



Thirsk Bowmen Guide **to Buying Your First Bow**

This Guide is intended for newer archers who have completed, or are in the process of completing, the Beginners Course at Thirsk Bowmen.

It should help you to avoid some of the (many possible) pitfalls when first investing in archery equipment. As with all things in archery, you will come across a degree of subjectivity in the Guide, but these should be clear, and if in doubt, do seek further advice from one of the coaches, from an experienced archer at the club you trust, or one of the retailers/manufacturers we recommend.

This guide is intended for new members, or members buying their first bow, who shoot at Thirsk Bowmen Club. Whilst lots of the information is transferable, it is intended mainly for archers who will be shooting the disciplines of Target- and / or Clout-Archery, as that is what we do here (rather than Field, Flight or others).

Introduction

We can assume that by reading this Guide, you have either joined, or are intending to join Thirsk Bowmen Archery Club, and in so doing become a member of Archery GB.

But to come and shoot at the Club, you need to be equipped. In the first instance, there are basically two ways of doing this:

- a) You hire a kit from the Club, which includes a recurve bow (riser and matching limbs), string, sight, arrows, stringer, tab, bracer and a bag or box to keep it in (one of the coaches makes sure you are getting the right stuff for you), or
- b) You go out and buy all this, and possibly more, or go and buy the equivalent longbow- or compound-bow tackle.

Why Hire?

There are a number of reasons why you should consider the hire option, at least to start with. These include:

- a) For growing, junior archers you can always swap the bits of your kit which will need to be changed as you grow, and/or build up strength, such as stronger limbs or longer arrows.
- b) For fully grown archers, you may also find that your requirements change rapidly as your shooting settles in, and again, the hire scheme allows you to swap kit accordingly.
- c) You might not be completely sure what kind of bow you wish to suit, and so investing in a recurve rather than a compound, or longbow rather than a recurve, and soon finding your original option is not for you can be an expensive way to trial-and-error.
- d) Even if you are seriously committed to the idea of longbow, we would still recommend an initial period of recurve archery to settle your technique, before moving on to a slightly less forgiving discipline.
- e) Its cheaper (in the short term and longer). You'll probably need to spend around 5 times the cost of our Annual Hire Scheme in order to have a fairly future proof (in the short to medium term) kit.
- f) After a few months, you might not be able, or not wish to keep up your archery. In such a case, you can return the equipment without significant financial loss.

Reasons Not to Hire

Once that you have spent some time with hired kit, and your distances are building up, and your shooting is settling down, consider buying your first bow. At Thirsk Bowmen, we don't recommend the use of our hired bows for shooting at distances greater than 40 yards, so if you are getting reasonable groups of arrows at this distance, and want to go further, then you will need to look at purchasing.

Purchasing Your Own Kit – Some questions to need to ask yourself.

Okay, so you have decided to take the plunge and buy yourself some of that beautiful kit. Here are some really fundamental questions you need to ask yourself.

1. What kind of bow do I want to shoot?

This can boil roughly down (in order of popularity) to Take-down Recurve, Longbow, Compound and Other (such as flatbows, horsebows and so on). If you are in any way not sure, you might not quite be ready to make that investment. Spend a bit of time talking to club members who shoot the kind of bow you are interested in. Of course, in the future, you may find yourself shooting different kinds of bows at different times.

2. What is my budget?

Purchasing archery kit can be expensive. One of the more cost effective ways (with recurve) is buy a 'kit', where a retailer will supply you with a set of

equipment (not unlike the hire kit, but each item of higher spec), once they have measured you up. And don't forget to budget in arrows, and if recurve or compound, all the other 'bits' (which can be easily done by cribbing the list of one of the retailers offering a full 'kit' (as well as reading the information below).

3. Where am I going to keep my kit?

Whilst there is no specific legal requirement for security (such as with guns), you want to have somewhere fairly secure, and if you are interested in longbow, somewhere without extremes of temperature or humidity (eg, not in a loft, most garages or cellars). And you need to have kit which you can transport to and from the club (so don't buy a longbow if you only have a motorbike!) Like most clubs, Thirsk Bowmen does NOT **have** the facility to store members' equipment on site.

