

CHAPTER 4 APPLYING FOR A FIREARM CERTIFICATE

THE FIREARM CERTIFICATE

Those of you who have now served a six months' probationary period at your club will be getting excited at the thought of at last being able to go out and acquire your own rifle.

Before you do that however you need a Firearm Certificate (FAC) which will license you to hold and use a .22 rifle

Before you apply for your first FAC it's well worth having a word with your club committee, rather than plunging into the murky waters of firearms legislation without a lifebelt.

It is the responsibility of at least one member of every club committee to keep up to date with the intricacies of the Firearms Acts, as far as they apply to their members, so they can inform and assist with FAC grants, renewals and variations.

GET SOME HELP

You may think that, once having been granted a Firearm Certificate there should be no problems, but your certificate does have to be renewed and as the appointment of local Firearms Officers can change overnight, you could find yourself dealing with someone new, who can't, for example, see any need for you to have more than 100 rounds of ammunition at a time.

This is where the club committee has a duty to protect its members, by at least knowing what is allowed and what is not, so as to avoid any problems in processing your application.

Even though you may feel secure because you have your FAC, and you're not doing anybody any harm, just remember that the fringes of our sport are constantly under attack, as guns are a very emotive subject, so it's important to get things right, and not be misled.

Now for your first application.

THE APPLICATION FORM

First, you need an application form - the same form covers a grant, renewal or variation. They are normally available from your local police station, but if you have any difficulty, ring your County Police Headquarters (number in the phone book) and ask for the Firearms Department; they should then be able to put a form in the post

to you.

The Firearms application form is blue - if you end up with a yellow one, take it back as that only covers shotguns.

Don't be put off by the amount of paperwork that arrives with the form. You are required to get referees who are prepared to say what a good character you are, and that means extra paperwork.

The application form consists of three A4-sized sheets of questions plus a back page of guidance notes. However, when you come to fill it in, do get some help from a fellow club member, or at least from this article.

The first part of the form is all questions about yourself, i.e. full name, previous names (e.g. woman's maiden name, change of name by deed poll, etc.), then your address.

Question 12 is about where you work and your phone number there.

This question could be a little disconcerting, because you may not actually wish the people where you work to know that you shoot - not out of embarrassment, but purely from a security point of view.

If you think this question could be a problem (and don't forget that security is your responsibility!) ring your Police Headquarters, ask to speak to the Firearms Officer (i.e. not one of his clerks) and explain your reservations. He should be sympathetic and allay your fears; remember to take his name and keep a note of your conversation.

Question 13 is about any previous addresses you may have had in the last five years.

THE PRESCRIBED FORM

It's probably worth pointing out here that Form 101 is what is known as a 'Prescribed Form'. This means that you are obliged to answer *all* the questions, and failure to do so will undoubtedly lead to a delay in processing your application.

Question 14 really does cause a bit of head-scratching because it asks whether you have any convictions. Here you must be very careful - it doesn't ask for 'recent' convictions or convictions 'of a serious nature' - it just asks for 'convictions'. So if you were prosecuted for dropping litter in a public place because you threw a sweet wrapper away in 1965, you should declare this.

It is a peculiarity of the Firearms Application Form that every conviction must be admitted (even minor motoring offences), but don't be afraid that this will jeopardize your chances; you have to have been sentenced to at least three years' imprisonment

before you are automatically refused by the Chief Constable, or you have to have a long history of robbing banks, riot, affray, public disorder, etc. which might make him think you're going to be a danger to the public.

If you have been guilty of the odd misdemeanour (speeding, parking offences, etc.) then put these down on your form; if you can't remember the exact dates and places then state something like 'various motoring offences between such-and-such years'. Some more serious offences, such as drink-driving, may have some bearing on your application but, again, this depends on the circumstances and how long ago it was, so if you have any doubts, your Firearms Officer is the person to speak to.

The next question (No.15) makes enquiries about your health and mental health (similar to those on a driving licence application form); answer honestly - only rarely do these sort of problems cause your application to be refused.

The name and address of your current GP is required next, and you have to sign the form at this point to say that you give permission for the police to obtain details of your medical history.

