

Longbow for Beginners

An introduction to shooting with a stick

This is aimed at those either new to archery fresh from a beginners course, or for those who have seen the light and decided to put down their screwdrivers and telescopes in favour of a simpler way of doing things. It is by no means a definitive introduction, but will hopefully get you on the right path. Nothing however is better than chatting to a longbow archer for encouragement (or consolation) and information – if they can't answer a question they will know who can.

What is a Longbow?

Based on the Victorian design, ArcheryGB defines a Longbow as...

The bow shall be the traditional longbow made from wood, either "self", "backed", or "laminated" with cambered (stacked) belly and horn nocks. With the exception of the "self" bow, each limb of the bow shall form a single simple curve from the handle to the nock when at full draw. The bow shall be not less than five feet in length for an arrow of less than 27 inches and; not less than five feet six inches in length for a 27" or longer arrow, this being measured along the back between the string nocks. At no point shall the depth of the bow, measured from back to belly, be less than 5/8 (five eighths) of the width of the bow at the same section. The bow may carry no support for the arrow. Bows of bamboo, constructed in conformity with the above, shall be permitted.*

*Self bow - made from a single stave of wood; Backed/laminated bow – made from 2 or more laminations of different woods, glued together

Choosing your first bow

Whilst it is true that you will be able to handle a heavier weight longbow than a recurve (because you don't hold a longbow at full draw for longer than a second or two), you do need time to build up stamina and fitness to be able to do so for a whole round. Also it's not just about the strength to draw the bow, but the additional strength required to control the shot. As for any bow, the best advice is to start lighter and work your way up over time. There are often second hand bows available for sale, or even some you can loan if you ask around, until you build yourself up over the first few months to buying your first 'proper' bow. For most people it is common to start around 40lb in weight, though this depends entirely on your muscle build when starting (and be aware that a muscle-bound physique doesn't mean you will have the right muscles built up for archery). Best to try a range of weights and pick what is comfortable, even if it limits you at first to how far you can shoot. With longbows being far less efficient than modern bows, you do need to shoot much heavier weights to reach the longer distances. Dependent on your arrows, draw length, bow cast (speed of the bow and therefore how far it can shoot an arrow), and loose, as a rough guide you can expect a 40lb to be suitable up to 60yds (without pointing at the sky), 50lb for 80yds, and 55lb+ for clout (180yds where you will most certainly be pointing at the clouds!).

Arrows

"It takes any old stick to make a bow, but a damn good stick to make an arrow"

Far more crucial than your bow is a good set of arrows. Being made from wood, you can have a set of arrows matched perfectly in weight and spine (stiffness), yet they won't all fly the same. The only solution is to get a dozen as closely matched as you can, then shoot them and note how they group to sift out your best 6. To get you started, most archery shops will sell basic arrows, but some are better and more consistent than others – ask for advice on which to go for. Similarly feather size, arrow diameter, spine, point type and weight all need to be matched to your bow and what you're shooting at – again, ask for advice. The arrows need to be matched for the bow you are shooting, and because you are likely to step up in bow weight over time, it's not worth spending too much on arrows that you won't be able to use later on with a heavier bow. When you do get to that point, it's often best to buy the required components and make up the arrows yourself, it's not as difficult as you'd think – yet again, ask for advice. Generally a good place to start is 5/16" shafts (5-10lb spine lighter than your draw weight), 100grain brass bullet screw on points, taper fit plastic nocks and 3" shield or parabolic feathers.

Tabs or gloves

Many people prefer the traditional look and feel of a shooting glove, however for target shooting where consistency is the key, a tab does seem to be better. In either case make sure that there is enough thickness to prevent getting your fingers sore, but thin enough to have a feel of the string. Have a look round at what tabs and glove others use. Tabs vary in complexity, but as a minimum recommendation choose one that has a finger spacer, this helps to keep your fingers separate on the string so they don't catch on the arrow nock when drawing the bow. A glove should be chosen to fit snugly on your fingers. A tab will always need trimming to fit when you first get it, especially to make the gap wider so it doesn't catch the arrow nock on the string. Curl your new tab around the bowstring as you would when drawing the bow, and draw with a pen around your fingertips so you know where to cut. Better to go a little at a time and check it rather than take off too much in one go. Tabs and gloves will need 'shooting in' so that they become shaped to fit into the comfortable hand and finger position on the string.

Arm guards

For the traditional look, but also for best protection, go for a good sized leather arm guard. If wearing it on your bare arm, it is a good idea to use a doubled-up piece of sock-bandage underneath to make it more comfortable to wear.

Quivers

There are various styles, hip, side and back quivers. Again look around at what other archers are using for ideas and pick something that suits you.

Tassel

Crucial for longbow archers to wipe your arrows clean when they inevitably miss! A cheaper choice than an archery shop is to buy a large curtain tassel, or even make your own.

Aiming

From the ArcheryGB Rules of Shooting...

A sight, as such, is not permitted but one of the following may be used: (i) A mark on the bowlimb. (ii) A rubber band of no more than 1/8" in depth and thickness. (iii) A ground marker of any design provided it does not exceed a height from the ground of 6 inches or a diameter of 3 inches or impede any other archer.

Most longbow archers opt for a rubber band on the top limb. When practising at various distances, set the rubber band to be level with the gold, then measure and make a note of the height above the bow handle for each distance. A little book that fits in your quiver is a useful thing to note your sight marks down in. This will help with your vertical position, for the horizontal you can either use the line of the arrow pointed towards the gold, or note where the edge of the bow lies at each distance. If you watch any number of longbow archers, you will note that they have all developed their own particular style for drawing and aiming – so long as you find something that works for you and you can accurately repeat each time, stick with it!

Tips for shooting

There is a tendency when shooting longbow to drop your bow arm. Make sure you keep your arm up and bow hand firmly on target until the arrow hits.

Don't hold a longbow for more than a second or two before releasing, as the cast of the bow will start to drop off.

When you reach full draw, keep pressure on the string for a clean and smooth loose. If you're doing it right your shoulders blades should pull together and your hand should jump backwards as you release the string.

Make sure you get your bow hand position so the arrow is resting level with the top of the handle (as the nocking point on the string is set to this). Much higher and the feathers are likely to catch your hand... it hurts and gets blood on things!

Don't get frustrated, especially easy to do if moving from shooting modern bows. There are no balance weights, rests, pressure buttons, release aids, etc on a longbow to help soften a less than perfect shot. Any slight deviation from that perfect shot will be amplified, so keep that in mind. Cherish the hits and enjoy the company behind the target picking up the misses.

Geoff Fisher, May 2016