

The unacceptable (?) face of elite gun culture

Peter Squires reflects on the myths and realities surrounding the shooting lobby

Flicking through the pages of *Shooting Gazette*, as you do, displayed adjacent to the cash tills at my local garden centre, I came across several pages of advertising for new and used shotguns. One of the cheapest guns displayed, included in a full page advertisement placed by a regional 'country sports' stockist, was a 'used Browning' in 'very good condition'. It had a stock in 'stunning dark wood' and was embellished by engraved hunting scenes: yours for just £8,750. A little more exclusively priced was the 'used Beretta' at £18,750 or, if you prefer your hunting with a friend, an 'elegant pair' of new Beretta's could set you back £69,950. Shooting is not a cheap sport, and judging from the expensive range of accessories, without which it just isn't done to be seen, mixing with the *nouveau riche*, rock stars, city traders and bankers, and the not-so-*nouveau riche* at exclusive shooting weekends held in the landed retreats of these British Isles.

Cheap licenses, exclusive 'sport'

The price of shooting rather begs the question as to why shooting sports and firearms lobbyists pushed so hard to block recent proposals to increase firearm and shotgun license fees. The lobbyists were successful, license fees will remain at £50 (and £40 for the five-yearly renewal), a figure they have been set at for well over a decade and which, according to the Association of Chief Police Constables (ACPO), comes nowhere near the estimated £200 per licence that it costs the police to operate the licensing system and undertake the home security checks essential for the safety and reputation of the sport. Four senior Tory backbenchers,

prominent in the £50 rear-guard lobbying, had recently enjoyed a day's free shooting and generous (£800 per head) hospitality on the Catton Hall estate in Derbyshire as guests of BASC (British Association for Shooting and Conservation). There was nothing underhand about this junketing, the MPs declared the event in the Register of Members interests, but it scarcely seems plausible that the shooting fraternity cannot afford as little as £10 per year for their gun licences, especially as more and more people appear to be taking up shooting and licence holders are buying more and more guns. The number of firearm licences on issue in England and Wales increased by 20 per cent between 2002 and 2012, while the number of weapons covered by current firearm and shotgun licences (465,000 firearms and 1,336,700 shotguns) is one of the highest totals since the statistics have been nationally collated.

Reflecting the fact that police forces are unable to charge anything like the full economic cost for the licensing system they manage, ACPO sources have calculated that firearms licensing costs policing around £19 million per year. At a time when frontline policing services have faced up to 25 per cent cuts and government austerity measures have stripped away welfare protections for some of our most vulnerable

citizens, it seems odd that the relatively affluent who choose to participate in a sport involving potentially dangerous weapons should not pay for the public safety consequences of their choices.

Police reluctance

A further consequence of police budgetary pressures in relation to firearm licensing – a theme that, rather disturbingly, goes right back to 1996 – is that police licensing managers are often reluctant to take decisions which are likely to incur expensive legal actions if and when firearms licenses are refused. Gun magazines frequently contain legal advice columns for gun owners facing a challenge to their certificates, as well as advertisements from law firms offering to represent clients in difficulties with 'overly diligent' police licensing officers. Yet the police often seem far from over zealous, 40-odd different police

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forces practice many different shades of due diligence in their handling of firearm licensing, accordingly, in any given year, less than one per cent of firearm licence applications are refused (two per cent in the case of shotgun licences) while only 0.25 per

cent of gun licences are revoked although the numbers of revocations have risen in the last couple of years (Paracha, 2012). These later rises are, no doubt, a result of incidents in which overly reticent policing appears to have allowed certificate holders (such as Michael Bird in Cumbria, 2010) to retain their firearms despite prior criminal convictions. Even more troubling are three further recent cases: Michael Atherton in January 2012; Christopher Parry in August 2013 and John Lowe as recently as February this year, where police either had prior contacts, or even temporarily confiscated firearms, subsequently

to return them, and the gun owners then going on to commit a series of six domestic firearm homicides, injuries (all female victims) and one suicide.

