

IN THE GUNROOM
PURDEY TARGET PISTOLS
DONALD DALLAS

Ah, we all moan about the foibles of social acceptability, what one generation said or did can be deemed reprehensible by the next generation as no doubt we all experience in conversation with our children. It might be thought that the gun world might be immune from this, but this is certainly not the case as is proved by lot 695 in this sale, a pair of Purdey target pistols.

Lot 695 shows a stunning pair of Purdey 50 bore percussion rifled target pistols dating from 1832 of the very best quality. They are instantly Purdey target pistols in their appearance with the shape of their butts and their black lacquered stocks, yet what makes the pistols really interesting is that they display a big change in social attitudes that had begun to take place in Britain in the 1820s.

Target pistols were very uncommon in Britain before the 1820s. The standard pair of pistols were duelling pistols in percussion or earlier flint form. Duelling pistols were built in their hundreds of thousands as is evident by how many come up for sale in auction today.

There is something romantic about a pair of duelling pistols, deadly in a pre-meditated way, yet looking resplendent in their case, but the one thing they were rarely used for was duelling! The tradition of the duel to settle disputes in a manly way was well-established on the Continent but duels in Britain were relatively rare. Although illegal, duelling was tacitly accepted and the courts would be very lenient with a participant if a fatality occurred. Any duel fought would invariably involve men of substance and consequently such events received much publicity. The publicity was such that over the years, many have assumed erroneously that duels were far more common than they certainly were.

Rather, cased pairs of duelling pistols were seen by many as an up-market fashion accessory to be on display in the hall or perhaps taken on a journey as a self-protection weapon. A pair of duelling pistols were one of these items you just had to have if you reached a position of some social standing.

However, social attitudes towards the duel began to change in Great Britain by the 1830s and it is very rare to find duelling pistols built after this date. The judicial opinion of duelling changed and participants were now likely to be prosecuted for manslaughter or murder. With the accession of Queen Victoria in 1837, she made known her distaste for the practice and coming from the top her views had much influence.

Perhaps the real death knell came from the army after several officers had been killed over the years. Very cleverly, the army did not actually ban duelling, but they did change The Articles of War whereby they decreed that an officer's wife was entitled to no pension if her husband was killed in a duel.

Consequently, most makers ceased making duelling pistols by the 1830s and changed over to the more acceptable target pistol. James Purdey was no exception and realised that if he was to

sell pistols to the wealthy, they had better be target pistols hence this lovely pair nos. 2078/9 dating from 1832, lot 695 in this sale.

As part of the changeover to target pistols, indoor shooting galleries sprang up in London and in some provincial cities. One of the best-known indoor shooting galleries was set up by Joseph Lang in 1827 at his shop, 7 Haymarket, London. What an exciting place it must have been as all the pistols would have been black powder with resultant smoke and explosions. These shooting galleries were also social affairs where army officers and the like could gather and show off their prowess and pistols.

What is interesting is that the Purdey records show that this pair of target pistols were actually sold, trade, on the 9th October 1832 for retail to Joseph Lang. With his shooting gallery he would have a ready supply of customers for such a pair of pistols. There is another reason why James Purdey favoured Joseph Lang, his daughter Eliza had married Lang in 1828 hence there was a strong family connection between the two firms.

Lot 695 are not just another pair of pistols, they are a pair of top quality Purdey pistols with such an interesting history showing the changing vagrancies of attitude that occur continually in society. Just ten years earlier they would have been duelling pistols but by 1832 they had to be target pistols.



Joseph Lang's shop at 7 Haymarket, London drawn in 1838. The sign "SHOOTING GALLERY" can clearly be seen and there is no question but the Purdey pair of target pistols nos. 2078/9 would have been used there.



Purdey 50 bore percussion target pistols nos. 2078/9 dating from 1832. Lot 695, estimate £15,000 - £20,000