

SHOTGUNS • GUNDOGS • RIFLES • ESSENTIAL GEAR • SHOOTING ADVICE

SPORTING Gun

FEBRUARY 2025 | £6.99
SPORTING-GUN.COM



TIPS & TUTORIALS

Sport abroad,
wildfowling, pigeon
shooting, deer stalking,
essential gundog advice

FEATURES & REVIEWS

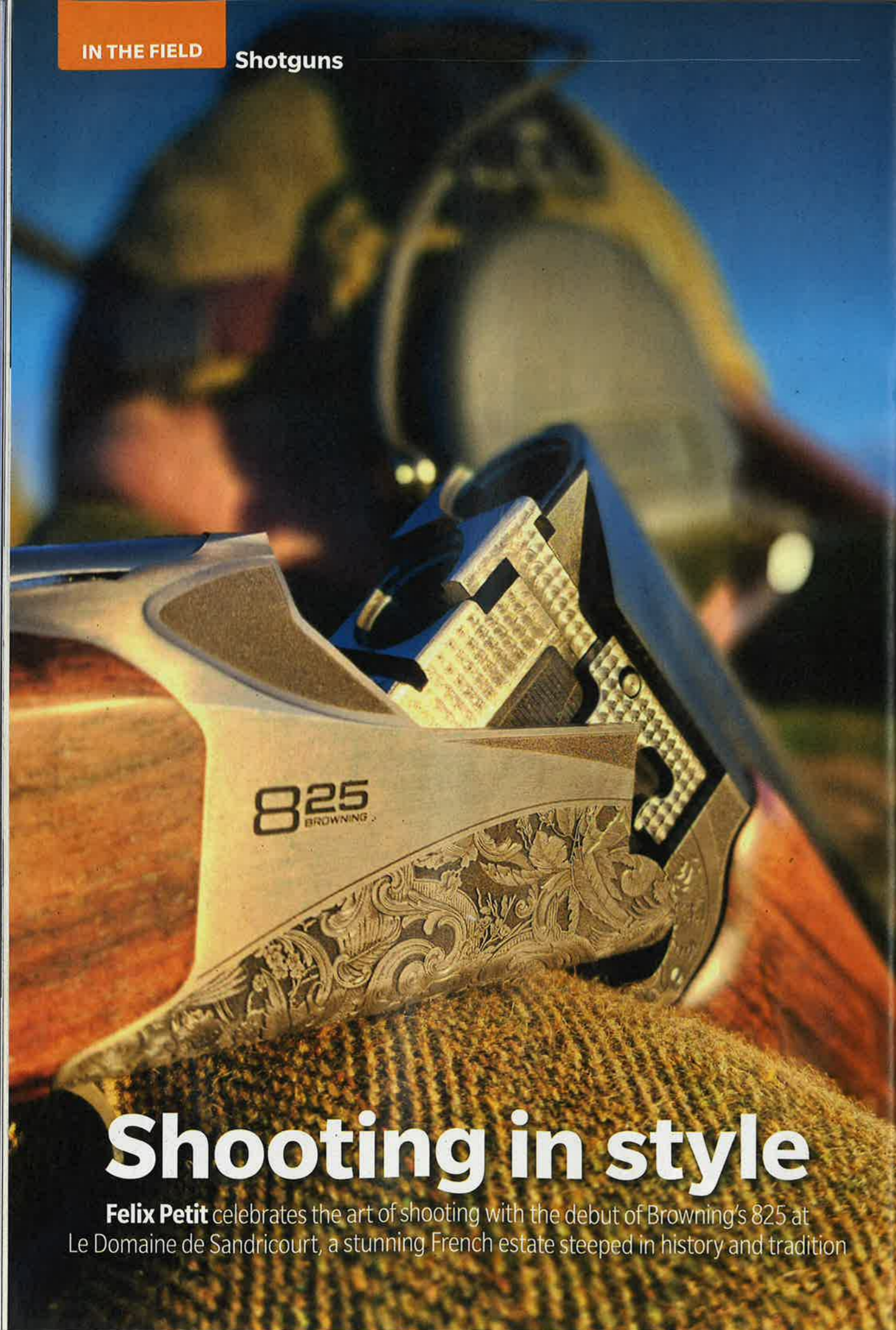
William Powell Prestige,
black-powder shotguns,
top 6 flappers and decoys

THE BROWNING 825

The latest evolution in cutting-edge
shotgun tech – first look and field test

RATED WILLIAM POWELL PRESTIGE





Shooting in style

Felix Petit celebrates the art of shooting with the debut of Browning's 825 at Le Domaine de Sandricourt, a stunning French estate steeped in history and tradition

I have just returned from a trip to Le Domaine de Sandricourt, one of France's premier shooting estates, after attending an event to launch the 825, Browning's latest shotgun.

