

**THE MAGICIAN OF GARONNE**  
*Russ Gould*

This article is about the discovery of something quite astonishing, all the more so because of the unlikely place it was discovered, and the absolutely stunning magnitude of the discovery.

Before we start with the account of this discovery, I would like to relate another tale. There is a story about a hunting party in the Namib Desert of what was then called South West Africa. A German settler was out hunting with two Bushmen trackers. They sighted a band of Eland and a successful stalk was made using the lengthening shadows cast by the scattered thorn bushes for cover. The herd became nervous and started to move away, so the hunter took aim at the biggest and bluest bull, set the trigger on his Oberndorff Mauser, and took the shot. A solid hit was heard but the animals disappeared over a sand dune in a cloud of dust. After following for some distance, the party realized that the Eland was poorly hit. The bullet must have been deflected by a limb of one of the few scrawny trees that cling to life in that dry empty place, or perhaps the hunter was tired and he made a poor shot. In any event, it was getting late, there was very little blood, and the herd was still together so they elected to camp for the night in a dry wash, right on the Elands' tracks. Winter nights are brutally cold in the Namib, so the hunter sent his trackers out to collect what little firewood they could find while he prepared a simple meal of bilton and coffee, supplies that he always carried in a leather pouch lashed to his saddle. While he was busying himself, the moon rose over the horizon illuminating the desert dunes with soft silver light, bright enough to allow him to discern that one of the trackers was returning without wood. The hunter was just about to scold him when the Bushman opened his mouth and spat something into his hand. Some small objects glistened in his palm. When he lifted his hand close to the hunter's face, the German immediately recognized the objects as three nut-sized diamonds, wet and pulsing in the moonlight. And thus the fabulous diamond fields of the Skeleton Coast were discovered.

I made a similarly incongruous discovery on a recent visit to a long-time Belgian friend and hunting partner now living in the South of France, not far from Toulouse in the broad fertile valley of the Garonne River. He had mentioned previously that his neighbor made guns, not commercially, but as a hobby, and arranged for me to meet this gentleman who lived in an ancient farmhouse at the end of a dirt track lined with oak trees. Farm machinery and more than one aging Mercedes Benz passenger car from the 70s and 80s weathered gracefully around a cluster of simple farm buildings. The main building lay to the right of the driveway. One end of this structure housed a herd of cows, some of whom could be seen feeding as one passed, their black and white hides splattered with mud and cow manure. The other half was the owner's home. The entrance was at the far end, through an enclosed porch draped with wet rain gear and crowded with muddy boots.

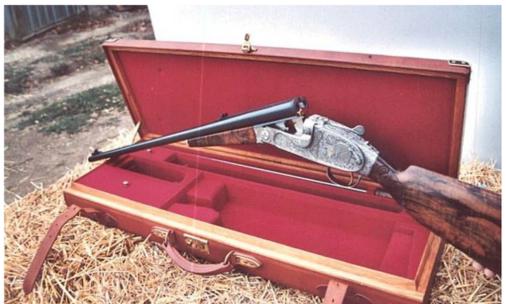
Out of this covered entry came Claude Bouchet, the gun-maker, to greet us. A compact man, he was wearing a powder blue shop coat and his eyes twinkled as we shook hands. Speaking very little French, I relied on my linguist friend to translate. We were duly invited into the kitchen and Claude then disappeared into the back of the house to fetch his gun. Looking around, I noticed stacks of gun magazines and books along the wall and a set of shotgun barrels hanging in a glass case on another wall.

He soon reappeared bearing what looked like a small gauge side-by-side shotgun with a side lever, profusely engraved. Upon closer inspection I was warned not to touch the guns unless invited to do so, the gun now laid on a mat on the kitchen table was a double rifle. My friend explained that it was a 7x57. While we were looking at this very elegant and unique gun, Claude reappeared with yet another gun, somewhat larger. This one was a 300 Weatherby, we were informed. Also a full sidelock double rifle. It was laid next to the first. Another appeared... this time a very substantial over-under gun in 378 Weatherby. By this time I realized that there was a lot more to Claude than I had expected from a hobby gun-maker! A fourth gun was laid on the table, a massive double sidelever with an oversized action, announced as a 460 Weatherby! And finally, a gun that looked almost as big as Claude himself, a top lever side-by-side of massive proportions and obviously great weight. The caliber of this monster was 577 Tyrannosaur, a brutish wildcat cartridge clearly capable of slaying its namesake.



