

# OVER THE COUNTER

with  
*Sir Edward Dashwood*



In the grounds of his home on West Wycombe Estate, Sir Edward Dashwood has created the all-embracing E.J. Churchill shooting ground, shop, gunmakers and corporate business. He is a fanatically keen Shot.

*When did you open your shooting ground and gun retail business?*

We started originally using the ground, which had previously been used as a waste site by the local council, for Sunday open shoots when I was at University in the early 1980s. We then formally started the shooting ground as it now is in 1988.

*Had you any experience of the gun trade?*

None whatsoever. The first gun I purchased in an auction in mid-Wales was a Purdey, and when I subsequently came to try and sell it, it turned out to be stolen!

*Was it how you expected it to be?*

Our main business was the shooting ground and the gun trade really crept up on us. We got more and more requests from customers and just gradually increased that side of the business year on year. It is a bit like having a pro shop at a golf club. Obviously it makes more sense than a high street location, as customers have easy parking and can try out guns on the range.

*How much has it grown and expanded?*

It has increased every year. We have had to rebuild and enlarge the gunroom several times, as well as all the other facilities to

include the shop, dining room and of course, all the clay pigeon stands and towers etc. From starting with a handful of employees, we now have about 20 full-time staff and various part-timers too.

*With a shop, shooting ground, sporting agency and gunmakers, which is your favourite aspect of the business?*

Obviously the sporting agency is great fun, as it takes you to some fabulous places around the UK and the rest of the world, and you meet endless characters along the way, all mad-keen on shooting. Having said that, on the gun-making side it is very rewarding seeing a product actually being made from scratch, literally, into something truly wonderful. As the workshops are right by my office I am constantly popping in and seeing what they are up to.

*Do you shoot with a Churchill gun?*

Yes, I shoot one of the first pairs of Churchill Premieres we made in our new workshops in the 1990s. They are traditional best English side-by-sides and I gave myself the luxury of having some game scenes engraved on them. I have shot them consistently and absolutely love them. They look a bit tired but I use them

for everything from grouse in August and September to high pheasants in November and December, and woodcock in January. They fit like a glove and have now given me almost two decades of unfailing service.

*Has the recession touched all areas of your business?*

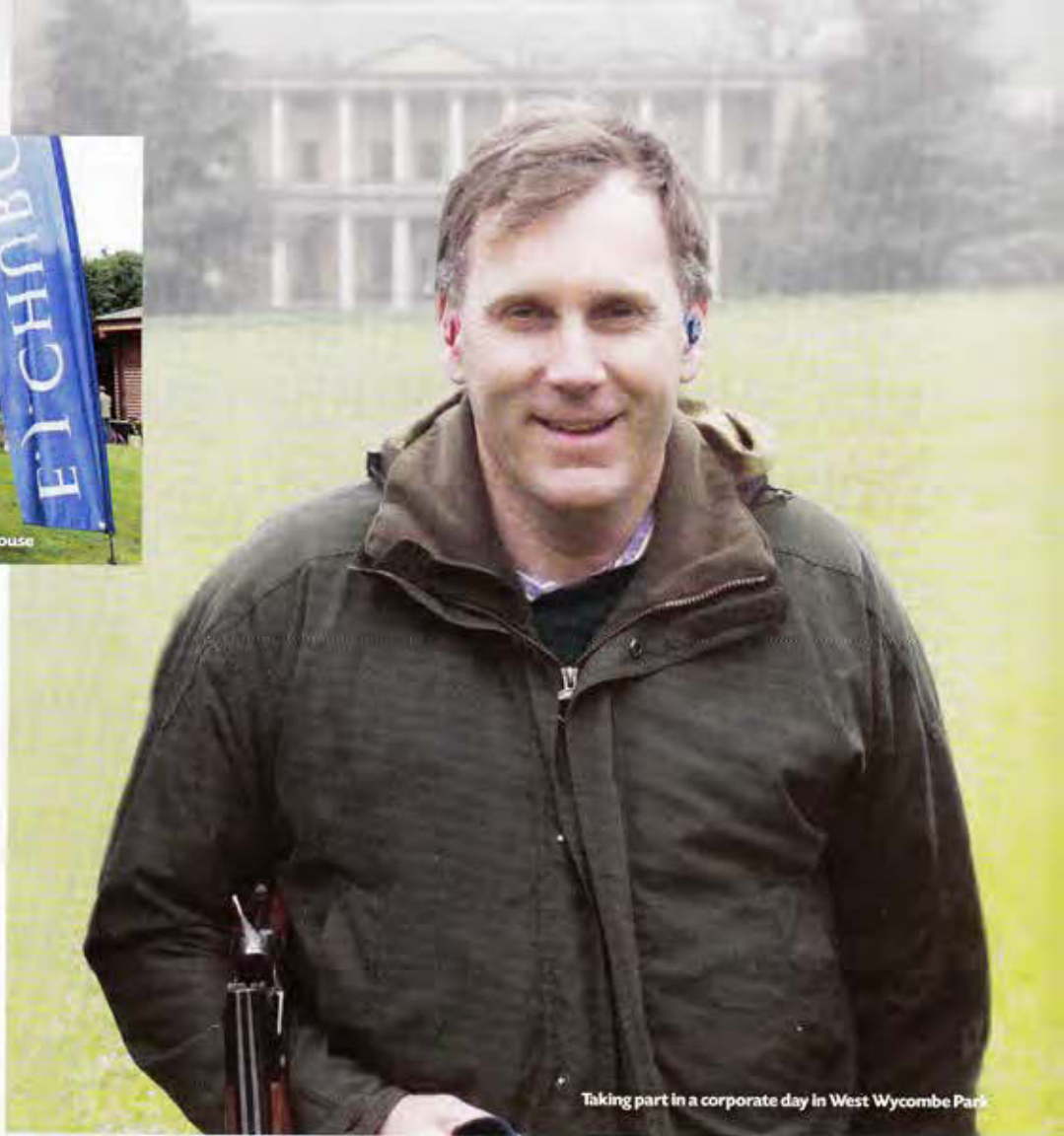
Undoubtedly. The corporate clay shooting business virtually stopped overnight at the onset of the banking collapse, but it is now picking up quite nicely. On the retail side, we are not as expensive as the London shops and our members get a good discount so I think that helps us. We recently won the 2012 IPC award for the best shop so we must be doing something right! Our Continental range of shotguns has been a huge success. They are a fraction of the cost of a best pair of English guns, are made to measure and are backed up by a professional gun fitting service at the ground. As a result, they've done very well.

