

The Beauty of Bespoke: The Poppy Gun

I've heard it said that "... a gun is just a tool - they all do the same thing." At one level this is true of course, but it is not nearly the whole truth. Since the dawn of history hunters and soldiers have treasured their favourite "tools" and embellished them with decoration. Initially this was to commemorate successful events during the course of usage and it often bestowed mystical properties on the "tool" in question. Later on, and to this day, these "tools" were embellished during manufacture, perhaps in anticipation of good and exciting times to come, often as expressions of wealth and status, and sometimes as part of a personal story or achievement. This is particularly true of sporting shotguns where it is expressed through the engraving. The advent of lasers has enabled guns to be engraved with complex and beautiful patterns at a reasonable cost, but this is not the same as bespoke hand engraving. Only this true artistry can make a gun unique to you.

I have a small collection of vintage guns, each of which has its own story. For me, the shooting experience is greatly enhanced when I know some of it. I found out about the project to produce the Stephen Grant Round Action in chance conversation with Francis Lovel and felt it was my opportunity to move from collector to client, to be able to specify my own gun and to follow it through all the stages of its manufacture, meeting the craftsmen who created it! So began the story of my gun - The Poppy Gun - so-called because the engraving features the opium poppy *Papaver Somniferum*.

The concept and design of the gun was a collaboration between Matt Hunt, the Project Leader and Don Custerson, and the first step was to establish the general specification and choose the wood. The givens were: 12 gauge over and under, round action, trigger plate locks with side plates, monoblock barrel construction with Teague multi-chokes. Choices were barrel length, rib and shape of the stock. I wanted the gun to be a game gun and to be as light as possible. I usually shoot with 30 inch barrels but decided on 29 inches with a plain

flat game rib to keep the weight and moment of inertia down. Choosing the wood for stock and fore end was extremely difficult, in that I had to pick from a large selection of equally lovely stock blanks. I did not know which to choose. Finally, Matt put a double stock blank in front of me with the comment that he would really like to make an O/U with it. A nod is as good as a wink. It looked terrific and rather than cut it down to a single blank, I bought it all for a pair - how fortuitous. The stock shape was to be semi-pistol grip with steel cap, dimensions were determined by gun fit.

If I thought all this was a challenging task, it was nothing compared with establishing the engraving, which was to be done by Keith Thomas. I wanted the gun to be beautiful, meaningful and traditionally English but I did not have the foggiest idea where to start. What story? What style? How much did I want to spend? All of these questions ran through my mind. I thought of several potential themes: game scenes, my dog, an artistic style etc. Eventually I decided to go for a theme derived from a landmark project I led during my past career as an academic.

The annual production of opium in Afghanistan was said to exceed 90% of the world production in 2009 and to supply almost all heroin consumption in the UK. In 2003, there were serious deficiencies in the quantitative information that impeded both policy formulation and counter narcotics action. The key sources of information were independent annual opium surveys, but they were providing different and often conflicting information too late in the year for action.

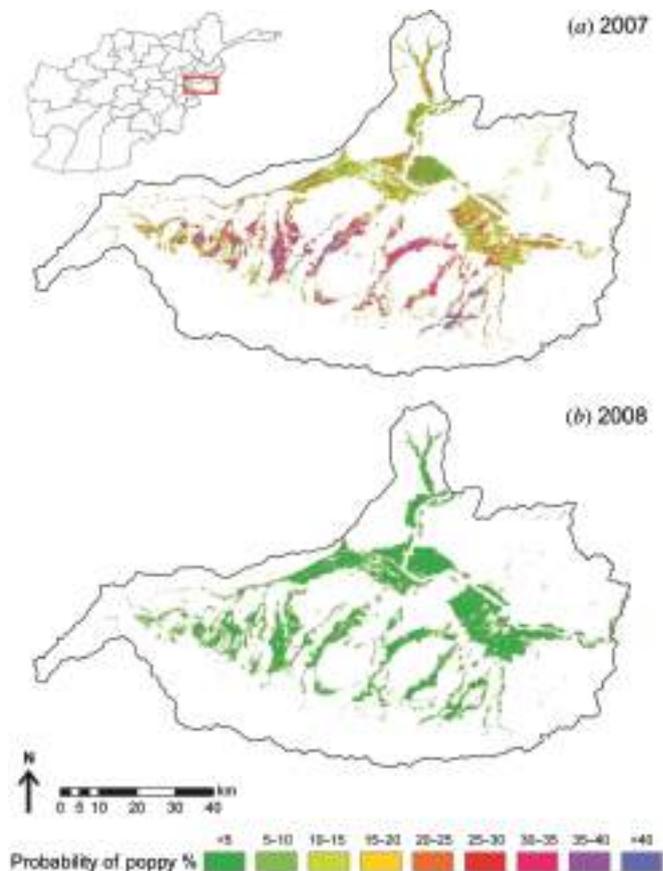
Part of the drug control strategy included action to physically destroy the opium crop in the fields, as well as compensating for the cost of eradication. Thus, there was a requirement to not only establish the location and size of the crop, but also to verify that it had been destroyed. All of this had to take place against a background of insecurity, coercion and corruption, rendering in-field

verification extremely dangerous and unreliable.