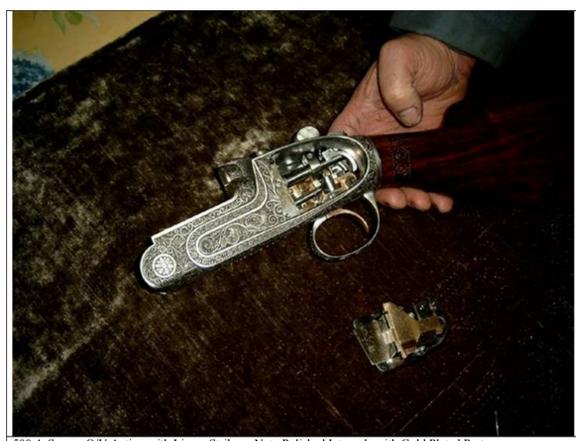
Claude with Massive 577 Tyrannosaur Double Rifle Made Entirely by His Own Hand, Employing his Unique Monolithic Barrels and Sidelever Action

For a while I was at a loss for words. The guns were overwhelming, not only because of their size and power, but also due to their workmanship and styling. The most obvious common styling cue was that the receiver metal of each gun extended back to the narrow portion of the wrist. Each gun was a full hammerless sidelock, together with the extended actions providing acres of metal surface every inch of which was covered in deeply carved ornamental patterns with a menagerie of game animals done in Bulino-style engraving. It took a minute, but I then realized that there were no exposed pins in the action plates to detract from the engraving, only a H&H-style key on some or a hidden socket screw on others to hold the lock in place in its mortise in the action frame.



460 Weatherby SXS Rifle Showing Double Underlugs and Hidden Third Fastener, Keyed Hand Detachable Sidelocks in Extended Action Frame, in Maker's Case

The finely figured wood stocks, of best French Bastogne Walnut, met the actions at the transition from the wrist to what would normally be called the head of the stock... except that this portion of the gun was metal. Each stock was slightly different in design although none could be characterized as having classic proportions. The 7x57 and 300 Why had perch-belly stocks with no pistol grip; the 378 and 577 had a pronounced pistol grip stock of stout proportions capped by an engraved metal cap; the 460 and 500 had a straight grip, but not of the English style. Each stock and forend was delicately carved with fish-scale patterns, leaves and fruit where normally simple checkering would be found. Claude pointed out that the junctions of the stocks and the receivers were rebated so the wood could not splinter, each stock being tapered and held tight to the receiver by a sturdy stock bolt. He further demonstrated that the forend wood was held in a "vise" of metal, and that the forend iron was one integral piece of metal with the hinge at one end and a cap at the other with dovetails to hold the wood in a firm grip. While removing a forend from one of the guns to demonstrate this design feature, he pointed out that the pushbutton release had to be first unlocked by unscrewing a knurled sleeve before the forend could be released.



500 A-Square O/U Action with Linear Strikers. Note Polished Internals with Gold Plated Parts

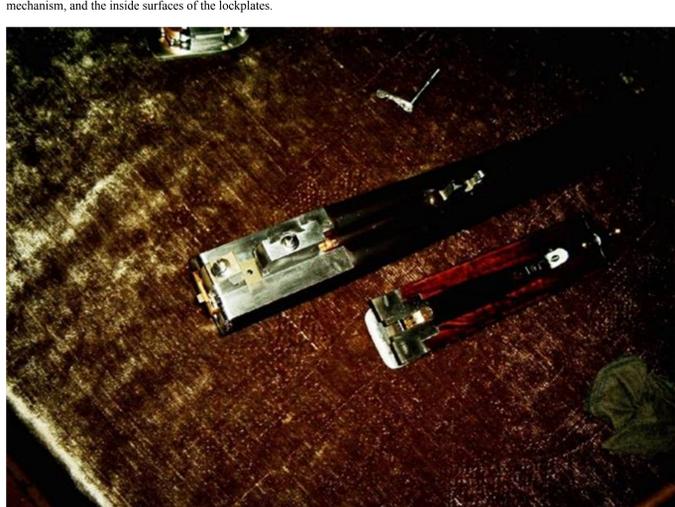


460 Weatherby SXS with Rotating Tumblers and Blocked Sears

The lockwork was demonstrated next. Each gun was provided with a means to remove the locks, either a hand latch on the lock itself, or a special key stored in a hidden compartment behind the buttplate. In a few seconds, the locks were detached and their glorious mechanisms sparkled on the table like the diamonds of the Skeleton Coast. More surprises lurked here: not only were the brasses integral with the stout lockplates themselves, allowing the lock to be constructed without exposed pins of any sort, but also while some of the locks incorporated hinged tumblers I hesitate to use the word traditional to describe any aspect of these unique guns), the 500 A-Square and 378 Weatherby guns had linear strikers to reduce lock-time, and, I suspect, just because he could do it! The main spring tension was adjustable. And finally, on all guns the beefy sears were locked in position, unable to release their hammers, by unique gold-plated rotating sear blocks. The removal of the locks exposed the remainder of the mechanisms including the unique mechanical non-selective triggers. Each a little different, these triggers were set in precisely-fitted pivoting blocks that eliminated all side-to-side play. On the first pull, the trigger would unlock that sear by rotating it's block out of place without perceptible movement, while simultaneously dislodging the sear from it's purchase on the tumbler or striker; upon release, an internal mechanism would switch over to operate the other lifter and then on the second pull the process would be repeated for the other lock. Thus the guns can only be fired by deliberate release of the trigger, not by recoil or any other shock. Amazing and delightful to observe.

