply for .243 upwards. To demonstrate 'need' for a high-capacity shotgun you have to show that you have a 'serious avian infestation'.

Benelli M2 semi-automatic 8-shot FAC shotgun

When applying for a certificate, you need some passport photos, and if it's a firearm, land or access to land (a Letter of Authority to Shoot from a landowner with a pest problem), or a membership card for a shooting club. You need references from a 'person of standing' such as a doctor, teacher, lawyer or analogous person who has known you for

more than two years and who will vouch that you are of good character. One reference is required for shotguns, two for firearms (for firearms, there will also be a Special Branch background check). People with a criminal record for violence are unlikely to be granted a certificate, but other offences, depending on the circumstances and the period of time since the offence, are often not a bar - nicking sweets from the corner shop when a kid is unlikely to stop you; duffing up people in pubs will, rightly, ban you for life.

They will also check that your doctor is happy for you to have access to a gun - if you're being treated for depression, or are an alcoholic, or suffer from an ungovernable temper, you will not get a certificate until the doctor thinks you're better. But this doesn't necessarily stop you joining a shooting club and using the club guns - though you should be honest about your circumstances when applying to join.

Not really the way we do things over here, old chap

You will also need security & a gun cabinet. If you are applying for firearms, you need a separate secure storage point for the ammunition and the bolts of the rifles (you can get cabinets with an internal lockable compartment). The cabinet must be securely fixed, to a solid & ideally internal & wall or floor, using metal bolts rather than screws and rawlplugs. Thunderbolts are ideal for this, Rawlbolts are OK but take a lot more fitting. A Police Firearms Enquiry Officer will call to check/advise on your security, and will give you a rating for the number of guns you may safely store. This will partly depend on the cabinet size, on the address you live at, and your level of security. In Devon and Cornwall, I had to have an alarm fitted in order to keep more than five guns at home.

"Putting your gun away dirty is a sin!"

The FEO will also ask, even if it's a shotgun not a firearm, where you intend to use it. Although this is, in law, none of their business, it's as well to tell them that you intend to join the clay club, or that you are joining a shooting syndicate, or whatever.

For shotguns, there is no age limit (though you have to be at least two to get the reference), but obviously parental consent is an issue for some. The shotgun certificates, from application to grant, can take anything between a week (as in Devon and Cornwall) and six months in some areas. There's not a lot you can do to hurry them up other than to recall that it's the squeaky wheel that gets the oil. Firearms Certs tend to take a minimum of a month as the Special Branch check and medical records check can take a while.

Then you need to buy your first gun. Don't listen to people who tell you you & need & this or that gun depending on what is in vogue at the moment. Over-and-under guns with enormously long barrels are & in & at the moment, so there are excellent bargains to be had on side-by-sides

of 26&rdquo;-28&rdquo; barrels. Guns whose chokes can be removed and replaced with other chokes are also in. My big work pump gun has removable choke, but I have no idea what choke is in there at the moment, and have never changed them around. Money is better spent on shooting lessons than on more guns.

You need to find a gun that &lsquo;fits&rsquo; you. This will depend on your height, the angle of your shoulder, the length of your arms etc. If you have fifty thou. to spend, go to Hollands and have one made. If you&rsquo;re a normal person, then go around second-hand gunshops and look at the stock until you find one that&rsquo;s right. It has to be comfortable. A heavy gun will recoil less, but your shoulder will get used to recoil before your arm gets used to elevating a man-portable howitzer. &lsquo;Game&rsquo; guns weigh less than &lsquo;sporting&rsquo; and &lsquo;trap&rsquo; guns designed for clayshooting. Personally, I prefer to go for a lighter, shorter gun that I can shoot more easily, and if recoil is bothering me I&rsquo;d use lighter cartridges.

#### Side-by-side shotgun

Don&rsquo;t assume that a 20-bore will have less recoil than a 12-bore: putting 28g. of lead through a 12-bore tube will generate less recoil than putting 28g. of lead through a narrower, 20-bore, tube. Remember that you can fit a recoil pad to a gun, or have one fitted. Stocks can be lengthened or shortened to improve fit.

There are lots of people &ndash; most of whom couldn&rsquo;t hit a pig&rsquo;s arse with a banjo &ndash; who will tell you absurd things like &ldquo;longer barrels are more pointable&rdquo;. I have often tried fruitlessly to make some sense out of this gibberish. The gun you shoot best with is a comfortable gun, that has a good &lsquo;feel&rsquo; to it, that fits your build. A £100,000 Purdey (even if gold-plated and engraved with nude ladies, as was one noisome object the owner once showed me with pride) is not inherently more accurate than a £150 second-hand AYA or Baikal. The more expensive guns are usually better built and will last longer, but at first, start with something cheap and find out what suits you. My own preference would be for a shortish English side-by-side, but that&rsquo;s just me. The best gun for you is the one you shoot best with. If anyone tries to tell you differently, just smile politely and offer them a stoat.

"Take a lesson" says the Marksmanship Stoat

It&rsquo;s a very good idea to join BASC or some other shooting organisation. Membership should include public liability insurance &ndash; just in case. BASC&rsquo;s is £10 million of cover.

Finally, an old bit of poetry &ndash; or doggerel if you prefer &ndash; on safety, written by Mark Beaufoy of Coombe House, Shaftesbury, Dorset, England,

in 1902, on presenting his eldest son, Henry Mark, with his first gun.

## A FATHER'S ADVICE TO HIS SON

If a sportsman true you'd be

Listen carefully to me. . .

Never, never let your gun

Pointed be at anyone.

That it may unloaded be

Matters not the least to me.

When a hedge or fence you cross

Though of time it cause a loss

From your gun the cartridge take

For the greater safety's sake.

If twixt you and neighboring gun

Bird shall fly or beast may run

Let this maxim ere be thine

"Follow not across the line."

Stops and beaters oft unseen

Lurk behind some leafy screen.

Calm and steady always be

"Never shoot where you can't see."

You may kill or you may miss

But at all times think this:

"All the pheasants ever bred

Won't repay for one man dead." If you have any questions or comments about this article please raise them on our forums.