An early flight from Heathrow saw me at Paris Charles de Gaulle Airport by 10.30am to meet Browning's marketing and events manager, Martin Boucquey, who had come to collect me and a group of other European journalists. Our half-hour journey took us through the pleasant countryside of the Vexin region that occupies the fertile plateau on the northern banks of the Seine, immortalised in the paintings of Van Gogh and Monet.

In just a few shakes of a duck's tail we arrived at the entrance to the Château de Sandricourt. The Browning team had outdone itself: it was utterly stunning. The traditional French mansion, with its external shutters and wonderful symmetry, was set among acres of manicured lawns, punctuated with geometric formal gardens, classical statues and avenues of trees.

House history

The house was built in the early 19th century by the Marquis de Beauvoir but sold to an American family, the Goelets, in 1908. Although the staff told us that the château had been used by Hermann Göring as his headquarters for part of the war, it has remained in the possession of the Goelet family, who still visit several times a year but rent it out to hunting parties in between.

I was shown to my room, which featured views over endless box hedges and ochre woods. I dumped my bags and spun back down the stone spiral staircase for the scheduled lunch, which consisted of scallops, foie gras, fillet steak, panna cotta and cheese.

Then it was time for the guns. We descended to the armoury with its vaulted ceilings, where there was a selection of both models of the 825: the Sporter and the Hunter. We each grabbed a gun, cartridge bag and slip before heading back outside.

My first impressions of the gun were positive. It weighs 7lb 8oz, very similar to that of its predecessor, the 725, but is a little better looking. It felt chunky and solid, but not in the slightest unwieldy. As I waited for further instructions I conducted a few dry mounts to get a feel for the balance of the gun. I immediately liked the semi-pistol grip, the gentle palm swell and the grippy,



Our very own Mr Petit, clearly proud of his impressive pheasant taken with the 825

laser-cut chequering. I played with the safety catch and barrel selector, which I was told had been designed to be slightly more prominent than in the 725 to make it easier to use with cold hands.

We were off to familiarise ourselves with the gun over some clays. The estate also runs simulated game days, so it has an array of realistic clay drive setups. In true French style, the gun bus that was to carry us around the estate was a handsome and heavily modified old Renault G300 off-road lorry. It was reminiscent of the troop-carrying vehicles you see plodding around the edges of Salisbury Plain but had been tricked out with double glazing to keep us warm and had retractable metal steps that made the whole thing very civilised.

We disembarked at the young beech wood where we were due to shoot. We lined out along the 10 or so pegs, with me stationed at the furthest point on the end. We loaded up and the simulated drive began. High

clays began to fly out at a ferocious rate. My neighbour was an Italian journalist with whom I had had a few conversations. Every time I raised my gun to aim at a clay it was powdered before my eyes. A couple of times I laughed and looked across as I thought he was doing it humorously. No eye contact was made, and I realised that in Europe you must have your wits about you if you wish to get any good shooting.

Working together

For half an hour the barrage of clays continued. I became rather swifter at locking onto them and had plenty of chances to become acquainted with the gun. I had selected the Sporter for the occasion, and even though my shooting is anything but polished we began to work well together. I fired close to 100 shots over the session and was feeling pretty confident by the end, even smoking one or two of the clays that came over my Italian neighbour. »

I rarely fire so many shots in such a short time and gingerly pressed my shoulder once the end of the drive had been called. There was no bruising, stiffness or discomfort, which is a testament to the gun. As I was taught as a boy, I still pop two fingers down the barrels after an unload to make sure I haven't left a shell in there. After this session, I absent-mindedly carried out my usual ritual and promptly burned the tips of my index and middle fingers on the hot barrels, such had been the intensity of the shooting.

By the time we had finished the temperature was dropping, the light was golden and the sun was casting long shadows. As the bus took us back to the house, everyone was chatting about how much they had liked the gun, comparing experiences and results. It had been a great introduction to Browning's new offering and a great way to get us all comfortable with it in a low-pressure environment.

On our return we had a cup of tea and then assembled in the library for an in-depth presentation, from product and sales manager Lionel Neville, who talked us through the new and legacy design features of the 825. Lionel told us that the 725 will slowly be phased out and that the 825 is



All aboard and good to go on a slightly more modest gun bus



Loaders and lavish accommodation combined for a truly stunning event



"All the birds were released in July and there was no topping up during the season"

The legendary Mr Mike Yardley takes to the stand to try out the new 825



An unsavoury bunch if ever there was one! Some famous names prove that the new Browning can indeed do its duty



A woodland wait as Felix tries his hand on the pheasants



All-new engraving, design and engineering combined in the 825

going to be priced as a slightly smarter gun to distance it from the 525. Although the 825 will retail at a higher price, we were assured that the margin would be exactly the same as its predecessor.