4. Would I consider buying second hand?

This is one way you can potentially save yourself a lot of money, as there is quite a bit of kit out there either on the web, or closer to home (see below).

5. Handedness

You probably have established by now whether you are shooting right- or left-handed, but remember that lots of the kit is specific, from risers, to tabs. So, it's a silly, but easy mistake to make, especially if you find yourself buying from a website (especially eBay), or if a well meaning friend or relative is buying you some kit as a present.

Where to Buy and Where Not to Buy

This will depend somewhat on your choice of discipline (recurve, longbow, compound), your budget and your ability to access the best options (how far you can, or are prepared to, travel).

a) Second Hand via eBay or similar

If ever there was a reason to say "Buyer Beware", it's with buying second hand archery equipment from someone you don't know, and have never met. The easiest recommendation in such a situation is not to do it. But the offer of a good price can be a factor hard to ignore.

There are so many reasons not to though, and we would not advise buying previously used limbs, arrows or a longbow in this way. The risks are normally too high. If we still haven't put you off though, take the advice of an archer at the club who has plenty of experience with the appropriate kit before making any purchase.

b) Second hand via a club member or ex club member

This is a different kettle of fish, though. Archers often need (or want) to upgrade their kit as they go along, or change disciplines, making (some of) their previous kit redundant.

People who you are likely to see again rarely sell you a dud, but in such cases, seek advice from an experienced club member (who may not be the same person trying to sell the kit!), and you may bag yourself a bargain. However, don't consider a purchase which is only 'nearly right'. Things like limb strength and arrow length need to be as exactly right for you as possible, or your performance will suffer, or risk injury.

c) New via ebay or similar

This can be an interesting way to purchase. Not least because some retailers offer new kit this way, and you might save quite a bit off the normal price. But don't forget to be a bit skeptical; have in mind what the 'real' price is for any item you are interested in. And, again here, you should still buy with extreme care, and take advice wherever possible. After all, you have to know EXACTLY what you are looking for when you buy in this way, making it **much less** advantageous to the next two options.

d) New from a manufacturer

Some manufacturers are also retailers, in the sense that they have a shop. Others may retail by appointment, or via mail order (such as a website or catalogue). Whilst buying over the 'phone or web can seem very convenient, it is not ideal, unless again, you know EXACTLY what you want, or can be guided over the 'phone.

Far better to visit the manufacturer themselves, always first making an appointment, and giving yourself plenty of time. In some ways, this can be the most rewarding way to buy, but bear in mind that you will probably have a bit less choice, so you'll need to feel confident about who you are going to. Best to talk to existing archers who have experience of that manufacturer (and maybe go along with a more experienced member if they are needing to go and pick things up themselves).

e) New from a retailer

This is a bit like the previous option, but with the advantage that you should have much more choice. Of course, you might pay a bit more for that, but it could be a trade off worth having. For example, having several recurve risers to choose from different manufacturers can allow you to easily settle on the one which feels best for you. You also might find a greater price range to choose from.

It's not always easy when you are new to a sport to put yourself in the hands of a retailer face-to-face and risk a bit of embarrassment and fear of spending more than you want to. But choose your retailer well (and again, read the rest of this guide, and talk to others about their experiences), and they will put you at ease, and place your needs first.

Again, always make an appointment (unless you just need an odd piece of kit, but that's not really what we are discussing here), and give yourself plenty of time, so you can make a sensible, unhurried, final decision. But, as a rough guide, if you go to a good retailer for your first recurve, take a full day out. You might not need

all of it, but it will stop you clock-watching, and enable you to concentrate and get the right thing for you. And be prepared to travel a bit.

Ensure you pick a retailer who has a shooting facility, so you can try things out.

Specific Considerations for Specific Bow Types

Recurve

Recurve archery gives you access to the broadest range of competition options, and access to the broadest first-hand knowledge and experience of other archers. If you want to become an Olympian, this is the only bow style (for able-bodied) you can do it with.

