

# HOLT'S

AUCTIONEERS OF FINE MODERN & ANTIQUE GUNS

## IN THE GUNROOM

There are 42 *Holt's* representatives world-wide, and counting. When Christopher Beaumont joined the company 10 years ago, there were just two, he recalls, one in Northumberland; another in Devon. As this innovative company flourishes, their representatives in Europe, the standard bearers, are the front line of the operation and increasingly important. These scouts are relied on to source collections and clients - both buyers and sellers. Unhampered by language barriers, they position *Holt's* on the right side of each country's firearms' rules and regulations, and act as a conduit for local hunters' tastes and requirements. *Holt's* representatives in Italy, France and Germany are in London for the September sale, and a more disparate trio it would be hard to find. Yet they are as one in their passion for the gun trade and for gameshooting and, firm friends, it is becoming something of a ritual for them to mark each sale by going stalking in Wiltshire.

At 6ft 7in, Massimo Orsi is wearing his tweeds with the insouciant elegance that so often eludes the English. A gameshooter for 41 years, he particularly loves stalking, comparing its contemplative value to that of fly fishing. "My stalking rifle is a .225 Win. single shot falling block action by *Orsi & Orsi*," he says, and explains that Italian law puts a stranglehold on the making and importing of rifles. "On the other hand, it is easy to get what we call a shooting licence which is both a shotgun licence and a firearms certificate, and allows us to buy any kind of weapon. Bureaucracy..." he shrugs, "it is the Italian way. My older clients in the past have bought dozens of guns; now they are selling because their children are not interested. There are no big estates as in England where the landowner owns the shooting rights. A big estate is 200 acres, and wild game belongs to the government. I have to submit a cull plan before shooting the deer and wild boar on my land."

Farmers combine their acreages to sell the shooting rights, but ignore our sport's best precepts. "It's not shooting; it's not sport; it is nothing. The average Italian shooter is wearing camel suits and using a *Beretta* semi-auto with three shots." Orsi's patrician disdain is thrown into reverse when he considers the great story-arc of Italian gunmaking. "Italians are very creative, and the Italian gunmakers are the best in the world now. There are families of gunmakers in Gardone Val Trompia where *Beretta* started their business in 1526. But they are provincial; despite selling all over the world, they just speak the local dialect, and even for me it is difficult to understand what they are saying. Top of the Italian makers is *Fabbri*. They make 30-40 shotguns a year, specializing in over-and-unders and commanding top prices."

Straight-backed, and sleek as Adolph, the silver Weimaramer at his heel, Germany's Ralph Paschen says, "Nicholas James Holt is the greatest guy I've met in this business. The team relationship between *Holt's* and their representatives is one of the biggest advantages I've ever had. And if you are raised in the old tradition, and believe strongly in being correct – it is huge in this company." Next he turns the spotlight on his own sporting rifles, *Jagdhaus Wilhelmshöhe*. "They are the best," he says and, indeed, their fine quality is based on the best traditions of German craftsmanship and precision engineering. "I have great respect for gunmaking. Shotgun-wise, my choice would be a *Hartmann & Weiss*. They are very lovely guns."

With trademark verve, Paschen condemns mass production in the gun trade. "In Germany, after the War, it became more and more a factory thing to produce guns, and finally, a big company – name beginning with 'B' – is conquering the market. They are everywhere; their marketing is perfect. When a German wants to become a hunter, he needs to go to school for this: it's not as easy as in your country, and this company is sponsoring most of the schools." Their marketing starts on the bottom rung of the ladder? "Yes, and we need to educate all those ignorant people to be more selective, but not everybody wants to listen. It's hard to make them understand that if you can spend £2,000 on a rifle it will shoot the same hole as a £20,000 rifle. But this is like with girls... all connoisseur things are the same."

I ask Paschen where his career began, and the reply is unexpected. "I am originally a hairdresser. I trained with Vidal Sassoon, and spent several years in England - the girl side was even more attractive to me at that time." Incurable, he erupts into laughter. "In life you really have to work hard and I ran a big, successful company in Germany. But after a while you have to recover from fashion: you can't stand those girlie talks any more, and it's run by drug-users, so I did my last fashion shows in Milan, London and Paris five years ago. I was always interested in good guns, and I am able to look at them from two angles: first of all, technically; second, of course, beauty." As with hairdressing, he turned to England to augment his knowledge of gunmaking, and appears to have found huge satisfaction. "The gun trade is my second career," he says. "I am so lucky."

While Sebastian Buchholz would love to claim that France boasts a gunmaker to compare with *Purdey* or *Fabbri*, he would need to go back centuries so to do. However, his trump card is a close Belgian connection and the Liège gunsmiths have always been amongst the best in the world. Buchholz hits the English language running, his youthful enthusiasm punctuated by a ready laugh. "There are some very nice French guns, but in the international market they are meaningless," he says. So how did he get into the trade when there isn't one? "I worked in Belgium, and this is where I discovered guns. Nobody in my family hunts and I saw my first gun when I went to a shop to work with their computers. Since that day, I stopped everything else and started to be interested in guns. And now I am shooting." He laughs merrily, almost in disbelief at his good fortune. "I did a lot of research on Belgian guns, and worked in a hunting store in Brussels. Four years ago, I quit and took over a shop in Paris. *Armurerie Elysées* is very small, but I liked it immediately: it has a caché - I fall in love with this place!"

“I specialize in second-hand guns,” Buchholz says, “and I find some very nice pieces for Nick. It’s very exciting. We discover something very nice for every sale. For me, I like all guns, but I use with a Belgian Browning o/u, and I also shoot sometimes with a Purdey - if I can.” You ‘borrow’ one for the day? “Yes, exactly! We have 1,300,000 hunters in France. But it’s not like in Germany or England. Everybody can hunt.” Egalitarianism breeds cheap guns. “Nobody is interested in very high quality guns, and this is why the idea was not too bad to go to Paris because there are a lot of things to do...” Buchholz knows a commercial opportunity when he sees it, not unlike *Holt’s* themselves, and as with all *Holt’s* people, a gun’s provenance means everything to him. “Every time I push the door of an owner or collector, he tells me the story about all his guns, and that’s nice.” Clearly he likes people too. “This is important. I try to build up a relationship with my clients, and all around hunting - and especially guns.”