



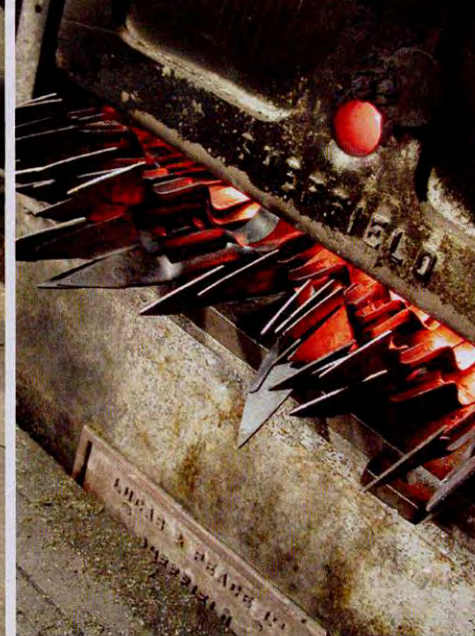
Shear delight

What's the difference between sheep and topiary? Not that much, as Stephen Anderton discovered when he visited the Sheffield-based tool manufacturer Burgon & Ball

If you ever have the chance to visit a factory, take it. They are thrilling places: the noise, the energy, the industry and most of all the promise of *new things* being made. At a factory beside the River Loxley in Sheffield, Burgon & Ball forges and grinds steel, and from clanking heaps of odd-shaped straps of steel, from stamping hammers and rollers and roaring furnaces, from goggled eyes and gloved hands working perfectly in tune, emerge some of the best blades a gardener can buy.

Twenty years ago hardly anyone had heard of Burgon & Ball, yet now you will see its products at the Chelsea Flower Show and in almost every decent garden centre. The firm has been in Sheffield since 1730, through good times and bad. In the 1900s it manufactured 96 kinds of hoe alone – one per vegetable with small variations according to national or even county preferences. By the Eighties gardening tools had given way to sheep shears – dozens of models for specialist markets (tailored to different fleeces) around the world. The “Monty” was sold only to farmers in Montevideo; but the international staple was and still is the “No 10 Drummer Boy”.

In 1988 Peter Jackson, an industrial engineer, bought Burgon & Ball with the specific idea of again manufacturing quality cutting tools. A word here about garden cutting tools – knives, secateurs, shears and other blades. Twenty years ago, every aspiring professional gardener lusted after a copy of *The Hillier Manual of Trees & Shrubs* and a pair of very expensive Felco secateurs. Felco blades, made in Switzerland, were the best, and they still are excellent. But the British household names in secateurs had lost their edge, literally. They had become gimmicky and fragile; fit only ▶



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In the workshop shears are forged by hand from a single piece of steel, formed into a bow, boiled clean and branded with the B&B die

◀ for occasional use. Jackson wanted to compete with the Swiss at the top of the market, but at a lower price. He also had a brainwave: well-grown and coiffeured sheep look smart, crisp, plump – a bit like topiarised animals in fact. Perhaps gardeners could use sheep shears for topiary? He launched his sheep shears at the garden market and today they are Burgon & Ball's top seller.

Initially the factory only produced topiary shears and secateurs, but the range grew to include knives, saws, shears, trowels and hand forks, and now, under the new MD, Peter's daughter Heather Culpan, it is making digging forks and spades. Today, garden tools account for 70 per cent of B&B's business, and top of the list is the topiary (sheep) shear, followed by a particularly small pair of secateurs known as the pocket pruner, then trowels and forks. No gimmicks, just good, well-designed, simple tools.

It is the high-quality carbon steel that sets B&B apart, but Heather is astonished by how little people know about steel. "Even some of our buyers have no

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idea about the hardness of steel blades," she says. It is measured on the tried-and-tested Rockwell scale, by firing a diamond at the steel and measuring the indentation. "Many of our buyers have never even heard of it.

"And many of our competitors know how to make good tools but still have them made to a low specification in the Far East." Take pressed, soft-steel trowels – they might be brightly coloured and patterned, but they are often unsatisfactory, so the number of returns by unhappy customers can be enormous. So why has



The B&B patent identifies the only shears made in the UK today

Burgon & Ball succumbed to fashion with pretty pastel-handled trowels? "Why not?" counters Heather Culpan. "They're fun – but of exactly the same quality as our other trowels."

Only half the garden tools are sold in Britain; the rest go to America and Germany. The sheep shears still soldier on, selling to the Middle East, Australia, New Zealand and South America. Trade ebbs and flows. Colonel Gaddafi might suddenly buy up half a year's production. South Africa was a big market until sanctions led it to set up its own factories. China competes hard and Turkey manufactures cheap replicas. And so it has gone on, since 1730.

The scythes and hay knives are still ground by craftsman Ron Staley, poised over a whirling stone in a slipstream of sparks. Grinding tools is his love but Ron marks the end of an era: when his grindstone wears out he will retire and the process will change.

Is B&B about to drop its standards? "Certainly not," says Heather, "it would be stupid. The market is polarising now. As in so many things, there will be more choice and less quality; B&B will be selling the real thing, and supermarkets will be selling their trowel and fork for 72p! Guess whose products will still be going strong in 10 years?" ■

TOOLING UP ★★★★★

If you are thinking about buying new tools, try these:

COMPACT WINGED WEEDER

I use no other hoe now, unless it's the larger-headed model. It is light, easy to use, and slaloms around effortlessly among the plants.

POCKET PRUNER

A neat little pair of classic secateurs for small hands, bought so my wife will not pinch mine when she picks flowers. Blue handles (as opposed to red) are easier to find when lost in the bushes.

FOLDING PRUNING SAW

Slips into a back pocket; I would rather have a mini-saw with me than a pair of heavy loppers any day. Extremely sharp.

PROFESSIONAL BYPASS SECATEURS WITH ROTATING HANDLE

The Rolls-Royce of secateurs, beating Felco at its own game. Take time to get used to the rotating handle: the extra leverage is wonderful. Otherwise, go for the plain-handled Bypass model. It has a notch for cutting wire, of course.



STAINLESS STEEL TROWEL AND FORK (above)

Simple, strong, well-designed classics. On my stony soil I prefer the fork with round tines – it seems to find its way into the soil better. SA

All the above are supplied by Burgon & Ball, www.burgonandball.com; 0114 233 8262