Each gun had ejectors, according to its type. The side-by-sides used H&H mechanisms in the forends, while the 500 A Square used the Boss system. Only the 577 lacked ejectors, possibly because after firing twice the shooter would need time to recover anyway! The ejectors themselves were of extremely sturdy construction riding on twin large diameter shafts exhibiting no play at all aside from their intended linear motion, with broad spring-loaded hooks to engage the rims of the rimless cartridges. When we pressed Claude on the rimmed/rimless issue, he meticulously laid out the number of rounds he had fired through each rifle, now in excess of 1600 in aggregate, and the fact that while he had had on failure to fire due to a blind primer hole on one round (of Norma-made Weatherby brass!), he had not had a single failure to eject.

On most guns, even those made in by traditional hand methods, one is used to a little roughness in wood and metal finish in hidden areas such as the upper surface of the forend, the action mechanism, and the inside surfaces of the lockplates.



Not good enough for Claude though...his forend iron and the associated ejector mechanisms were polished to a mirror finish and the wood fit and finish on the interior surfaces was just as good as the exposed ones. Key pieces of his lockwork and ejectors were plated in gold. The fit and finish on the internal mechanisms of these guns is impeccable, bringing to mind the workings of a fine Swiss watch with the feel and heft of a bank vault door.

Regarding the exterior finish, we were amazed to note that with the exception of the first gun built (the 300 Why), Claude had personally executed the engraving including the Balino game scenes. Each gun bore appropriate renditions of game animals... from the "little" 7x57R with its depictions of local wild boar, mouflon, and roe deer to the lions and elephant on the 378, with the heavy artillery adorned with buffalo and rhino. The 577 exhibited a complete tableau with elephants and antelope on the left and a pride of lions on the right. The ornamental scroll and leaf work was deeply chiseled, offsetting the very fine game scenes. When we asked Claude how long it took him to perfect his technique, he shrugged and stated that he just started in on gun no. 2 and didn't find it necessary to practice at all!



7x57 Sidelever Rifle with Mouflon on the Rump of the Action



Same Rifle, Right Side Depiction of Boar's Head

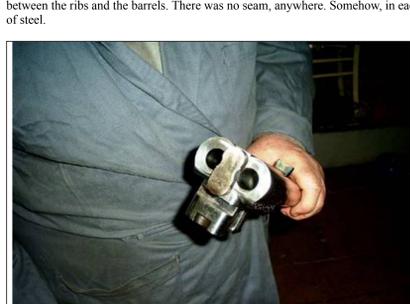


300 Weatherby Rifle, Right Side Depiction of Wild Boar Common to Local Area

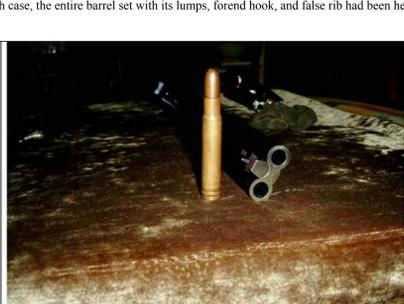


Weatherby Again, Left Side Showing Stag Against Forest

The biggest surprise was yet to come. The barrels of each gun were as finely struck, polished and blued as any Holland or Purdey. Their lines were impeccable and sensuous. Each had a plain game rib wearing express sights of Claude's own construction. Except for the 300 Weatherby rifle. That gun had only a half rib with an island for the front blade, the valley between the barrels otherwise appearing to have no seam at all! These barrels had been milled from one single billet of Chrome-Molybdenum steel, after both bores had been deep-hole drilled (by a nearby aerospace machine shop, the ONLY operation not done onsite in Claude's "laboratory"), polished and then rifled by hand! Then Claude dropped his bombshell: the ribs on the other guns were integral with the barrels, not separate pieces soldered in place, but milled from the same billet as the barrels!! This I confirmed by looking at the muzzles and the breech ends, and then closely at the "joint" between the ribs and the barrels. There was no seam, anywhere. Somehow, in each case, the entire barrel set with its lumps, forend hook, and false rib had been hewn from one rectangular billet of steel.

