

IN THE GUNROOM
THE DUKE AND THE ARCHDUKE

Donald Dallas

We all love to play the game of “what if?” from the academic, what if Adolf Hitler had not survived the gas attack he experienced in World War One, to the trivial, what if I had had the courage to ask out that girl in sixth form all these years ago. What if is a completely pointless exercise as history is history and not revocable, but nevertheless it can be a consuming conundrum.

Lot 1210 in this auction is a stunning double boxlock ejector .303 rifle by Daniel Fraser of Edinburgh that was originally built around 1900 for the 6th Duke of Portland. One of the fascinating tales of the 6th Duke is that he was involved in a major “what if?” that might well have resulted in the First World War not occurring.

The 6th Duke of Portland, born in 1857, was a very wealthy gentleman who owned massive estates totalling over 183,000 acres. His main residence was Welbeck Abbey near Worksop in Nottinghamshire and in addition he had several other properties throughout the length and breadth of the land. He succeeded his cousin to become the 6th Duke in 1879.

He was a very keen shot and counted Lord Ripon as one of his best friends. His estate at Welbeck was one of the finest shooting estates in the country and all the great shots including the Prince of Wales shot there.

The Duke had various properties in Scotland and was also an avid deer stalker in the Highlands. By 1921 he had shot his 1000th stag such was his enthusiasm for the sport. This passion was the reason behind his purchase of the Daniel Fraser .303 double rifle. He ordered it from Fraser in Edinburgh around the year 1900 and it probably resided in one of his gun rooms on his Scottish estates.

Daniel Fraser of Edinburgh would be an obvious choice for the Duke as he was renowned for his quality rifle manufacture. He served his apprenticeship with Alexander Henry, the rifle maker in Edinburgh and in 1878 set up on his own at 4 Leith Street Terrace. A little bit of animosity developed between the two as in age old fashion, Fraser proudly emblazoned his time with Henry on the front of his shop much to Henry’s annoyance.

In addition to being a first-class rifle manufacturer, Fraser was also a first class shot winning many rifle competitions in the Volunteer Movement, this combination of quality workmanship and rifle skill being held in high regard by sportsmen like the Duke of Portland. He developed a new type of bullet to go with his rifles, having angled cuts in the jacket to cause mushrooming of the bullet. He termed his invention the Velux and constantly advertised his rifles as the Fraser Velux Rifle. His boxlock design was very original with a distinct curve at the back said by some to resemble a gibbous moon, a wonderful description with the elegant curve to the rear of the action. The reason that it was curved like this was to give the stock a stronger fit to the action, important on a double rifle.

The great “what if?” concerning the Duke of Portland occurred in late November 1913. The Duke was hosting a grand shooting party at Welbeck Abbey and his principal guest was the

Archduke Franz Ferdinand, heir apparent to the Austro-Hungarian throne. The arrival of such European royalty caused much excitement and the Archduke came up from London by special train. He arrived in Worksop on Saturday the 22nd November 1913 and large crowds turned up at the station to see him. He was met by a fleet of motor cars and this motorcade travelled through the crowds to Welbeck Abbey. Such was his standing that several notable guests were there to greet him, the Duke and Duchess of Devonshire, Lord Curzon, The Marquis of Titchfield, Lord and Lady Salisbury and the ex-prime minister A.J. Balfour. The Archduke and his wife stayed for a week and spent much of the time shooting.

Snow had come early in the year and on one particular day there was deep snow on the ground. There was a great rise of pheasants and in the haste to ensure that the sportsmen were ready to deal with this rise, one of the loaders rushing to hand over a gun, slipped in the snow, fell down and the gun that he was about to pass to the Archduke with the safety off, accidentally went off discharging both barrels. There was great consternation as the shot passed within a few feet of both the Archduke and the Duke but fortunately both men remained unscathed. They were very lucky indeed.

Later on after the end of the First World War, the Duke of Portland wrote "I have often wondered whether the Great War might have been averted, or at least postponed had the Archduke met his death there and not at Sarajevo the following year". What if?