Après presentation

Once the presentation was over we retired to ready ourselves for dinner, which was a sumptuous array of lobster, sea bass, wild boar and venison, all washed down with a good deal of French wine. After much convivial conversation, most of us retired

early for what we had been promised would be a stellar next day.

I awoke in the pale blue light that precedes sunrise. The gardens hung heavy with the night's frost, and my telephone told me that the temperature was still a few degrees below zero. After a quick continental breakfast with strong black coffee, and it was time to meet our loaders. I have never had a designated loader before and never double-gunned, so this was certain to be a memorable experience. Much to our surprise and delight the night before, estate manager

Thibaut Constant had said that today's shoot would be almost entirely grey partridge shot from butts, and the experience would be similar to driven grouse shooting.

Selecting our loaders was a bit like finding a partner at a dance. They were all milling around and we had to catch an eye and somehow non-verbally enquire if they fancied joining us for the next two days. I managed to snaffle Didier, who looked as if he might be in his late 60s, as my companion. With his smart white moustache, he could have been straight out of a Tintin comic. Didier spoke not a word of English, and I speak just enough French to tell him about my pets and where I went on holiday.

Then it was back into the gun bus and off to the first drive. We arrived at a broad field with a line of 10 butts in front of a hedgerow. The butts were solid things with gravel floors to stop the ground beneath from becoming too trodden.

Rare survival

The Sandricourt estate is one of the few French estates to survive the revolution of 1789 intact and covers around 5,000 acres that has been split into three beats. Stephen Toft, the head keeper, is one of two English keepers on the estate and has had an interesting career that has even included running a Barbary partridge shoot in Morocco.

Stephen was keen to stress that this shoot was run in the English style, as it had been from 1940. All the birds were released in July and there was no topping up during the season. Most of the grey partridges bred in the wild, and a few were reared and released at intervals into the game cover to act as calling birds for the wild ones. The keepers manage the habitat, engage in rigorous pest control and leave out a small amount of medicated grit when necessary.

On the first drive the butts faced an enormous striated game strip that went back around a kilometre. Stephen explained that the game strips consisted of a line of maize, then a line of sorghum, a line of canary grass, then a closely cropped stripe of regular grass to allow the grey partridge chicks to get around, and then a final strip that was drilled with a wild meadow mix. Decked out in dayglow orange, the beaters advanced along the strip in the usual way. For the first drive I was on the end.

We hadn't been waiting long when a great covey of greys lifted and, following the

contours of the undulating field, rocketed towards us. The birds were barely a few feet from the ground and travelling at enormous speed. I didn't raise my gun and received a barrage of encouragement from Didier to do so. I fired both barrels and missed.

Didier and I exchanged guns, and he gestured that I should have a go at them behind me as well. I did so and succeeded in shooting my first ever grey partridge. Although Stephen had explained that we were allowed to shoot low in front until the horn was blown, after which we were only allowed to shoot behind, this format had taken me by surprise and I felt as if I were going against all the lessons of my shooting life. With high arc markers on each side of the butt it was impossible to swing through the line, and once the horn went it was only blue sky or behind, so actually it was all perfectly safe.

I soon learned that grey partridges are extremely skittish, and they almost always flew in coveys of 50 or more. Stephen said that the team spent a huge amount of time dogging in as the birds tend to wander. I was over the moon with my first grey, and the day continued to get better. The drives would quite often go one way, and then the beaters would get round the back of the Guns and drive them back over you, so you were often in each butt for an hour or so.

Over the course of the next few drives I understood the flight of the birds a little better and began connecting. During one purple patch I got a left and a right of greys

and later on a grey and a red-leg. I was really chuffed about this, and even more by Didier shouting "Bravo, le double!"

The gun was serving me extremely well, and I found the adjustable comb and length of pull much to my liking. The crisp rib down the barrel and the clear muzzle bead gave me a great sight picture. After the last drive, Didier, who absolutely refused to let me carry my own gear, handed me my game card with all my shots and downed birds for each drive. I felt that this was more analytical than was strictly necessary, but it was interesting to see my ratios dropping as the day advanced.

Beaming from ear to ear, we returned to the house. On our way back we surprised a wild boar standing in a gap in a cover crop. I'd never seen one in the wild and was taken aback at how large and shaggy it was.