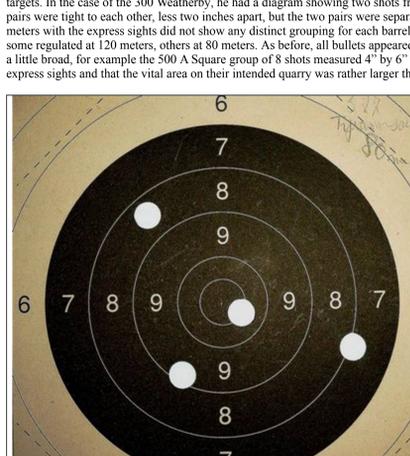


Massive Integral Underlugs and Extractor on 577 Tyrannosaur.

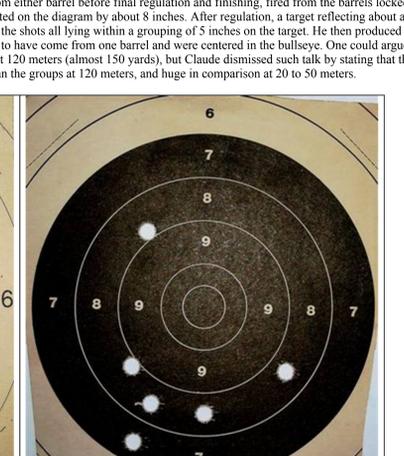


Business End of the 460 Wby Barrels Showing Integral Web

A lively discussion regarding regulation ensued. Claude stated that 80% of the regulation was accomplished by a slight convergence of the bores and pulled out; with the final 20% being achieved by cold-hammering the web between the bores "very carefully". To prove his point, Claude dug through his pile of gun magazines and drilled out a carefully-preserved file of targets. In the case of the 300 Weatherby, he had a diagram showing two shots from either barrel before final regulation and finishing, fired from the barrels locked in a vise using a hammer. The pairs were tight to each other, less two inches apart, but the two pairs were separated on the diagram by about 8 inches. After regulation, a target reflecting about a dozen shots taken at 100 meters with the express sights did not show any distinct grouping for each barrel, the shots all lying within a grouping of 5 inches on the target. He then produced final groupings for each rifle, some regulated at 120 meters, others at 80 meters. As before, all bullets appeared to have come from one barrel and were centered in the bulls-eye. One could argue that some of the groups were a little broad, for example the 500 A Square group of 8 shots measured 4" by 6" at 120 meters (almost 150 yards), but Claude dismissed such talk by stating that the guns were fired with open express sights and that the vital area of their intended quarry was rather larger than the groups at 120 meters, and huge in comparison at 20 to 50 meters.



577 T Rex at 80 Meters (89 Yards)



460 Weatherby at 100 Meters (120 Yards).

When asked if he had killed anything with his guns, Claude replied that he had not, and he had no plans to do so. He built the guns for personal satisfaction, he stated, and not as everyday hunting weapons. He wanted to advance the state of the art, to build the strongest and most powerful guns extant, and to provide them to the highest standards of craftsmanship and finish. Each gun had taken three to four years to build, working part time and late into the evenings mostly; laid out on the simple kitchen table in front of us was a lifetime of work, literally! We asked which guns he most enjoyed building, to which he replied the "Boss" system gun, the 500. The forend mechanism in particular proved most challenging. If he built another gun, was there anything he would still like to improve? And then, after some pause, he said, no, he felt he had proven every innovation he could think of and had built guns that would sustain many thousands of rounds of heavy loads without complaint, and then IF any wear occurred, he had incorporated wear-compensating blocks at all wear points so the guns could be tuned up and made ready for the next bout of use. Having had the wonderful opportunity to handle them (and yes, he did allow me to do so with the gloves I brought along for the purpose), and having seen how and where the guns were made, I found his statements bold but I could find no argument with ("The Magician of the Garonne").

Postscript: Claude has committed to build one more gun, a prototype of a 12 lb working gun in a caliber suitable for use on dangerous game, specifically designed to be the toughest and most durable double rifle ever made, incorporating his many innovations and ideas with a few twists and surprises that won't be revealed until the work is done. If all goes well, this gun will be produced in limited quantities with bespoke engraving and stocks, with deliveries starting in 2010.

Table Summarizing the Key Design Features of the Guns

Caliber	Action	Ejectors	Bbl length	"Rib"	Sights	Strikers	Weight
7x57R (275 Rigby)	Side Lever SXS	H&H	Half	Fixed Express and Scope Base	Rotary	4.5kg	
300 Why	Top Lever SXS	H&H	Half	Fixed Express and Scope Base	Rotary	5.5kg	
378 Why	O/U Kersten Locks		Full	Fixed Express	Linear	7.5kg	
460 Why	Top Lever SXS	H&H	67cm	Full	Fixed Express	9kg	
500 A-Square	O/U Boss System	Boss	70cm	Full	Fixed Express	Linear	8.5kg
577 Tyrannosaur	SXS Side Lever	None	60cm	Full	Fixed Express	Rotary	10.5kg