The riser-

risers typically come in 23 inch or 25 inch lengths. As you might expect, the longer riser will give to a longer bow on the equivalent set of limbs. If you are average or above height senior archer, you'll want the larger size. Younger or smaller archers should consider the 23 inch option. You may also come across 27 inch risers, which can be a boon for especially tall archers.

Better quality risers allow you to adjust the power of the limbs.

Cheaper risers may not have the ability to fit certain accessories.

You might be best looking for a riser that offers an International Limb Fit (ILF for short). This is an open-standard of fitting, and allows you to buy a different brand of limb to riser.

The limbs –

Whilst on that subject, look for the ILF fitting for your limbs, if you have an ILF compatible riser.

Limbs can be constructed from a combination of different materials, and you'll come across a host of different opinions as what to buy or not to buy. The addition of carbon in the limb construction certainly takes you up to another level, but don't necessarily dash out and buy carbon (composite) limbs, if you still have a shooting style which is not fully settled or developed: the limbs you buy will reflect the poundage (the power required by you) needed at that time. There may come a time (sometimes sooner rather than later) when you need to increase that as you develop as an archer.

You really need to avoid buying limbs that are too strong for your current strength, in any attempt to future-proof your purchase. There is a very real risk of injury. If you feel that you still have quite a lot of development to do as an archer (and at this stage, you probably have), buy cheaper limbs which reflect your current draw weight, and be prepared to upgrade (you can usually trade the others in, especially if you stay loyal to your supplier), until your shooting style settles, and THEN think about upgrading in quality.

Most limbs come with two variables: their poundage (from about 28 lbs upwards, with all figures measured with a draw length of 28 inches, so if you have a longer draw length the poundage increases and vice versa), and the limb

length. Limb length is often just cited as short, medium or large, and depending on the length of your riser, will result in a bow length from about 64 inches to 70 inches. Taller people need longer bows. The poundage you require is best discussed with one of the coaches, and confirmed via the retailer or manufacturer you are buying from.

As a quick guide to overall bow length, in relation to your draw length:

60"-64"	if you draw 24" or less
65"-66"	if you draw 25" to 26"
67"-68"	if you draw 27"-28"
69"-70"	if you draw 29" or above.

The Sight –

You might think that all sights are pretty much the same, but they come in a vast range of quality (and, surprise, surprise price). Probably best to buy at a level to reflect your enthusiasm for the sport, but don't go crazy at this point.

Arrows –

Arrows are made from one of three constructions: aluminum, aluminum core with carbon outer layer, and carbon. Your needs (in length) may change as your shooting style develops. Most newer archers have started with aluminum arrows as they are fairly durable and cheaper, but manufacturers like Skylon are now producing budget carbon arrows which are worth considering. Your retailer will measure your draw length, then recommend a range of (different quality level) arrows based upon that and the poundage of bow you have chosen. The majority of arrows sold for recurves are made by Easton, and Easton produce a chart for matching arrows (the spine, or stiffness, of the arrow) based upon that information.

Other things you'll need (depending on the level you are buying at):

Pressure Button – not all risers allow for the addition of a pressure button (or cushion plunger to give it another name). But this is a basic requirement for higher quality recurve archery. You may not require such a thing at this stage, but if you are getting keen on the sport, consider this fairly early on.

Arrow Rest – these come in different levels (like everything else really). The basic plastic one you will have seen on the training bows are fine, but have limitations. Consider a metal, adjustable one, fitted with a screw to the riser (rather than adhesive tape) if you are a bit more serious.

String – Fast flight is the most preferred option. Ask the retailer to fit nocks for you as part of the basic set up process any retailer should offer.

Stringer – not a complicated purchase, but a necessary one. Never string a recurve without a stringer.

Tab – you can get a simple leather one, or one with more help to provide a stable platform ("Platform Tab") when drawing freestyle (ie under your jawbone) and/or separate your first and second fingers (ie the two above and below the arrow when shooting freestyle).

Bracer – cheap and cheerful should be fine.

Breast Guard – Not everyone needs one, but take the advice of one of the coaches if in doubt.

Quiver – a very personal choice, but recurve archers normally use one that hangs off a belt. A bit more money buys one with pockets for bits and bobs and is probably worth having.