Afghanistan is a large, sparsely populated country famously inaccessible because of extreme terrain and poor infrastructure. Much of the country is characterised by small-scale irrigated cropping along high narrow valleys emanating from the Hindu Kush, but the main irrigated agriculture is along the larger river systems such as in Helmand, Kandahar and Nangarhar provinces. Our team devised and implemented remote sensing technology during 2003–2009 to provide critical improvements in information on poppy cultivation and poppy eradication. The results were used by UK and international partners to assist counter-narcotics actions.

An example of the type of information provided in the project is shown below. This figure shows a rare but temporary success in Nangarhar province. In 2007 there was widespread and high intensity poppy production. In 2008 it was all but eliminated. Sadly, production returned in following years.

There were many extremely dedicated and talented individuals involved in this project from the UK, US, UNODC and Afghanistan, both civilians and in the military. The country was in a state of war and more than a few people were killed, particularly in the gathering of field data. This gun engraving is as much a remembrance of them as of my own experiences.







So how did all this translate into the engraving of the poppy gun? The overall style is traditional English Scroll with the characteristic fluted fences associated with Stephen Grant guns, very beautiful but not over-stated.

There were two areas selected for the elements specifically associated with the poppy project: the underside of the action and the grip-cap. When I first met Keith I took along some ideas. The initial plan for the action was a bunch of opium poppy capsules for which Keith produced a very nice art work. It was impressive but I felt the capsules were perhaps more sinister than I wanted, being the direct source of the opium. So, this was changed to a flower. Poppy flowers are flamboyant but they don't last long. I had many pictures of different varieties but the image that I selected stood out as it shows several growth stages, not only a beautiful fully open flower but also the opium capsule and a bud in the characteristic hook stage. Several times during the project I tried to obtain a botanical study of the opium poppy but was unable to find one - so why not have one engraved on the gun?

The grip-cap is a different story. I was at a meeting in Kabul in 2005 and one presentation was about the growing problem of opium addiction among Afghans,

in spite of the extremely strong religious condemnation. An information campaign was being waged to counteract this trend. There were various posters but the most striking message for me was told in symbols on a matchbox, understandable by all including those unable to read. On one side of the box there is a white dove carrying a rose. On the obverse side is the same bird as a skeleton with an opium poppy capsule in its beak. The message is stark and clear to all. Take opium and you will die. This is the message engraved on the grip-cap of the poppy gun.

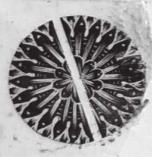
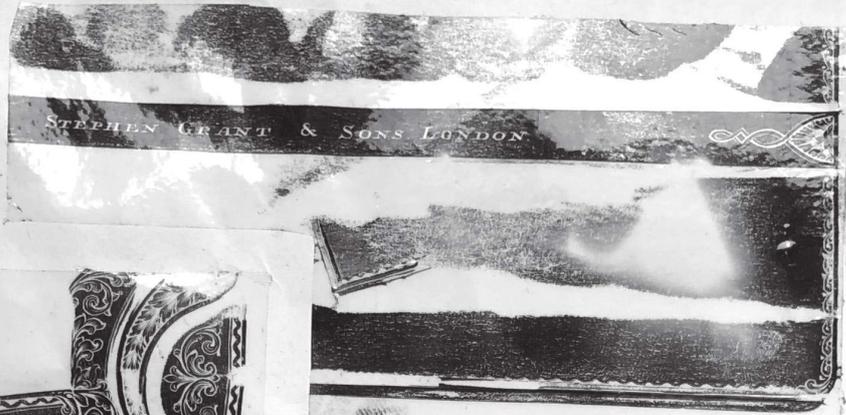
The gun was finished by Don and it is no understatement to say that I am over the moon with the result.

But what of the other half of the stock blank? A few weeks ago Keith was engraving the second poppy gun, a 20 bore. This has now been finished and I now have a garniture - a pair but of different calibres. So now I am doubly over the moon.

When I first said I wanted an opium poppy engraved on my gun I was met with polite scepticism - the customer is always right even if he is more than a little eccentric. When I commissioned the 20 bore I contemplated leaving out the poppy aspects. That was when they said I must be mad! So, there we have it. Two beautiful guns with a story. I hope you like them as much as I do.

Written by Prof. John Taylor





STEPHEN GRANT & SONS
No 25011
FINISHED 17th Oct 2016
ENG with EVA work.

5/2

J.C.T