THE SECOND PAGE

Part 'B' of the form on the second page starts with a question about the firearms in your possession at the time of the application. Obviously if this is your first application then you write 'none'. Even if, for example, your club is holding a rifle on its certificate for you, you must still write 'none', because you can't actually *own* a rifle until you have your own certificate. That is question 17; question 18 goes on to ask what ammunition you have in your possession which, as a new applicant, you write "none" here as well

If you're renewing your certificate, or asking for a variation, then put down everything which you have in your possession. Anything that you've sold, lent or hired to somebody else doesn't count if they've been transferred onto their certificate (which they should have been).

Question 19 is your opportunity to list all the firearms you would like to possess. There is no limit, in law, to the number of firearms you may have, but your local Chief Constable has the power to insist that you show 'good reason' for possessing each individual firearm, and it would be difficult to give enough reasons for more than two or three .22 target rifles.

It is recommended that you ask for permission to acquire at least two target rifles. Your certificate will last for five years, and a lot can happen in that time; whilst you can apply for a 'variation' to your certificate at any time, an actual increase in the number of weapons could cost you a renewal fee each time.

Therefore, although you may only just be starting in the sport, consider the following:

You could be entering a number of big competitions, when you may find it advisable to have a spare rifle, or if you take up 3-positional rifle reasonably seriously, you may wish to keep one rifle set up purely for prone-only competitions, and have another for 3-P. You may also fancy doing some 'scope shooting, either in 'any sights' competitions or as a training aid, so you *could* keep a rifle specifically for this.

You should also note that the Law says that you can't purchase or acquire a firearm without authority to do so; therefore it could be argued that leaving a deposit on a rifle is a contract to buy. So if you don't have an FAC or a 'space' for another rifle, you could be acting illegally if you do this while you're waiting for your variation (or FAC) to come through.

But if you've applied for more than one rifle in the first place, you'll have a spare 'space' to buy your new one, and can dispose of the old one at your leisure. However, most Chief Constables don't accept economy as being 'good reason', so asking for permission to buy three, simply to avoid paying the fee if you wish to change your rifle or buy another, won't generally be accepted as 'good reason'.

An approach NOT recommended is to ask for six firearms in the hope of getting three. If you can provide a good reason for each of the rifles (e.g. prone shooting, 3-P, use by your wife/son/daughter, 'scope shooting) then no Chief Constable can refuse you, but you must be clear in your mind what you want each one for.

WHAT CALIBRE?

The question goes on to ask what calibre you require, which will obviously be .22 unless you intend shooting any other rifle calibres such as 7.62. Then it asks what type of weapon, which is obviously 'rifle'. Don't be tempted to call it a target rifle because there is no such thing; a rifle is a rifle and there is nothing to stop you using any sort of rifle you like for any sort of discipline, as long as it fits within the rules of that competition.

The next two questions, 20 & 21 are inter-related. These ask about the maximum amount of ammunition you wish to hold and acquire at any one time. The second answer should be greater than the first, by a sensible amount, allowing for a buffer of, say, 250 so you don't have to run out completely before you can buy your maximum again.

You may feel that as you're only shooting a couple of 10-bull cards a week you don't actually need very much ammo. But remember that your certificate lasts for five years and during that time, if you really get the bug, you could be shooting open competitions every weekend in the summer, going to Bisley and/or Scotland, as well as shooting league cards. It's not unusual for someone to get through 1,500-2,000 rounds in a week in those circumstances.

Ammunition is usually on sale at open competitions and at Bisley, but you may prefer to stick to a brand and batch that you know works well through your rifle, so a reasonable amount to want to purchase would be 1,000, with a 'holding' allowance of 1,250 or 1,500.

Many of our top shooters have permission to purchase 5,000 rounds, and some can even have 10,000; this is because they like to buy their ammunition in batches to match their barrel and ensure consistency throughout one, or even two, seasons.

While there's nothing in law to restrict the amount of ammunition you're allowed to buy, you're unlikely to get a 5,000-round allowance with your first application, but if you show over the years that you do buy a lot of ammunition on a regular basis, then there's no reason not to ask for an increase upon renewal.