Finger Sling – a VERY worthwhile use of three or four quid. Should help you stop any inclination to grip the bow on release.

Long Rod – this is the thing you will see more established club members have sticking out at the front of the bow. Some risers really need such a thing to help stability at full draw, and help the bow fall forwards after release.

Clicker – a clicker is a device fitted to the front of the riser, to indicate that the arrow has been drawn to a consistent length. Probably not a great use of your money until your shooting style is well settled.

An Arrow puller – essential kit.

Bracing height gauge – an inexpensive but very important ‘ruler’ which allows you to measure your bracing height and tiller.

A bow stand.

Box for all this stuff

Most maintenance equipment is available at the club, so you shouldn’t worry about fletching jigs, nocking pliers, etc. You will have spent enough already!

Its easy to see why many folks just buy a complete kit to begin with. And it can be a decent solution. But hopefully this guide should make it easier for you to assemble (or at least with the help of a good retailer) the kit yourself, or with a good degree of your own input.

As you develop, and maybe take things a bit more seriously, you’ll also find yourself considering a clicker (see above), limb upgrade (again, see above), arrow upgrade (probably to Aluminium-carbon composites), carrying spares (string, fletchings, nocks, maybe even another bow if you start competing seriously) and so on. But don’t be in too much of a rush, or too tempted by all the shiny things in the shop. There is plenty of time for all this, and any decisions will be improved as your own experience develops.

Longbow

If you value the idea of a low-tech approach to this sport, then the English Longbow is one of the best weapons to consider. And unlike things like the horsebow or flatbow, it is more widely accepted at competition, and you’ll come across more archers who do the same as you. Only exceptional longbow archers will score anywhere close to a good recurve archer, but if you are thinking like that, you are probably missing the point!

If you have decided to shoot longbow, it is hard to think of another way of buying other than new, direct from a retailer, or direct from the manufacturer.

Ideally, the manufacturer is the best route. They are less likely to sell you something off-the-peg (unless you get especially lucky with what is in stock), but rather measure you up, draw length included, and produce a bow (and possibly arrows too) specifically for you.

At this point, it is worth making a recommendation. If you are new to archery, having only recently completed our Beginner's Course, even if you have only ever wanted to start archery in order to shoot longbow, don't rush into it. I'd recommend a period for 3-6 months honing your technique and settling your shooting down with a recurve (hired from the club). Why? Well, if your draw length is not fully settled, you may be having a bow made for you which in very short time is underpowered for you, and with longbows, you can't just fit a set of new limbs. Also, longbows are not very forgiving (this isn't an attempt to put you off; there can be few more satisfying things in archery than an arrow loosed from a longbow thudding into a distant target, without the advantages offered by modern technology). Poor habits are not that easily rectified when only shooting longbow. And if you invest in a longbow with a higher poundage, in the hope of growing into your investment, the most likely short term outcome is injury.

So, the previous comments hold true. Talk to club members, decide on your bowyer, make an appointment, and give yourself plenty of time (and don't expect to necessarily leave with a bow in your hand. It might take 6-8 weeks to make it for you).

Self-bows are normally less expensive, as the nocks are made as an extension of the bow wood, rather than fitted horn. Self bows are okay for gentle hobby use, or junior archers whilst they are developing, but otherwise look for a horn-nocked bow.

Some bows are made suitable for left- or right-handed use. The difference is normally that these don't have an arrow plate (another piece of horn normally, embedded into the side of the bow to protect it from contact with the loading and loosing of the arrow), and so might be a bit cheaper.

Most longbows are made from a laminate of a hardwood core, with softer woods on the back and belly of the bow. The common exception is where the belly-side of the laminate is made from bamboo: not a wood, of course, but a grass. This can upset some purists, but all things being equal will make for a 'faster' bow, which might be a bit more forgiving to draw.

The arrows-

You'll need arrows made from wood, not aluminium or carbon. Most are made from pine. You can just buy the pine shafts, and assemble them yourself, depending on how self sufficient you feel about it (see also Further Reading, below), but don't forget that you are using the knuckle of your bow hand as the arrow rest, so they will need to be fairly 'polished'. But there is plenty of reading material, and doubtless youtube postings, on the subject.

