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Last Updated: Monday, 12 November 2007, 02:23 GMT

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## Britain's changing firearms laws

**In the wake of a series of high-profile shootings, an observer might assume that guns are suddenly pouring into the UK for the first time.**

**But gun control is a relatively recent phenomenon in Britain, where ownership of firearms was relatively common a century ago.**



Gun ownership in Britain has been tightened during the past century

The contrast between UK legislation on gun ownership - among the strictest in the world, and that in the United States - among the most relaxed, might appear stark.

But in fact both countries' firearms laws can be traced back to the same source.

The right to bear arms was guaranteed in the **1689 Bill of Rights**, in which the new King William of Orange enshrined a series of rights for his subjects - Catholics were famously excluded.

This was enshrined in common law during the early years of the US, and later informed the second amendment of the US constitution, which explains why the right to bear arms remains so strong a factor in America.

### 'Driving factor'

Meanwhile back in Britain - where hostile natives and rogue bears - were less of an issue, few people took up the right to carry arms.

But there remained no legal restrictions on gun ownership throughout the Victorian era.

In **1870** a licence was introduced for anyone who wanted to carry a gun outside their home. But there were no restrictions on keeping a firearm indoors.

Mild restrictions came into force with the **1903 Pistols Act** which denied ownership to anyone who was "drunken or insane". It also required a



Gun laws were almost non-existent in Victorian time

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licence for firearms with a barrel shorter than nine inches - what we nowadays refer to as handguns.

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Prior to World War I there were a quarter of a million licensed firearms in private hands across the country.

But after soldiers returned from the trenches the government became concerned about the number of weapons they had brought home with them.

The establishment's fears were heightened by the rise of socialist and anarchist movements and the 1917 Russian revolution.

The 1911 Sidney Street siege in east London - which ended with a bloody gunfight between police and a gang of Latvian anarchists - underlined the dangers.

### Further restricted

The result was the **1920 Firearms Act**, which introduced a registration system and allowed local police forces to deny a licence to anyone who was "unfitted to be trusted with a firearm".

Restrictions were tightened with the **1937 Firearms Act**, which banned most fully automatic weapons.

The **1967 Criminal Justice Act** required licences - but not registration - for shotguns.

Hard on its heels, the **1968 Firearms Act** consolidated existing laws and gave the Home Office the right to set fees for shotgun licenses.

Two tragedies nine years apart were to see the law further restricted.

Following the Hungerford massacre in August 1987 - when Michael Ryan killed 16 people and himself with two semi-automatic rifles and a handgun - pressure was put on the government to tighten the law.

The result was the **Firearms (Amendment) Act 1988**, which banned semi-automatic and pump-action rifles; weapons which fire explosive ammunition; short shotguns with magazines; and elevated pump-action and self-loading rifles. Registration was also made mandatory for shotguns, which were required to be kept in secure storage.



Fresh laws followed Michael Ryan's killing of 16 in Hungerford

Even stricter controls were introduced after the 1996 killings in Dunblane, when Thomas Hamilton murdered 16 primary school children and their teacher with four legally-held pistols.

The Conservative government drew up legislation banning handguns above .22 calibre. But following their general election victory, Labour introduced the **Firearms**

**(Amendment) (No. 2) Act 1997**, which outlawed .22s as well.

More recently, in response to a series of high-profile shootings, the **Violent Crime Reduction Act 2006** was introduced.

This made it an offence to manufacture, import or sell realistic imitation guns; doubled the maximum sentence for carrying an imitation gun to 12 months, and made it a crime to fire an air weapon beyond the boundary of any premises. It also increased the age limit for buying or possessing an air weapon from 17 to 18.

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