

## ROYAL ROOK RIFLE

DONALD DALLAS



By the spring of 1900, King Umberto of Italy was eagerly looking forward to his new acquisition, a best double-barrel .295 Royal hammerless ejector rook rifle by Holland & Holland. As the King of Italy, he had previously ordered several Holland & Holland guns and rifles and in 1883 had granted the firm his Royal Warrant. Holland & Holland were very proud of this association to the extent that they emblazoned all their trade labels of the period with this accolade.

King Umberto received regular updates on the progress of his little Royal rook rifle – “shot and regulated” on the 8<sup>th</sup> March 1900, “finally shot” on the 10<sup>th</sup> May 1900 and “finished at the factory” on the 14<sup>th</sup> May 1900. It was then crated up in a wooden transit box and having crossed the Channel, slowly made its way by steam train to King Umberto in Rome.

One can only imagine the delight upon King Umberto prising open the crate in late May 1900 and gazing at his little double Royal rifle in sparkling factory new condition. It remains in very original condition today and unfortunately there is a very good reason for this.

The foundations of Holland & Holland’s reputation as rifle makers began with their early specialisation in rook and rabbit rifles. “Rook and rabbit rifle” was a generic name applied to all manner of short-range, small bore rifles used for shooting small game. They had existed in muzzle-loading days, more commonly known as “pea rifles”, but were not popular due to the difficulty in loading a small bore bullet down the muzzle. The development of breech-loading allowed small bore rifles to be manufactured with ease.

Hollands began selling rook and rabbit rifles in the late 1860s and tended to make a speciality of them. By the 1870s well over half of Holland & Holland’s production was rook rifles and they sold them in prodigious quantities. These rook rifles varied considerably, central hammer, side hammer, boxlock and so on and were available in all qualities from the Belgian made to the very best. Their calibres were .297/.250, .295, .300 and .360.

Like all other makers, Holland & Holland did not actually make their rook rifles, they were built in Birmingham by a variety of makers but their best were finished in London. Hollands even invented a special rifling to go with these rifles, “semi-smooth bore rifling”, a scratch rifling to prevent fouling.

However, King Umberto of Italy's rook rifle no. 17667 of 1900 is a very different kettle of fish indeed. This was no ordinary Holland rook rifle built in Birmingham retailing at around £5-£10, this was a Royal sidelock hammerless ejector double rifle of the very best quality. It is in effect a miniature version of the Royal double big game rifle that Holland & Holland became so famous for after decisively winning every category in The Field rifle trials in 1883.

It is no co-incidence that King Umberto of Italy granted his Royal Warrant to Holland & Holland in that same year, 1883, as he was so impressed by the quality and accuracy of the firm's rifles.

This little double .295 Royal double rook rifle just oozes charm and desirability. It is so tiny yet such best quality and weighs in at just 6lbs. 4oz. a far cry from its bigger .450 and .577 cousins.

When King Umberto finally held the little rifle in his hands in late May 1900, he must have been quite delighted by it with its diminutive scale and high quality. How he must have looked forward to firing it with the tiny .295 rook cartridges. But his elation was due to be short lived as he only owned the rifle for a mere two months.

King Umberto was born in 1844 and succeeded to become King of Italy in 1878. He was a militarist and a proponent of colonial expansion into the Horn of Africa and spent large sums of money on the military rather than at home. His conservatism, militarism, contempt for parliament and his repression of civil liberties bred much opposition to him and resulted in various attempts upon his life. In 1898 during large scale demonstrations in Milan over the price of bread, military rule was imposed and over 80 people killed. King Umberto lauded the general in charge for his restoration of order and even awarded him a medal.

In Monza on the 29<sup>th</sup> July 1900, an anarchist Gaetona Bresci, incensed by the massacre in Milan in 1898, ran up close to King Umberto and shot him four times with a .32 revolver. He was captured and put on trial, but since there was no capital punishment in Italy, was sentenced to penal servitude for life. Less than a year later in 1901, he was found dead in prison in suspicious circumstances.

King Umberto had received his Royal rook rifle in late May 1900, yet just over two months later on 29<sup>th</sup> July 1900 he was dead. I wonder if he ever had the time to actually try out his little Royal rook rifle.



A Holland & Holland trade label of the late 19<sup>th</sup> century proudly proclaiming the King of Italy's Royal Warrant.