

Shoot to thrill

There are few pastimes more English than owning and using the finest antique sporting guns and rifles. Nick Blackmore sets his sights on romance, history and craftsmanship.

Photographs: submitted

For many of us, the finer things in life remain the same as they were for our ancestors: sublime food, exquisite craftsmanship...and explosive power. No Norfolk pastime brings those factors together quite like the driven shoot.

Sporting guns and rifles are just as collectible today as they were in the late 1800s, when advancements in gun design meant that hunting became all the rage in the courts of Europe. Anyone who was anyone needed to know how to use a gun, from princes to businessmen. Sovereigns would have their guns engraved with their coats of arms.

Technology has long since outstripped the capabilities of such guns and rifles, but little can match their craftsmanship and elegance. Similarly, celebrities have superseded royalty in the public eye, but the sporting gun remains a status symbol for the new elite: when Larry Hagman commissioned a gun from iconic manufacturer Holland & Holland, it was engraved not with a venerable coat of arms, but with portraits of 11 fellow cast members from Dallas. (Possibly the "Who shot JR?" episode would have turned out differently if Hagman's fictional counterpart had been armed with a bespoke Holland & Holland.)▶



Purdey Double
Barrelled Rifle,
from £98,700,
www.purdey.com



One man whose knowledge and experience can help distil the rich past and present of sporting guns is Nick Holt, managing director of Wolferton-based Holt's, the country's leading antique and modern gun auctioneers. Nick is a man who auctions guns once owned by the movers and shakers of yesteryear to their present-day counterparts – selling Tsar Nicholas II's Purdey for £30,000 to a Russian oligarch is just one example.

"It's the romance and the past – the provenance of the gun – that attract people to collecting," Nick explains. England's major manufacturers still produce small amounts of new weaponry, and Holt's still sell them, but for Nick it is antique weaponry that has the X-factor. "I will always go for the older ones," he elaborates. "I love to know where it has been used and who by. If a gun was built in 1900 it's rather nice to know what it's been doing before you bought it, even if the antiquity does add about 20pc to the price."

As Nick indicates, often you're paying a premium not for the gun, but for the story that it forms a part of. When that story is *Out of Africa*, you begin to understand the romance of collecting: Holt's once sold a Charles Lancaster double rifle that had belonged to Denys Finch Hatton, big-game hunter, lover of author Karen Blixen and the man immortalised in the 1985 movie by a dashing Robert Redford. "The gun itself was worth only £2,000," Nick points out, "but because of the story it made £28,000."

While other nations (particularly Italy) have certainly produced some sublime sporting guns and rifles, England has always been considered "the heartland of elegance", and it is the driven shoot that has influenced English gun manufacture the most. Guns used for beats (or battues) have

a distinct barrel arrangement, either side-by-side (horizontal) or over-and-under (vertical). Today, over-and-unders are more popular for regular shoots because so many people initially learn to shoot (and to kill their quarry humanely) with this arrangement. English side-by-sides are increasingly seen as occasional guns better suited for the nostalgia of a Boxing Day shoot, with a pair of efficient, reliable over-and-under Italian Berettas or Belgian Brownings being more preferable for the other 20 or so days spent on shoots on the estates.

Interestingly, despite being generally of lower quality, non-ejectors (guns from which spent cartridges must be manually removed from the gun barrels) are seeing a rise in market popularity. Most estate owners now require hunters to pick up their cartridges after shooting, and non-ejectors save you the time and effort of stooping to clear up after yourself.

Speaking of estates, Norfolk is a prime location to begin a passion for collecting, and using, sporting guns. "People come from worldwide to shoot in Norfolk," says Nick. "It's one hell of a shooting community and there are some fantastic estates." From Barsham to the The Wicken, there's a wealth of venues to enjoy and when it comes to making your gun collection local, there is also plenty of Norfolk manufacturers to choose from. Local manufacturers abound – Thomas Johnson, later of Swaffham, is well collected, as is Thomas Clough (of King's Lynn) and Norwich manufacturers C S Rosson and E Wilson.

While owning a brand new Purdey or Holland & Holland may set you back £55,000, collecting sporting guns and rifles is not a pastime exclusively for the super-rich. It's possible



to begin a collection by picking up a side-by-side, Damascus barrel, non-ejector for a reasonable £300. Unlike some other luxury goods, sporting guns and rifles do also tend to hold their value if properly cared for.

Furthermore, a sporting gun is not an antique that is in search of a retirement home. For most of its life it may sit in a pristine glass case alongside an eye-catching cartridge board, but you're taking possession of a functional, storied piece of equipment that is there to be used.

As your skill levels grow, you can begin to take into account other conditions when buying, beyond affordability – weight, barrel arrangement, personal technique, and a passion for a particular manufacturer will all play a part. So incredible is the level of artistry involved in the engraving on many guns that this will also be a factor. British guns usually feature roses and scrolls but many specially commissioned guns boast fascinating, exotic work – personal portraits, or reproductions of great battles and famous paintings.

Of course, the most valuable thing you'll collect is experience, though just because your gun was once held by an expert sharpshooter doesn't necessarily mean the gold dust will rub off on you. You'll be hard pressed to challenge the likes of Edwardian marksman Count Clary, who is said to have shot 98 pheasants with 104 rounds, and all in less than three minutes... ■

*Holt's Auctioneers, Church Farm Barns, Wolferton, PE31 6HA, 01485 542822; www.holtandcompany.co.uk
The next Holt's sale takes place on December 11 at Princess Louise House, Hammersmith, London W6 7DJ.*



Above, from top Purdey Side by Side game gun, from £62,862, and Purdey Over and Under game gun, from £73,731, www.purdey.com

Top left Holland & Holland 10-bore Royal Sidelock Ejector (sold for £18,000 at Holt's Auctioneers).

Top right John Dickson & Son 1887 Patent Round-Action Triggerplate-Action Ejector (sold for £7,500 at Holt's Auctioneers).

Opposite page Nick Holt in a gun room at Holt's in Wolferton.

Photograph: Matthew Usher