Dramatic display

At the château, as darkness descended again, we were invited to view 'Le tableau'. Between two flaming torches, the day's bag was hung from stands and arranged in patterns before us. This dramatic display was oozing with French theatre and was a wonderful way of celebrating the 108 grey partridges that we had shot that day.

The next day, which was primarily pheasants, was another fabulous - though more conventional - outing, and with even more birds to go at I became exceptionally comfortable with the 825. On one drive I managed four left and rights, something I have never achieved before, and this time

received a double thumbs-up from the avuncular and smiling Didier.

On one drive I was walking gun and was able to snaffle a few crossers peeling out of the side. On another I was ensconced in an icy wood and thus able to indulge in some thrilling snaphooting. Still later, when we were stationed in the trough of a steep valley, the pheasants were among the highest I have seen, and yet the line of Browning-wielding journalists continued to haul them down.

At one point an outlandishly high lone pheasant flew over the well-known shooting coach Mike Yardley. With all eyes on him he folded this 65yd bird and we all watched as it tumbled to earth. He couldn't quite suppress a smile as we congratulated him on it afterwards.

The third evening brought more food, more good conversation, and in the morning we were deposited back at the airport. Waiting for my plane, I cast my mind back over the weekend. The gun was an absolute peach and had served me well. The event couldn't have been better planned to show us the versatility of the two new models. The Browning team were all was hugely knowledgeable, and the passion with which the company has produced its latest release was apparent in every swing and shot. ■

For more information

browning.eu
Prices from £2,749
depending on model



Le Tableau - a testament to the field performance of the all-new 825



WWW.GDKTRADING.CO.UK

01582 879 588

sales@gdkoutdoors.co.uk

NORRINGTON END FARM
REDDING LANE,
REDBOURN,
HERTFORDSHIRE,
AL3 7PU

<p>£159.99 inc. VAT POLICE APPROVED</p>  <p>3 GUN CABINET H1300mm - W245mm - D205mm Suitable for 3 shotguns, or 1 scope rifle and 1 unscoped gun</p>	<p>£289.99 inc. VAT POLICE APPROVED</p>  <p>6 GUN CABINET WITH INTERNAL AMMO SAFE H1450mm - W350mm - D300mm Suitable for up to 6 scoped rifles</p>	<p>£429.99 inc. VAT POLICE APPROVED</p>  <p>10 GUN CABINET WITH INTERNAL AMMO SAFE H1450mm - W420mm - D380mm Suitable for 8-10 scoped rifles or 10-14 shotguns</p>	<p>£799.99 inc. VAT POLICE APPROVED</p>  <p>DIGITAL 14-20 GUN VAULT CABINET WITH INNER AMMO SAFE H1500mm - W630mm - D420mm Available digital or key unlocking system</p>
<p>£1349.99 inc. VAT POLICE APPROVED</p>  <p>DIGITAL 26 GUN 'FIREPROOF' VAULT CABINET WITH INNER AMMO SAFE H1600mm - W712mm - D508mm Also available H1450mm - W712mm - D508mm £1049.99 inc. VAT</p>	<p>£139.99 inc. VAT</p>  <p>GDK 51" GUN SLIPSTAND, POP-OUT STAND AVAILABLE IN CANVAS - BLACK & DARK GREEN Thick internal lining. Pop out stand. Carry handle. Shoulder strap</p>	<p>£169.99 inc. VAT</p>  <p>GDK 57" GUN SLIPSTAND, POP-OUT STAND AVAILABLE IN GUARDIAN LEATHER - TAN & DARK BROWN Thick internal lining. Pop out stand. Carry handle. Shoulder strap</p>	<p>£289.99 inc. VAT</p>  <p>SEATED DOUBLE THROWING ARM 3/4 COCK CLAY TRAP 2 years warranty • Effortless re-cocking • Throw all sized clays in any direction including rabbits • smooth silent one way clutch bearing system</p>
<p>£499.99 inc. VAT</p>  <p>90 TARGET BLACK QUAIL PRO TRAP • 90 standard target capacity • 70-90m throwing distance • 2 seconds re-cocking time • Elevation from 0-45 degrees • Powered by a 12V battery • Cabled foot pedal release • Trap weight 30kgs • 2 years parts warranty</p>	<p>£899.99 inc. VAT</p> <p>PACKAGE DEAL INCLUDES</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> 90 TARGET BLACK QUAIL CLAY TRAP ABT / DTL SMALL WOBBLER KIT 2 WHEEL TROLLEY 200m WIRELESS HAND REMOTE  <p>BLACK QUAIL PRO TRAP PACKAGE DEAL • 90 Target Black Quail Clay Trap • ABT / DTL Small Wobbler Kit • 2 Wheel trolley • 200m Wireless hand remote</p>		