However, at today's prices 5,000 rounds is going to set you back a few hundred pounds, so you need to be fairly dedicated to invest that sort of sum, but with manufacturers and importers now offering you the opportunity to take your rifle to their factories for testing, and buy 5,000 of whatever gives the best results, it would certainly be worth considering for the future.

Another point to bear in mind is that, when it says on your certificate that you can buy 1,000 rounds of ammunition at a time, that's exactly what it means, so don't ask a dealer, or your club, to sell you any more than that. You could of course, go away and shoot some of what you bought and then go in and buy some more (even on the same day), but the seller has to sign a declaration on your FAC confirming that it won't take you over your 'holding' amount, so it's better to have a reasonable allowance in the first place.

GOOD REASON

Question 19 also asks for your reasons for acquiring the firearms and ammunition requested. Whilst the Chief Constable has to satisfy himself that your reasons are 'good', he's not interested in an essay on the delights of scoring a 'possible'! The form actually suggests 'target shooting' as being a good reason, so that's all you need say.

The next part of the question leads on from there and asks where you intend to use the firearms listed. Here the obvious answer - the name of your club - is what is required; but add the term 'and on military-authorized ranges' as well, or something similar. (All firearms ranges in this country which are open to the public, or to club members, have to be authorised by the Ministry of Defence.)

If you only mention the club or a particular range on your application, those details could form part of the conditions of your FAC; if you were then to shoot anywhere else such as at Bisley or any other range, you could be deemed to be breaking a condition of your FAC.

On part 'C' of the form, question 22 raises the thorny problem of security, because it asks where your firearms and ammunition are to be kept when not in use, and what arrangements have been made for their safekeeping.

The Law requires that you keep your firearms and ammunition secure; how you do that is really down to you, but the Firearms Acts give Chief Constables the power to interpret the word 'secure' as they wish, and most of them have decided that, for firearms, this means a steel cabinet bolted to a wall.

Some police forces insist that you keep your ammunition separate from your rifle, others are happy if you keep it in the same cabinet - you can seek advice from your club as to local preferences. A brief description of your own arrangements will suffice, as they will probably be inspected at some stage anyway.

OTHER CERTIFICATES

Part 'D' and questions 23 to 26 are interested in any firearm or shotgun certificates you have previously held, or hold.

Part 'E' of the form is asking for two referees and part 'F' is for your signature to say you have filled in the form truthfully.

The last page of the form is full of helpful guidance notes about how to fill in the form, so everything is fairly straightforward.

PHOTOGRAPHS

There are one or two rules about who are acceptable as your referees, but nothing too onerous.

Whilst on this subject, you also have to provide four photographs of yourself, two of which have to be verified by the referees as being a true likeness of you. One of these four photos will appear on your FAC; the 'signed' ones will be kept on file, and the other one will be kept as a spare in case you lose or damage your certificate.

Now you've got to the end of the form (and hopefully it didn't take you as long to fill in as it has to read this chapter), read it through carefully. It's amazing how many mistakes *are* made, and if there are any queries it could mean a delay in processing your application.

On average, Firearms Officers send back approximately 25% of all firearms applications because they've not been filled in correctly, mainly because people don't know what answers are expected of them - hence this chapter and the suggestion that you consult your club for guidance.

Do make sure that you answer all the questions with something (even if it's only 'not applicable') as blank spaces often raise more questions than they answer.

Now you've completed your form and had it countersigned, take it or post it to your local Police Headquarters with your photos and the appropriate fee.

BE PATIENT

It may seem that, having sent all the paperwork in to your local Police Headquarters, you've just launched your application into a black hole and you'll never hear anything about it again, particularly if nothing appears to happen for ages. Just remember that large organisations (and the Police are fairly large) do take time to assimilate information and to log all your details.

As public servants the Police are obliged to deal with your application, so you can rest assured that something *should* be going on. However, if you don't hear anything within a reasonable period (say 7-10 days) then a polite enquiry to the Firearms Department (in case your paperwork has gone astray) will not upset anybody.

If you've provided plenty of contact addresses and phone numbers, the next thing that is likely to happen is that someone representing the Firearms Department will ring to make an appointment to come and discuss your application.

