

Are you shooting where you are looking?



The eyes have it

Looking to put an end to a run of poor form, **Mike Barnes** met up with a man who has made a speciality of solving gunfitting problems - and finds that they are mostly down to eyesight.

I have just gone through a bad patch that has lasted for the best part of two years! While I'll never be a challenger at the championships, I nevertheless know the kind of scores I would expect to be shooting (after all these years).

Essentially I'm a Sporting shooter who enjoys the odd round of Skeet. My temperament (never mind lack of talent) will never let me into the upper echelons of AA, though I did miraculously find my way into its lower reaches two years ago. More typically three years ago I was scoring 75, which was enough to send me home with a smile on my face - I would have enjoyed one or two good stands. For a couple of years I qualified for my class final at the British.

However last year at the British I shot in the mid-fifties. And though due to other commitments I have been unable to shoot very little registered it hasn't improved much since. Whereas I would shoot 18-21 on Orston's Sportrap, I now try my hardest and only manage 13 or 14. After my last outing I was trying to put my finger on the problem and

came to the conclusion that I was finding it hard to focus - I even missed a fast right to left crosser at around 20 yards from four of the five stands. These were five guaranteed ticks on the scorecard. Worst of all I was neither shocked or disappointed - just mystified.

On the Monday I spoke with Carl Bloxham about his tip of the month. He made the mistake of asking where I had been over the weekend and I bored him rigid for the next five minutes. But Carl being Carl, he didn't seem to mind. He suggested I spoke with James Hand of Brierley Guns, who was apparently very knowledgeable on eyesight problems.

I was obviously aware of Brierley Guns and also of James and Brett as their names both appear regularly in the West Midland regional column of this magazine, turning in relentlessly high scores. But I knew nothing of their interest in eyesight problems.

So I duly made a phone call and found a friendly voice at the other end of the line as James, without hesitation, invited me over to Brierley Hill for a chat.

What took place was not so much a conversation as a revelation. James is of a similar vintage to me and has been stocking guns for 25 years. "I got into it when the stocker at our local shop, Chris Harris, decided to call it a day," he explained. "He showed me what to do and gave me his equipment."

James then set about researching just about anything he could lay his hands on relating to the subject. He was working as an electrical engineer at the time but his great love has always been problem solving. "First of all I did stocks for friends at the local gun club and progressed from there. I bought a lovely pair of Browning B2G's and found they didn't fit, so I set about putting them right. But my first real project was a Miroku Grade 5. By now I was doing more and more work that made me realise there was something more to fitting than the obvious."

He had also got into scientific glass blowing, working with optics and involved himself with research relating to high level dexterity optics. A personal involvement also encouraged him to dig deep in order to find a



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solution to an ongoing eye strain problem. He found that he had convergence and focus working independently.

It all started to fall into place as optics and stocking came together. He moved into his present premises 10 years ago, where he installed a laboratory and workshop, so that he could run the two interests in tandem. He opened the gunshop three years later.

“The biggest obstacle in gunfitting is the pattern plate. For starters very few people know how to shoot at a pattern plate properly, and it can take 100 shots to find the cause of a problem, which is both time consuming and tedious, so I thought of trying a laser beam.”

What he did was to create a laser torch that would slot snugly into the end of a 12 bore shotgun barrel. Connected to the laser is a lead which has a button at the other end. As the person holding the gun aims and calls “ready” on mounting onto the clay on the cardboard pattern plate, 10 metres away at the other side of the lab, James presses the button and the red dot appears at the point of aim. “I always tell people to aim the gun as if they were shooting Station Four Skeet.”

He very quickly realised that he was onto something. “A laser will clearly show an irregular gunfit, most are up or down problems, only relatively few are sideways, which are invariably down to wrong master eye. The face structure may affect gunfit, but the biggest problem by far is optical.

“A key factor can also be gunmount, and someone has a much better chance of shooting well if their head is upright. Look at George Digweed, Richard Faulds, Barry Simpson - they might all stand differently, but if you look at their heads on the stock, they are upright, just as if they were standing normally. Eyesight is at its best from this position - if you nod then it drops to 65% efficiency.”

He has now had hundreds through his laser system, with many notable successes. “It is a fact that eyesight changes, as does the way in which the eyes

function. So while you might think your gun fits you perfectly, and that you are seeing the precise amount of rib necessary to shoot well, the way in which your eyes operate might have altered beyond recognition.”

James had asked to me to bring my gun - an old Beretta 682 DeLuxe, which definitely used to fit me - and after a little explanation invited me to be a guinea pig. In the photographs the target is placed on a door for the purpose of illustration. For the test I was the standard 10 metres from the target, and I duly did my best to mount as if for Station Four. James squeezed the button and my red dot appeared a good 6" beneath the clay. I must have mounted wrongly, so I did it again. The same result. And another four times. I was amazed but James was not surprised in the least. I would be at least two feet off line on a 40 yard crosser - with a sloppy mount I wouldn't stand a chance.

Interestingly my bad run has lasted ever since I had a cracked stock replaced on my gun. But the fit is identical to previously, or appeared to be so. James however felt that this might be coincidence - much more likely that my eyes have altered.

Out of curiosity I asked to try his gun, a Krieghoff, and I mounted three times in succession directly onto the target. Yet my eyes were telling me that the rib picture would suggest that it was shooting high.

So what's the solution? An adjustable stock is the instant answer, but I don't particularly want to start carving up my 682's nicely figured stock - the gun has sentimental value. Another option would be to build up its comb by another 8-9mm.

The solution, I feel, is a new gun (excuses don't come any better!). Quite what, I can't decide. I don't expect my scores to jump from 60 to 90, but James insists that if I bought a gun that fitted me perfectly then there is no reason why they shouldn't climb by a minimum of 15%.

I couldn't stop thinking about it on the way home. Driven targets, which had always been a favourite, had over the last 18 months become much more difficult, as had teal. It all made sense. The chippy kills. My improvement on droppers. I can't wait.

But first, a new gun.

To speak to James, phone 01384 573410.