Your bowyer may also make arrows, but equally might not. If not, your fletcher will want to know your draw length, and the poundage of the bow they are buying, so they can be spined correctly to the bow.

Barrelled arrows are a bit fatter in the middle than at the ends to stabilize the arrow in flight better, and footed arrows are ones where a harder wood is used at the front of the arrow to reduce the risk of damage on impact. Both are more expensive 'options'. I wouldn't recommend either to start with.

Other stuff you will need-

Precious little really. But you will need:

A Stringer – which you can make yourself from flight cord and cutting to length (including a smallish loop at each end).

A String – which will normally be supplied with the bow. When fitting nocking points, brass nocks are frowned upon by most of the longbow community (see below).

A bracer – longbow archers tend to prefer leather ones (there's a comment for a car window sticker).

A tab – longbow archers tend to use a simple, leather tab, rather than anything with a platform (to the extent that there are competition restrictions on the use of platform tabs for longbow discipline).

A quiver – again, longbow archers often prefer leather, sometimes shoulder mounted. Ideally try a couple out before deciding.

An arrow cleaner – you can use a beer towel, or a duster, but more sophisticated versions are available, but you must have one to hand. Always clean arrows throughout use, especially if they go to ground outdoors. Otherwise, mud and grit can severely damage your equipment.

Dental floss, and glue – the best way to fit a nocking point onto a longbow string.

A glove for your bow hand – an optional extra this, but some archers swear by it, others not. Easiest solution is a close-fitting golf glove.

An arrow puller

A bow stand, but many longbow archers make their own.

Compound

For some people, Compound Archery is the Devil's work, for others it is the ultimate and most devastatingly accurate form of the sport. Compound Bows are categorized, or sub-divided as to whether they are solo cam (with a cam on the lower limb, and an idler wheel on the top limb), twin cam (so, with a cam at the end of each limb) or cam-and-a-half (which has twin, non identical cams).

Compound Bows can be broadly sub-divided into styles for

- a) Target Archery (and marked Field Shooting), and
- b) Hunting and Unmarked Field Shooting.

The variables which dictate the difference are mainly the bracing height and axle length. As we are concerning ourselves with bows suitable for target archery, a Compound bow for this purpose should have a bracing height of 7" or above and axle length of 38" or above (unless you have a particularly short draw length). A larger bracing height can make for a steadier shot, but also slows the arrow down.

You will also come across references as to whether a bow has soft cams (although these are non existent now), medium cams or hard cams. The harder

the cam, the more power is delivered, but the greater the skill required to shoot the bow well.

Recommended maximum let-off would be 70%.

It is recommended that first-time Compound buyers buy a bow with the capacity to increase poundage (by 2-10lbs). This is pretty normal. A bow advertised with a single poundage, say 50lbs, can normally be adjusted DOWN by up to 10lbs.

A critical consideration for Compound purchase is to work to the correct draw length for the archer. Using a release aid, you will work to a higher anchor point, and thus a shorter draw length than with recurve. So, if moving from recurve to compound, do not make the assumption that your draw length will be the same (and the Compound Bow needs to be set up, and work to, a specific draw length, unlike a recurve).

I'd suggest being super-careful about buying a Compound online, even new, as this is quite a specialist field. So, if you are considering the compound route, take as much advice as possible, and approach the subject with at least respect, and ideally some humility too!

And buying end of line Compounds at a reduced price, can come at its own price, if the cost of replacement components becomes expensive for out-of-production bows in future.

Likewise, buying second-hand can be a false economy if parts on the bow are close to needing to be replaced.

Like a Recurve purchase (see above), you'll want a bracer, quiver and finger sling, and possibly a breast guard.

Unlike a Recurve, you will almost certainly require a release aid (which costs much more than a tab!). Most common are the Caliper or hook styles, which fit onto a D-loop on the bow string. You should look for a model which fits your hand well, can be adjusted for travel and method of operation and work smoothly, and allow for maintenance.