According to the Home Office guidelines he is not supposed to turn up on your doorstep unannounced and demand entrance, but he may well be in your area and hoping to kill two birds with one stone, so obviously if it suits you then it could speed matters up if you spoke to him.

However, if you're in the bath or on your way out, then ask if he can come back another time, bearing in mind that it may be a couple of weeks before he does get back to you because of his shifts.

Some police forces use civilians to do all their running around for them and you could argue that this is a good approach because it's better for a policeman to be out patrolling the streets, rather than sitting in your house dealing with a clerical matter.

However, civilians may not have quite the same approach; if a Police Officer puts a foot wrong and you make a complaint, he gets a 'black mark' on his file and his future career could be affected, whereas civilians don't run the same career risk, particularly if they're retired police officers.

THE INTERVIEW

If someone representing your Firearms Department (Police Officer or civilian) comes to discuss your application, there's no reason why it shouldn't be a pleasant occasion - you're not on trial you've done nothing wrong, and you are quite within your rights

to pursue a legitimate and legal sport.

He is only there to send back a report as to your suitability, so he is interested in your background, and he's probably started forming an opinion on that before you've even opened your front door, because of the neighbourhood in which you live. However, that only has a very small amount of influence on your overall suitability to own a firearm.

Therefore, answer the questions honestly and pleasantly - the Police are only interested in making sure that firearms don't fall into the wrong hands, and that should be your concern as well.

Anyone who has decided to take up smallbore target rifle shooting just has to be a dedicated sportsman (or sportswoman) at heart, so your rifle is going to be a tool to do a job, rather than a weapon, and that attitude will distinguish you from the sort of person who is after a Firearm Certificate for dubious reasons.

SECURITY

During the visit he/she may wish to have a look in more detail at the security which you've described on your application form.

If you decide to keep your ammunition separate from your rifle, it's not really necessary to go for another elaborate and expensive steel security cabinet just for a few rounds of .22. You'll probably find that keeping it in a locked box or cupboard will be acceptable.

Remember that the quantity of ammunition you're allowed to hold has no bearing on the type of security required; 5,000 rounds is no more likely to be stolen than 50 rounds - in fact exactly the opposite could be the case, as a 5,000 box of .22 ammo weighs some 30 lbs.

Therefore, if you *did* decide to keep 5,000 rounds with your rifle it would actually make it *more* difficult for a thief to rip the cabinet off the wall and make off with it (all the Police would have to do would be to search the hospitals for recent hernia admissions).

If you're clever enough (or you know a man who is) there's nothing to stop you constructing your own cabinet; however, there is a British Standard for gun cabinets - they should be capable of resisting the attack of an ill-equipped thief for at least five minutes.

The average handyman capable of welding steel plate could, without much effort, exceed that specification considerably, but on the whole the Police prefer to see commercially-made cabinets (2mm thick steel, 7-lever locks, concealed hinges, anti-jemmy bars, anti-drill plates, close-fitting recessed doors, etc., etc.).

Commercially-made cabinets are readily available from most gunshops but, be warned: when someone says they have a 3-gun cabinet in stock, they mean it will hold three shotguns.

Although there's no difference between rifle and shotgun cabinets as far as technical specifications are concerned, you'll generally find that it could be a tight squeeze getting more than one target rifle into a '3-gun' cabinet, so go for something that allows plenty of room for sights, butt hook, etc.

The main point of the exercise is to stop an opportunist thief armed with nothing more than a large screwdriver, looking for your DVD player and family jewels, from getting to your rifle; the determined professional will come prepared to break into even the most secure of cabinets.

If the Police don't think your security is adequate then they will say so on their report to the Chief Constable; therefore it's down to you to persuade them that it is.

CLUB MEMBERSHIP

It's also at this stage that you may be asked for further details as to where you're going to shoot. If you belong to a club, they are obliged to have regular use of a range, reasonably locally and covered by a current Ministry of Defence safety certificate, so your very membership will prove that you have somewhere acceptable to shoot.

