

The First POST

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The middle classes are tooling up

A widow who lives alone in a Wiltshire farmhouse has taken to sleeping with a Smith & Wesson Saturday Night Special under her pillow. It belonged to her husband and is more than capable of stopping an intruder, of which she has had three in the last two years.

When she goes shopping in Swindon, she slips a can of Mace into her handbag in case of assault. "Bought it at the ironmongers in Bergerac," she says. "Much more effective than an Asbo."

A senior civil servant, now retired and living in a remote house near Lostwithiel in Cornwall, believes in the efficacy of a small-calibre .22 pistol. It was easy to buy without a licence or proof of identity in rural France, where they are used to kill vermin. The .22 is also an assassin's weapon - once the round has entered the cranium, it will ricochet about as it looks for an exit,



As rural police stations close, self-protection is the only answer, writes JOHN GIBB

devastating brain tissue in its wake.

Many country people consider a sawn-off 12-bore to be the most effective and easily available short-range weapon. A farmer at the Suffolk Show told me that, for added impact, he pierces the crimped end of the cartridge and pours in warm wax which sets and creates a mass of lead shot.

Owning a weapon is becoming a habit for rural homeowners who feel unprotected now that so many police stations have closed.

I have never seen a police car in my village and violent crime in the county, of course, is up. Baseball bats, swords, machetes, Mace and firearms are kept beneath the bed or close to hand by many people.

In spite of Tony Blair's legislation against handguns, lethal weapons are easy to acquire in the countryside. They aren't perceived as a problem because they are kept secretly for emergencies, rather than to show off to rival drug-dealers. Often they are acquired during military service and handed down through the family. But increasingly they are brought back from Europe by car.

HM Revenue and Customs figures confirm this, showing an increase in weaponry seized at ports. For instance, 842 stun guns were intercepted by searches in 2005, an eight-fold increase year on year.

Most weapons seized are from respectable people worried about their security. Mace, pepper spray and metal-spring batons, illegal here, are easily and lawfully acquired in Europe, while high-calibre pistols can be bought in the Czech Republic.

Scotland Yard recently investigated a French company selling arms through the internet and found that the majority of British customers considered themselves to be law-abiding people, often young couples



This precision hunting crossbow has the power to skewer a hoodie at 50 metres

worried about personal safety. Police searches of their homes revealed a wide selection of weaponry.

Could we be seeing the first signs of a militant middle class which has had enough and is beginning to arm



itself? Perhaps.

For those who cling to the notion that an Englishman's home is his castle, a new weapon will soon be available to help deter intruders. Designed by BowTech in Oregon, USA, the Stryker (left) will be on sale in Europe by mid-January.

It is a precision hunting crossbow complete with a multiple reticule, red dot 1x30 scope nightsight, 175lb draw weight, binary cam technology and the power to skewer a hoodie at 50 metres. It fires bodkin-tipped 425 grain bolts at 405ft per second and will cost a little under £1,000.

Strangely enough, it's legal and fits neatly beneath the bed.

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