

AUSTRIAN ARTISTRY

Geoffrey Boothroyd looks at the inspired work of Ferlach gunmaker Peter Hofer, whose skills have already attracted worldwide attention and admiration

THESE ARE certain places whose names are inextricably bound up with the manufacture of firearms. Despite the onward march of the machine-made shotgun, traditions survive in these towns. The guns, which owe more to the individual skill of the gunmaker's hands than the built-in skills of the machine tool, continue to be made to delight those whose philosophy includes not only the traditional "Liberty, Equality, Fraternity," but also Quality!

The names of these hallowed places will be known to many gun enthusiasts; London and Birmingham, St Etienne, Söhl, Liège, Eibar, Gardone and, in Austria, Steyr, where the famous Mannlicher-Schoenauer rifles are made in the factory founded by Josef Werndl in 1853.

Austria boasts another town in what I have called "the Valley of the Gunmakers". To find Ferlach, in Upper Austria, you need a large-scale map, since its importance to those who love fine guns is not related to its size, but to

the number of fine gunmakers who live and work there.

It is a lovely old town at the foot of the Carinthian Alps, not far from Klagenfurt, on the border between Austria and Yugoslavia, where fine guns have been made for four centuries. You will not find a Steyr, F.N., Mauser or Beretta here, for Ferlach is a town of small industries, comprising small communities of specialised craftsmen.

The absence of a major mass-production factory in no way diminishes the importance of Ferlach. For not only is there a renowned and very highly respected technical school for gunmakers and engravers, but also Ferlach has its own Proof House, established in 1882. Probably because — to my

sorrow — I have not been to Ferlach, it is the place which holds the most mystery and romance for me and which, some day, I would very much like to visit.

My fascination with Ferlach started many years ago, at the very first International

Hunting Exhibition in Florence, where I was introduced to some of the gunmakers of Ferlach and to the results of their labours. Since many gunmaking centres in Europe have been considerably altered by competition in recent years, it is possible that gunmaking is no longer the foremost industry of the town.

But although I haven't visited Ferlach, I do manage to meet people who live or work there. In 1986, during a visit to Dan'l Fraser, Gunmakers (who are based at Peddieston, on the Black Isle, north of Inverness), I had the opportunity of a long talk with Erwin Oraz. He was born in Ferlach and attended the school of gunmaking, where he chose to specialise in engraving.

I was greatly impressed by the quality of the work which he showed me, and if this is representative of the work of the graduates of the Ferlach School of Gunmaking, then it augurs well for their future.

One might be led to believe that Ferlach is an oasis of the highest quality of gunmaking expertise! This, of course, is not so. More information on Ferlach was obtained through the kindness of a reader, Jurgen Lemm, and it seems that Ferlach is little different from many of the other well-known centres of gunmaking, in that there is a fairly wide spread of skills and abilities, from the outstanding to the ordinary.

This, of course, is also the case in Liège, Brescia and Birmingham. One gunmaker will tell you about the beauty of his work, another will merely discuss the price, and the fact that he is cheaper than anyone else. One look at his work tells you why! It is not the work of the cut-price gunsmith that attracts attention, but rather the highly skilled craftsman.

Ferlach is renowned, not only for shotguns and bolt-action rifles, but also for those special combination guns which are so much a part of the central European sporting scene, the over-and-under shotgun/rifle and the three- and four-barrelled combination guns, the drilling and the vierling, which are made in a bewildering variety of calibres and configurations.

Recently, my long infatuation with Ferlach was fanned into flames once again by the comments of my old friends Mike Clarkson and the Birmingham gunmaker David Dryhurst. Both visited the Nuremberg Arms Fair, where they saw the stand occupied by the gunmakers of Ferlach, along with another stand showing the work of Ferlach gunmaker Peter Hofer.



Hofer's exceptional artistry and skills have been widely admired throughout the British gun trade.

Such guns are very expensive, but a joy to own in these days of largely impersonal service and mass production.



The customer's every artistic wish can be accommodated.

Both Mike and David were quite ecstatic about his work and their comments were such that I was prompted to write to Ferlach for more information. Splendid though the illustrations are, they do not do full justice to the extremely high quality of the workmanship, which is superb.

So what have I been able to learn about this remarkable gunmaker? Peter was born in 1958 and is a graduate of the world-renowned Gunsmith's College in Ferlach. He obtained his Master's qualification in gunmaking and gunstocking in 1979 and he then established his own business in Ferlach.

The atelier (I can't call it just a "workshop") of Peter Hofer specialises in single-shot hunting rifles, the hinged-barrel Kipplaufwaffe.

Also offered is the over-and-under shotgun/rifle, the Bockbuchsflinte, and the unusual Bockdrilling, a three-barrelled over-and-under shotgun/rifle with side-mounted, small-bore, rifled barrel.

Because of the manner in which these weapons are built, it is possible to comply with the customer's every technical and artistic wish (within the bounds of safety!). Peter can offer his rifles in over 100 different calibres and more than 20 different barrel combinations.

The gun can be built on the British Anson & Deeley or Holland & Holland type actions, or on the German Blitz or Merkel actions. A second set of interchangeable barrels opens up the versatility of the Hofer hunting gun, be it a rifle or rifle/shotgun.

The traditional, deeply cut — almost sculptured — Austrian engraving with gold inlay is available, as well as the more restrained English style of engraving. Set triggers, scope mounts and a wide variety of stock styles and finishes are available to suit the customer's wishes. So, if you are searching for something very different, look no further.

If you have to know the price, you cannot afford it and if, like me, you cannot afford it, take pleasure in the fact that in this grey — and, at times, harsh — world, highly-skilled craftsmen like Peter Hofer can still make such magnificent guns.

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This single-barrel hunting rifle has mounts for telescopic sights and is available in any bore.