When purchasing a sight, the same essential rule applies as for Recurves, above, but bear in mind it is a different sight, which will incorporate a magnifying lens and spirit level, and is called a scope.

For arrow purchasing for Compounds, see the Arrows section on recurve bows (and the Easton or Sky charts will give details of how to match arrows to Compounds).

Other

Flatbows, horsebows and hunting recurves (whether one piece or take-down) are usually shot in the Barebow category of archery (and often used for Field-, rather than Target-Archery). For some archers they have their own unique

appeal, whilst other archers may own one of these as a second (or more!) bow and occasionally shoot it.

Unless you have some special connection or affinity with one of these bow types, its not where most folks make their first purchase. But if you do, pay attention to the poundage and draw length which is going to best suit you. A lot of these bows are bought new, but via the internet, so an experienced shoulder to lean on whilst doing this would be very important (as well as then buying the right arrow length and spine). Otherwise, you could consider KG Archery or Border Archery for some very high quality interpretations of these bow styles (see Recommended Suppliers below).

Frequently asked questions.

“I want to buy British. Is it practical? Is there any compromise?”

The great news is that you can buy British for most disciplines of archery, and it doesn't need to involve a compromise. It is most obviously achieved by longbow archers, as the UK has traditional bowyers and fletchers to beat the world (see Recommended Suppliers).

But even for recurve, whilst the recurve shooting line is dominated by Hoyt (USA), Win & Win (Korea) and Samick (Korea), there are very fine UK options. World class ILF limbs are made by KG Archery near Ollerton, as well as at Border Archery in Southern Scotland. And both of these companies are in the process (maybe completed by the time you read this) of producing top of the range CNC-machined risers too.

Compound bows are made by the Jones family at Merlin (www.merlin-bows.co.uk).

Arrows for recurve and compound archers do pose a bigger problem. The market is dominated (and they do a very good job) by Easton (USA), although Sky Arts of Switzerland are a newish and interesting alternative.

Some simple set up considerations for your first bow

Please print off a copy of Thirsk Bowmen's Simple Set up Check, which can be downloaded from the website. You should keep a copy in your kit box, and refer to it each time you set up your bow.

Some Recommended Suppliers

The following suppliers are ones about which either archers at Thirsk Bowmen have first hand experience they highly recommend, or companies which seem to have faultless reputations.

K G Archery

K G manufacture recurve limbs at various levels, and a wide range of traditional bows. They have a long association with Thirsk Bowmen, and are highly

recommended. They also have an indoor range so you can try things out, and a top coach on site.

www.kgarchery.com

Custom Built Archery

C B are a high quality distributor of all bow types, based near Newark. The owner is a highly experienced competitor and coach and offers a wide range of leading brands.

www.cbarchery.co.uk

Merlin Archery

Merlin have two outlets, the closest of which is in Bishop Auckland. A large stock range, which includes their own Mybo brand.

www.merlinarchery.co.uk

Bickerstaffe Bows

Pip Bickerstaffe is a very well-known bowyer (of longbows) and author. They also produce wooden arrows to match if required. Used by more than one club member over the years, Bickerstaffe make longbows which can be highly recommended. Visit by appointment only.

www.bickerstaffebows.co.uk

Adrian Hayes Longbows

Adrian Hayes is a top longbow archer based near Leeds, who is getting great reviews for his longbows. As distinct from Pip Bickerstaffe, Aidy Hayes uses bamboo as one part of his bow laminations.

www.adrianhayeslongbows.co.uk

Further Reading (post purchase)

Not so much for bow purchasing, but for traditional archery, the Traditional Archer's Handbook (Hilary Greenland ISBN 0 9524627 6 1) is really useful in setting up a traditional bow, including fitting nocking points. If you want to make your own gear, this is a useful handbook for that too.

Simon Needham's The Art of Repetition is a good investment for recurve archers (ISBN 1 86126 869 6), and includes useful chapters on Bow Tuning and String Making.

Rick Stonebraker's Tuning for Tens can be downloaded for free and is recommended by experienced coaches, as is Murray Elliot's Reference Guide for Recurve Archers.

Danny Cameron

dancam@me.com