

A VISIT TO WEIHRAUCH

The editor goes behind the scenes in Mellrichstadt to witness the evolution of an airgunning giant

Recently, at the kind invitation of Weihrauch UK agents, Hull Cartridge Company, I was among a party of UK airgun journalists who were invited to take a privileged peek at the state-of-the-art headquarters of the world famous HW brand. This would be my third visit to Weihrauch headquarters in Germany, and for me there's always a little of the 'coming home' about it. I felt that during the first hour of my first visit, over 10 years ago, despite never having been within 50 miles of Mellrichstadt in my life. I was puzzled for a while, and then all became clear; it was the components. Various bits of air rifle, a breech block here, a trigger blade there, were so distinctly Weihrauch they transported me back to the two phases of my life that brought me to where I am today.

Although I began shooting airguns when I was an annoying and overgrown toddler, I discovered the 'adult' version through a Weihrauch HW35. Then, field target shooting came along and a Weihrauch HW77 propelled me head-first into total immersion in that wonderful sport for some of the best years of my life. Seeing the components of those great rifles being manufactured, assembled and tested took me back to where it all began for me, and for millions like me.

MANY CHANGES

The latest version of the Weihrauch factory is a completely



Hull Cartridge MD, David Bontoft, (left) and Hans Weihrauch have been in business together for 40 successful years.

different place these days, even compared to my previous visit a few short years ago. The HW epicentre of 2017 is impressively eco-friendly, ferociously efficient and it displays a degree of cleanliness that wouldn't be out of place at a food-processing facility. Yet, and it pleases me to say this, there's still a distinct policy of using traditional gunmaking skills where these do a better, albeit

slower, job. Hans Weihrauch, company director and our guide for this visit, told me, 'We simply use what is best, but quality is the first consideration.'

A SEA OF CNC

Like most modern gunmakers – Weihrauch produce live-ammunition rifles and pistols in addition to airguns – there has been a significant investment in

Computer Numerically Controlled production technology. By 'significant', I mean millions of Euros' worth of machinery that runs day and night. From relatively compact devices that turn billets of steel, aluminium and various alloys into recognisable gun parts, just a polish away from the assembly phase, to vast, self-contained mini-factories, 10 metres long, that work their digitalised magic on bar stock.

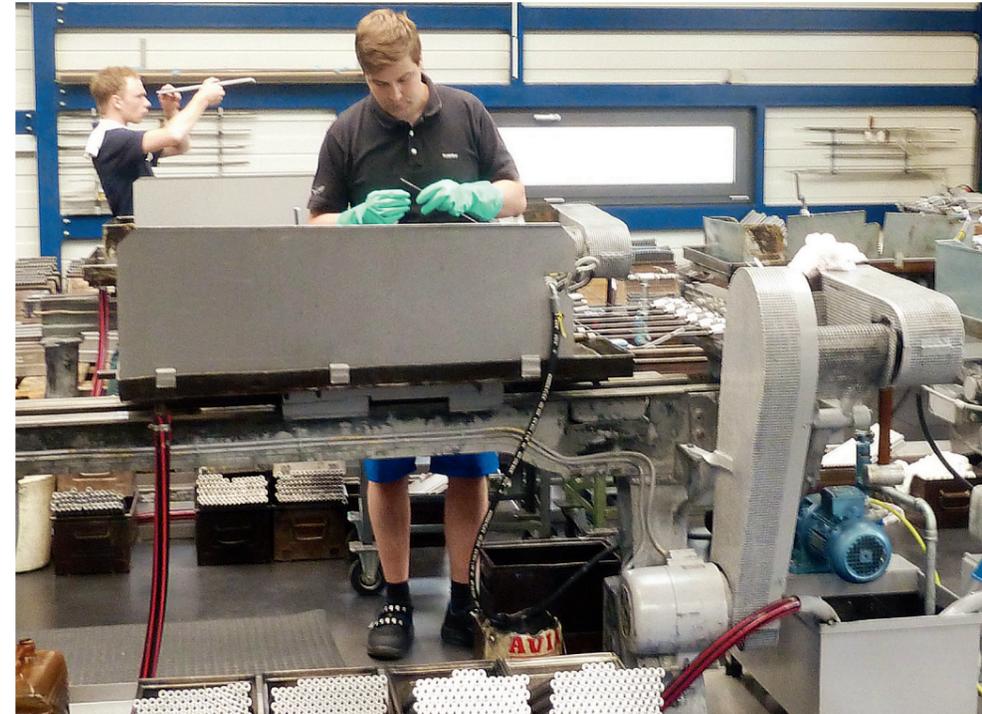
FASCINATING STUFF

Then, most fascinating of all, there's the robot worker that loads and unloads one of the CNC machines. You know those robots with the go-anywhere arms we've all seen making cars in TV documentaries? This is one of those and to watch it go about its precision business is a fine way to spend an hour or two. A Hans-free operation, if you will, and the first of many such advances, I'd say.

