



Symes & Wright Gunmakers

Before setting up in partnership together, Peter Symes, had previously worked for Purdeys, as a barrel maker and Alex Wright was a finisher (polishing the barrels etc), and had worked for Holland and Holland

Words: Lesley Goddard

Who remembers Wheaters gun shop, which was situated in Tentacroft Street, Lincoln? Anyone remember the owner and proprietor, Joe Wheeler?

Well I do. He was a man that made an impression on who ever met him. Very self assured, knowledgeable and very outspoken. Also he was a very astute business man with a remarkable memory. He is still fit and well and is in his 90s.

Joe was my first coach and he had a wealth of knowledge to impart, with a unique way of coaching.

He taught me techniques that I still use today, and I often quote incidents that occurred when I was with Joe. Like the time I visited him and his lovely (late) wife

Muriel and walked through the back door of his house (which I had done many times before), but this time his two German shepherd dogs came into the kitchen and moved



into attack mode (One coming at me from the front, and the other one, circling around the back). Phew! That was a scary moment, but as soon as Joe came into the

room and called them off, they were just soft pets again. Even the dogs had respect for his 'presence'.

Joe sold the gun shop and purchased a farm at Blyton, near Gainsborough, which he turned into a shooting school and game shoot. It was a well thought out ground, and I spent many hours there learning how to shoot sporting targets, supposedly 'testing' his new traps. When I started shooting DTL (down the line) internationally, Joe knew me that well, that before I had arrived home, he knew what sort of score I had achieved. I used to think someone had rung him up and told him, but that wasn't the case.

I recall being invited by Joe, on a trip to Hungerford. It was in September 1988, after the Hungerford shootings, and it was

to a shooting ground that was in a scenic area, (unfortunately the ground was closing soon afterwards, so that the beauty wasn't marred!). It was an open day, run by Symes and Wright, gun makers. Peter Symes had asked Joe if he would attend and bring his pair of Symes and Wright guns, so that other prospective customers could look at and admire them. For those of us who couldn't afford them we could quietly drool over them. They were the first pair made by the new partners and numbered 1 and 2 and had cost £27,000 (see photo).

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There was a sporting clay shoot and a hospitality tent and John Goddard, Joe and I, went out for a round of shooting. Joe was happy to walk round with us and chat to people. Many of them didn't know who he was, which led to a very amusing incident on the Grouse butt flush. The gentleman running the stand (wearing an 'out of Africa' hat-see photo) was instructing people to shoot, as well as radioing the message for the start of the ten clay flush, as once it had started, it was not able to be stopped until the sequence of clays was complete.

Most of the targets were within range, except for one target, and Joe being Joe, sat and watched and then loudly pronounced that no

one would be able to shoot all the targets! He had already pointed out to me that one particular target was out of shot range! The instructor looked down his nose at Joe (not knowing who he

was and what an accomplished shot he is) and said something like, "Of course it is sir, would you like a go?"

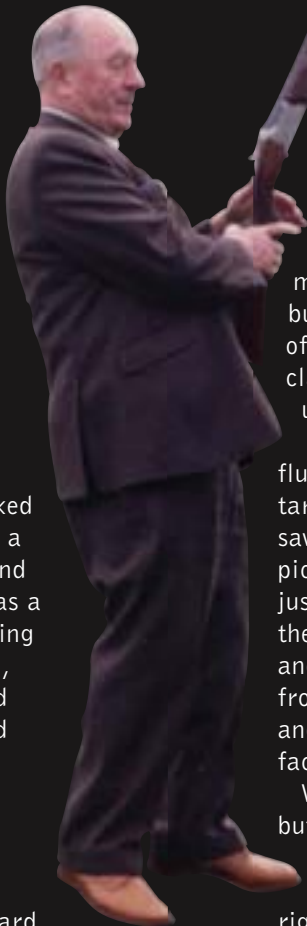
John and I looked at each other and smiled and then listened as Joe said, "I will shoot the first five clays and then give the gun to you and you shoot the next five clays and if you break them all, I will give you £100" (or some large sum of money). The instructor agreed, but did not realise that his half of the 'flush' would include the clay that Joe had announced as unbreakable.

Joe borrowed a gun, and the flush started and he shot all the targets, and when the instructor saw how he shot, his face was a picture, as it dawned on him he had just been set up for a fall! He took the gun off Joe and started to shoot and promptly missed the clay, and from then on it was all downhill, and he didn't break many more (In fact he looked quite flustered).

We left the stand with a smile, but just before I left, the instructor said to me, "Who is he?" I said, "Joe Wheater". "Oh, right", was his reply and he knew he had made a big error of judgment. I wonder if he ever tells the story of how he put his foot in it.

We had a wonderful day, my shooting skills improved somewhat (I was only just learning at this time, and the photos show a very amateur shooting style), but we had fun. The guns were admired and drooled over. Joe used them for game shooting, and then later sold them at auction for a tidy profit.

Peter Symes and Alex Wright eventually went their separate ways, but they left a legacy of well made British guns to rival other top British gunmakers.



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