You may be asked to prove that you have *bona fide* club membership. Many clubs provide you with a membership card, but they are not obliged to do so, so if you don't have anything like that, make sure you have available the name and phone number or address of the Club Secretary so that the Police can confirm your membership with them.

After the visit your certificate should arrive in the post in due course, unless there are any queries to be resolved.

It's worth pointing out here that, if you run into problems with your application because you don't meet one of the Police's criteria (e.g. security, wrong sort of referee), they may suggest that they put things on 'hold' while you sort it out.

Here they are probably trying to be helpful by giving you the chance to update your application, rather than you having the embarrassment of a refusal which you would then have to declare on a future application.

Once you've allowed a suitable amount of time for the grinding machinery of a large institution to take its course, you could enquire as to the whereabouts of your FAC.

If, after a further 7-10 days it hasn't appeared, it wouldn't be unreasonable for you to make further enquiries, in case it's gone astray in the post. It's not uncommon for FACs to be sent out by second class post in window envelopes which show what's inside - not the best form of security for such an important document!

ON RECEIPT

When you receive your certificate, the first thing you must do is sign it - it is not valid until you do, but it's amazing how many people forget. Do also check that the certificate has been signed by the Police - again, it's not valid if *they've* forgotten to sign it!

Next, check it carefully - it's not unknown for mistakes to occur as to the type of weapons, quantity of ammunition, period of validity, your date of birth, etc. There will be certain conditions printed on the form (primarily concerning 'authorised ranges') but there should be no unreasonable conditions, unless you are a special case and have specifically agreed to them. If you find anything wrong, phone your Firearms Department immediately.

Remember that if you break any condition which is shown on your FAC, it could mean the loss of your licence, so now is the time to check that you're able to comply with all the conditions printed on it. If you have any doubts about anything, check with your Club Committee, fellow club members, local gunshop or your Firearms Department.

Now that you've received your certificate, it is a good idea to have it with you whenever you're carrying firearms or ammunition (and make sure that you don't exceed your ammunition allowance); don't be tempted to carry anyone else's weapon around just because you now have a certificate - that's not permitted.

Your certificate gives you the authority to purchase or acquire a certain number of firearms. When you go to buy a gun, the dealer or private seller should write all the details of the gun onto your certificate, together with the details of his certificate; check that the details entered are correct, to save embarrassment later.

If you're buying from a dealer, he will also enter your details onto his register with a description of the firearm, and will then inform your local Police that you have acquired that weapon. You also have to inform the Police that you have acquired one of your permitted rifles and who you got it from.

Every time you purchase ammunition, the seller will enter the quantity purchased onto your certificate (try to get them to write fairly small, as there's not a lot of space to cover 5 years!), but you don't have to inform the Police every time.

Once you've purchased as many weapons as your FAC allows, you can't buy any more without getting permission from the Police first, so if you only have permission to buy

one gun, then that's all you're allowed to acquire.

VARIATIONS

If you then decide that you don't like that particular model and want to sell it, or give it away so that you can acquire another one, you have to dispose of your original weapon. Then you must go to the Police with your certificate, and another completed application form 101 (but without photos or countersignature this time).

They will then remove your original gun from the certificate and give you permission to acquire another one. Luckily this sort of variation (known as a 'one-for-one') shouldn't cost you anything.

If you're going to part exchange your old rifle for a new one through a shop, then the Registered Firearms Dealer will give you a receipt for your old gun, to show that he's taken possession of it. You can then take that receipt to the Police with your FAC and completed form 101 as above, to get permission to acquire another, so that you can go back to the shop and collect your new rifle.

A 'one-for-one' variation is purely a clerical exercise, and many Firearms Departments should be able to do it while you wait.

If you sell to a fellow club member or other private individual, you should get a receipt from him, and make a note of his name, address, FAC number and date of issue; you can then apply for a 'one-for-one' variation as above.

You must remember that if you dispose of a firearm by any means at all - and that includes losing it - then you must inform the Chief Officer of Police within seven days.

It all seems very complicated, and some aspects may seem pointless, but unfortunately it is the Law, so it's important to get the procedures right and not get a 'black mark' on your file.

However, don't worry, you can always ask your Firearms Department for guidance - they *are* there to help.