SO MANY OPERATIONS

Once accustomed to the whole CNC concept, you could be forgiven for believing that Weihrauch airguns are created by feeding the raw materials into one end of a machine, and collecting a gun from the other end. Given the way production technology is progressing, this may well be the case one day, but that day is a long way off, even in a facility such as this.

The amount of processes required to transform base



Weihrauch produces its own barrels, through a blend of traditional and cutting-edge technology.

materials into a precision airgun is simply mind-boggling. I counted eight separate cutting, folding, grinding, tumbling, polishing, degreasing, bluing, drilling and fitting operations that combine to produce one section of a cocking linkage. This inspired me to count the number of processes involved in the production of the HW44 pre-charged pneumatic pistol we'd all come to see, but I lost count at around 150, and there were dozens more after that.

SKILLED INPUT

Again, when being shown the seemingly endless series of

operations that result in the Weihrauch models we see today, it was heartening to see so much skilled human input. Hans Weihrauch and his company are rightfully proud of the apprenticeship scheme they've established, where young men and women train for three years to become skilled operatives within the Weihrauch system. The company employees span the generations, too, and that's a product of company loyalty, from both sides, plus job satisfaction, and it was yet another pleasing process to observe as the visit unfolded.

From a billet to a component, thanks to the magic of CNC.



Old-school barrel-straightener. Still in use because it does the best job.



Traditional testing tools are on duty for every process.



More tradition with the '50-compartment box'. It lets you see instantly if a component is missing.



A box of Rekords. It was the components that made it feel like coming home.



goes into the guns that carry his family name, is truly impressive.

TESTING, TESTING, TESTING

Batch-testing used to be the accepted practice with post-CNC production, such is the faith invested in the precision output of these machines. Weihrauch doesn't go with that line of thinking at all, so it checks every component individually. 'Again, it's the best way and it allows us to keep complete control of quality', as Hans Weihrauch explained.

Thus, for every department there is a testing station, and

It's Hans Free, the HW robot. I could watch him work all day.





Testing time. Everything logged on computer - only one standard allowed.



David Bontoft is absorbed by a 10-metre CNC machine.



Springs, ball-bearings, pins, clips and the rest of the gun-builders essential items.



Hans Weihrauch - he has detailed knowledge of every process and every component.

once the assembly of the guns is complete, that testing is ramped up several notches and proof of accuracy, consistency, trigger performance, cocking effort, the

reliability of the various safety devices, plus overall product integrity are all tested and re-tested until each gun is signed off.



Craftsmen with hand tools complement technology.



Micro-managing those components.

THE UNSEEN BITS

Hans Weihrauch was an inexhaustible source of knowledge, patience and hospitality during our visit, but he made it perfectly clear that certain areas of the factory were off limits. A discreetly closed door blocked us from the Weihrauch design suite, and certain test procedures were kept firmly under wraps, as Hans smiled his polite smile and waved us toward the next point of interest.

What does this suggest? Well,

obviously there are things under development at HW headquarters that are not yet ready for release, plus the company will have production secrets it doesn't want to share. Fair enough, and this is a company not given to launching new products every year or two, so it's good to know there are guns in development and that the ideas are still flowing from Mellrichstadt.

THOUGHTS FOR THE FUTURE

Weihrauch is obviously an extremely successful company. It

would have to be to make such colossal investment in its future, but it retains the 'family' feel implanted by Hans' father and grandfather before him. The family Weihrauch is a big one, now, and growing all the time, but the passion for producing some of the finest airguns ever made runs right through this proud German company and that's what keeps it at the top. It's also what keeps it authentically Weihrauch – and that's something that will never change. ■

THAT HW HERITAGE

During my previous visit to Weihrauch headquarters, the company was about to demolish the last of the timber-clad buildings formerly used for airgun production. These trademark 'green sheds' once produced the two rifles that helped send me on my way in this airgun world and I asked Hans Weihrauch if he'd save me a small piece of the painted green planking so I could have it mounted to keep in my man cave at home, as a reminder of my airgunning roots.

Hans looked a little surprised at this request and asked me to explain it in more detail. I told him how much I owed to the airguns that came from those historic buildings and that I'd really like a piece of

one to keep. He still seemed a bit bemused that I'd want a lump of ancient, green-painted plank, but he promised me he'd include a bit in the next shipment of airguns to the Hull Cartridge Company.

As ever, Hans was as good as his word, and at the Midland Game Fair he presented me with my 'bit of green plank' ... only it was far more than that. It was a section of the door through which my rifles had emerged. The door knocker was there, with a bit of a hinge, plus a commemorative plaque with my name on it. I was absolutely over the moon with this and it has pride of place in my sacred man cave, but there was to be one more, extremely pleasing twist to the 'bit of green wood' tale.

During my latest visit Hans Weihrauch told

me that two more such 'bits of green wood' had been prepared. One is mounted on the wall of the new factory building that replaced the last old one, and the other hangs outside the Weihrauch boardroom. 'We thought it was a good idea', said Hans.