*Does your shop sell an increasing number of small bore guns, or is this a trend that has fallen back?*

Surprisingly few. We are selling quite a few 20 bore Continentals for teenagers to use, and lots of standard Silver Pigeon Berettas and the like in 28 bore and 20 bore. Grown-ups buy the odd pair of 20 bores, but generally, 12 bores



The E.J. Churchill clubhouse



Taking part in a corporate day in West Wycombe Park

outsell everything else by a huge margin.

*How about heavier over-unders for high birds?*

We have sold a few of our new range of tl Continental over-unders made exclusively by Perazzi with 32" and even 34" barrels, which are ideal for those really high pheasants.

However, this is a somewhat specialised tool, and unless you are an extraordinarily good Shot and only shoot these sort of high pheasants all the time, and most game Shots would definitely not fall into this category, then I think an all-round gun would probably suit you better with more traditional 28" or 30" barrels.

*What is your best-selling cartridge?*

I personally developed the Hellfire High Pheasants Cartridge with Eley about 15 years ago when I was looking for a really effective cartridge, but only with fibre wads, which I could not find at the time. Of course, now, virtually all estates insist on fibre wads only. We experimented widely and the Hellfire uses copper-plated shot. The theory is to reduce friction and air resistance as the pellets travel up the barrels and through the air and there is no doubt that this cartridge kills really cleanly at long ranges. The Hellfire range is a superb, quick 30g or 32g cartridge made exclusively for Churchills and we now have a huge number of devotees, particularly among the premier grouse moor owners.

*At what age and where did you first shoot?*

I started when I was about eight and spent most of my holidays working with the keepers here at West Wycombe.

*What is your favourite form of shooting?*

I love wild shooting, whatever or wherever that may be. In the UK that generally means grouse, grey partridge (very, very rarely), and woodcock, and I must have my cocker spaniels with me. I also really like wild boar shooting



One of the Churchill Premieres made in the new workshop

# INTERVIEW

abroad as it is so different to what we have here.

*Did you inherit your love of the sport from your father?*

Not really. He was more of an academic and loved the social side of shooting, but was never a great Shot or countryman. I gather I am more like my mother's father. Sadly, he was killed commanding the Welsh guards at Monte Cassino, but by all accounts he adored woodcock shooting, and I seem to have inherited that from him.

*Do you have sons who shoot?*

Both my sons, George and Bertie, love shooting and are great Shots. My daughter, Victoria, also shoots very nicely. They have all now left school and I have just been to Iceland with them all walking-up ptarmigan.

*Your favourite shoot?*

I could name two or three fabulous grouse moors, but it really has to be my own woodcock shoot at Slebech in west Wales.

*Do you also fish?*

I grew up sea trout fishing with a fly at night in Wales on the Eastern Cleddau and Towy Rivers, which I admit is somewhat specialist. It is very challenging and really exciting. I also love salmon fishing and the more extreme the better. My desire is to land a 40lb fish and I am off to the River Tana next year in Finland with great hopes!

I was lucky enough to catch one of 34.5lb on the Gaula last year.

*Are you optimistic about the future of shooting?*

Generally yes. It is great fun and so people will always want to do it and it provides a healthy way of life for so many. I think most people cannot fail

but to recognise the amazing conservation work that sporting people bring to the countryside, along with the economic benefits in rural places that otherwise have no other hope of income. The alternative is to do nothing and this will lead to a wildlife desert which is already happening in some places. I think this argument alone will prevail.

*What is your view on the lead debate?*

I am open to be persuaded otherwise, but currently there is no science outside the wildfowl and wetland areas that supports the banning of lead that I am aware of that stands up to scrutiny, and also there are no credible alternatives. People talk about other countries having banned lead, but most of those countries have a high proportion of migratory wildfowl as their quarry, and none of them have even a fraction of the land based game, such as pheasants, grouse and partridges, that we shoot here.

*What do you least enjoy about the sport?*

Poorly managed shoots such as those which place the Guns too close together. It is such an easy thing to get right. I also hate where you see detritus all over the shoot. You still find old feeders, plastic, broken-down pens and other such mess on some shoots and yet we claim we are the rightful guardians of the countryside.

*What do you most enjoy?*

Being out shooting with my family and friends, and my dogs, or on my own in the snow at 2,000m in the mountains in Turkey near the Armenian border stalking a wild boar the size of a VW. Take your pick...

