

# A MASTER GUNMAKER'S JOURNEY

*Stephane Dupille has worked with some of the biggest names in the London and British gun trade. Now based in Bedfordshire, he is passing on his knowledge and a lifetime's passion for gunmaking to a new generation. And there's plenty to go round...*

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**W**hat Frenchman Stephane Dupille doesn't know about gunmaking probably isn't worth knowing. Born in 1973, Stephane, who now runs the eponymous Stephen & Son Gunmakers in Bedfordshire, has come a long way since his childhood in Normandy where he developed a passion for shotguns from his father, a sportsman and collector of old and antique guns.

Stephane is certainly worthy of his company's motto "quality always comes first..." and having learnt part of his trade in England, working in London as well as for other gunmakers within the British Isles, he is perfectly placed to pass on his knowledge to the next generation, including Asten and Vincent, two twenty-somethings who work alongside him. Though well travelled, Stephane is no journeyman: quite the opposite in

fact, with each new career chapter opening up new opportunities, the chance to meet more people who share his passion and learn new things about a trade he loves. The story of how his career in gunmaking started is just as interesting...

**"I was fascinated by English guns and sent an envelope full of pictures of my work to every London gunmaker."**

**In the 1990s you spent three years at Leon Mignon School of Gunmaking in Liege, studying for a diploma in actioning and stocking. What are your memories of your time there**

**and did you know what you wanted to do after you left?**

"Absolutely not, I was just absorbing everything I could about guns and just tried to do a little bit of everything. During the day I used to go the main school to learn about metalwork and then in the evenings I would go to another school to learn about woodwork. They were long days and during the weekend and my spare time I was an apprentice with a gunmaker called Marcel Thys & Sons, which manufactured shotguns and double rifles. I just didn't stop back then. It was great. I was 18 years old, away from home for the first time and doing something I loved."

**After graduation you worked for Gastinne Renette in Paris and then J.J Sipp in Strasbourg. What were those days like?**

"I had my first taste of English guns at Gastinne Renette, which



Vincent Lafont carrying out chequering on a new fore-end made on a top English shotgun.



Stephen & Son carries out work for the British and Continental gun trade as well as for private customers.



The gunmaker's motto is "quality always comes first" and it shows.

was a prestigious gunmakers in Paris. That's where I worked on my first shotgun from Boss & Co. From there on I really started to get hooked on English guns. I went to Renette while waiting to do my national service, and the plan was to return there afterwards. Sadly the business was sold while I was

away with the army, and so I went to Sipp when I returned to civilian life. Sipp was a very good gunmaker with a good team of people and I learnt a lot there, especially on German guns, with repairs and so on. German guns are so different from their English and French counterparts, so it was interesting."

**Do you remember the first shotgun you ever worked on for a client – how did it feel to be at the bench working on it?**

"When I was an apprentice at Marcel Thys & Sons I put together a brand new sidelock ejector with deep engraving from Grifnee. It was magnificent to look at. I was petrified about making a mistake, but it went well."

**How did you end up in London and was it somewhere you had always wanted to work?**

"Yes, London was in the back of my mind ever since my first taste of English guns at Gastinne Renette. I was fascinated by them and wanted to learn more. I sent an envelope full of pictures of my work to every London gunmaker and received a job offer from Rigby. I went over there and for some reason declined the offer. The then owner, Paul Roberts, was a gentleman about it and recommended that I approach ►

Watson Bros. that same day. He called Michael Louca to say that I was coming over to see him, drew me a map showing me how to get to the Watson Bros. factory, I met Michael a few hours later and he offered me a job. I really enjoyed my time at Watson Bros. I was there for around 18 months, after which I moved over to Holland & Holland, where I had the chance to work on some wonderful guns.”

**Who was your biggest influence in the London trade and what lessons did you learn at Hollands and Watson Bros.?**

“I have learnt something from every single person I worked with in London. They were all nice people – the actioners, engravers, everybody. Those days taught me a lot about quality because you always compare the work you do with that of others. British gunmakers are in a different league and that’s why

they have outlived many of those in France, Belgium and elsewhere in the world too. This country is home to the best of the best in gunmaking, that’s why so many customers come from far away to get the exclusivity and the beauty of a bespoke gun.”

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**Was it hard to leave London behind when you set up your own business in 2002 at the Atkin Grant & Lang workshop?**

“I was living in London when I first worked there but eventually moved to Bedfordshire. The daily

travelling was quite hard but I wanted to learn more, and being self-employed meant I could work for different gunmakers and do different things with them. I missed the team environment that came with working in London but I loved the countryside, so it was good for me to work in the countryside because that is where I had come from in France. It was brilliant at Atkin Grant & Lang because I was working with other self-employed gunmakers, the atmosphere was good, and it was a lovely set up right near my home. It also coincided with a very busy time in the trade, which was great, too.”

**When did you decide you wanted to work for yourself and did you have any idea what kind of work you wanted to do?**

“Having my own business was always my aim. I worked really hard when I was young and I always



**Asten Metters working on a Beretta EELL, doing some alteration to the stock after a gun fitting check.**



**Stephane has over 30 years' experience in the European gun trade.**



**Stephen & Son's expertise are in demand from those who demand the best.**

wanted to have my own workshop, to have freedom, and build up a team of young people to come and work with me and to teach them what I had learnt. From the start of my career in England I’ve been lucky to work with the likes of W.W. Greener, William & Son, and Dickson & MacNaughton. At the start I was just doing stocking work for the gun trade, but when I bought this premises in Harlington in 2008 I wanted to work for the public, doing finishing and repairs. Four years ago we expanded to become an official dealer for Chapuis Armes, Browning, Caesar Guerini, Miroku, Browning and Krieghoff, and we are planning on becoming an official dealer for Perazzi.”

**What’s the best thing about a career in the gun trade, and the hardest lesson you’ve learnt?**

“The best thing is the customers. They’re very interesting people who share our passion. The gun trade is small, everyone knows and respects each other, so if you do a good job your name becomes reliable. The hardest thing to accept is the hours are long. Sometimes you will have a job which will take double the amount of time it might normally because shotguns are complicated things. This is something you have to relay to the customer, who might not appreciate the time involved in completing a job.”

**When does a gunmaker know that a shotgun they’ve been working on is finished?**

“You learn to know when something is finished. There is a standard that you need to reach; everything needs to be done in a certain way here. Everything that goes out of our door, it needs to be absolutely perfect.”

*For more information, visit [stephenandson-gunmakers.co.uk](http://stephenandson-gunmakers.co.uk)*