Shooting and its myths

The gun lobby frequently like to present their hobby as ethical and shooters as a highly responsible breed; for instance, the sport is shrouded in an aura of 'nature conservation' – concerned shooters can even purchase 'non-toxic' steel shot, although there is still plenty of evidence that sports shooters prefer their 'more effective' lead, thereby contaminating woodlands, pasture and water-courses. No doubt it was something of this veneer of responsibility that prompted Michael Gove, to urge young people to join their school and community 'cadet' organisations, to take advantage of the opportunities and discipline offered, including learning to shoot, in order to develop character and personal responsibility, solid masculine virtues. It was precisely this myth that sociologist Ian Taylor took exception to in 2000 in his essay *Respectable, Rural and English*, which critically unpacked the claims to respectable and traditional masculinity so frequently voiced by firearms lobbyists.

Another vital plank in the defence of shooting interests has been the gun lobby's apparent insistence on there being a near watertight distinction between the illegal gun culture on city streets and their own shooting practices. Apart from the fact that this is manifestly not true; for instance, all three British shooting rampages – Hungerford, Dunblane and Cumbria – were undertaken by firearm certificate holders with lawfully acquired weapons. Then there are the three domestic homicide cases referred to already and a host of further domestic shootings (Mark Saunders, 2008 and Paul White, 2013), murder/suicides (Bill Dowling in 2013; Donald Knight in 2013) and family annihilations (Christopher Foster in 2008). The UK Gun Control Network compiles a national register of media reported shooting incidents, often including

whether the weapon used was legally owned.

Beyond these especially tragic cases, Matt Sieber in his book *Gunfire Graffiti: Overlooked Gun Crime in the UK*, has unearthed substantial evidence of a much more routine misuse of firearms. His book catalogues many cases of firearm criminal damage, chiefly road signs, hit by shotgun blasts or high velocity rifle bullets. The practice is common in the USA, considered by many to be amusing, either way it poses a question about the alleged 'responsibility' of firearm owners in the United Kingdom. In fact the only thing we can't say about this weaponised irresponsibility is how much of it was perpetrated with lawfully owned firearms. This, precisely, is one of the yawning gaps in our contemporary gun crime intelligence and a serious hole in public safety risk assessment: we simply do not know how much gun crime is undertaken with legal weapons, statistics on the legal status of criminally employed firearms has not been separately recorded since 1996. One might wonder why not.

'Responsibility'

Further questions arise regarding the 'responsibility' of firearm owners and collectors. In a recent review of criminal access to firearms (Squires, 2014), it became clear that offenders were sourcing firearms from collectors (including by theft), and that apparently lawful collectors and antiques firearm dealers often had one or two 'off-ticket' items amongst their otherwise lawful collections. Reports of police enquiries have thrown up a number of notorious cases, but in the absence of fuller and more appropriate data it is difficult to draw reliable conclusions. The lack of such statistical accountability allows the

gun lobby its deniability: just a few 'rotten apples' and 'dodgy dealers' – maybe, but perhaps also a lack of appropriate public safety scrutiny.

Experience has shown me that the gun lobby is often a little 'sensitive' to such criticism, as I discovered when I became involved with an Animal Aid project 'Gunning for Children' which was seeking to pressure major newsagent chains to refrain from displaying shooting magazines picturing grinning hunters amidst a host of dead birds or animals. Using the phrase 'shooting

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porn' to describe this type of magazine certainly got their attention. Such displays of 'casual cruelty', killing for fun, it was argued, did little to reassure people of the integrity of these sports. Instead it spoke volumes about a shooting mindset that was neither

responsible, nor safe, nor willing to be held to account. Above all, this continues to be a problem for shooting which, despite countless fatal tragedies, frequent irresponsibility, 'casual cruelty' and an arrogant indifference to wider public concerns has, literally, 'stuck to its guns' and sought repeatedly to avoid appropriate public safety oversight. ■

Peter Squires is Professor of Criminology and Public Policy, University of Brighton

References

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