

IN THE GUNROOM

PROVENANCE, PROVENANCE, PROVENANCE.

By Donald Dallas

I have a 1962 Fender Stratocaster guitar in sonic blue – sublime – and when I bought it forty years ago, the vendor quite clearly stated it was ex Jimi Hendrix and consequently its price was inflated. The problem was he did not have a shred of evidence, only a fertile imagination; it was soon mine at the going rate, but if that had been a Jimi Hendrix guitar...

It is exactly the same in the gun world. Any gun or rifle with an exciting provenance will see its value soar if it belonged to a famous sportsman like Lord Walsingham or big game hunter like Selous. Not only big names, but guns with an interesting history such as prize rifles presented to Volunteers, or Charles Gordon guns belonging to his vast collection. I even know of the Boss hammerless ejector owned by the surgeon who took the famous Loch Ness monster photograph in the 1930s and straightaway that makes it a far more interesting Boss.

The best guns of any individual maker are all very similar, the same mechanism, the same style and the same little idiosyncrasies particular to that maker. Engraving styles may differ, some stocks might be of better quality than others, but a Purdey looks like a Purdey, a Grant looks like a Grant and so on.

However, some guns stand out more than others and this is due to one thing – provenance. Provenance can completely transform a gun from being a mere creation in wood and metal into something far more personal and far more interesting and that means desirability.

A couple of years ago I was searching for a Dickson round action dating from the 1930's to illustrate my new book on John Dickson & Son as 1930's Dickson guns have very individual features. I came across a very nice example in an American auction but although the catalogue gave a very full description, nothing was noted about its provenance. All that was stated was that it was a 12 bore round action no. 7341 dating from 1936. The only clue to its original owner were the initials "W.H.C-K" engraved on the oval with additionally, the same initials stamped on the case.

Looked pretty simple to me – just examine the Dickson ledgers but little did I know what I would uncover. I searched through the ledgers to find out who no. 7341 was originally built for and that is when the puzzle began. The records listed that it was the No. 2 gun of a pair, nos. 7340/1 ordered on the 12th June 1936 by A. Duncan Millar, obviously not the "W.H.C-K" displayed on the gun. Two things puzzled me. First of all, as a No. 2 gun it should have had a "2" prominently engraved upon it, but no. 7341 was bereft of such engraving. Secondly, the single case no. 7341 resided in seemed to be completely original to me – it fitted like a glove, the label and velvet lining were correct for a 1930's Dickson. There was no way that no. 7341 was the No. 2 gun of a pair; it had been built as a single gun and that single case was original.

I couldn't work it out and think as I tried, I couldn't come up with a solution. I went back to Dicksons a couple of weeks later and re-checked the ledger. No, I hadn't made a mistake. Then by pure chance all was revealed. Still puzzled, I was idly flicking through the ledger and bingo, what appeared in front of me was gun no. 07341 ordered in July 1936 by W.H.Clark-Kennedy, the exact initials on the gun "W.H.C-K"

What had happened was that a Dickson clerk had mistakenly allocated the same serial number to two different guns. Nos. 7340/1 were indeed a pair, but the number "7341" was used again for another gun. Realising his mistake, he inserted a "0" in front of the serial number of

the second gun to differentiate between the two similar numbers. John Dickson & Son have never used five digit serial numbers, hence this gun must be the only one in existence, albeit unofficially! This scenario is relatively common in the ledgers of many firms and I have encountered several times different guns having the same serial numbers.

In an instant, no. 7341 was transformed from being just another Dickson round action - I knew the name - W.H. Clark-Kennedy was a well known Victoria Cross holder from World War One.

William Hew Clark-Kennedy was born on 3rd March 1880 at Carsphairn in Galloway to a Scottish father and Canadian mother. His father had been a Captain in the Coldstream Guards and was a landed proprietor who owned Dunskey House in Portpatrick. William Hew Clark-Kennedy joined the army and saw service in the Boer War 1900-1902.

He emigrated to Canada in 1902 and enlisted in the 24th Battalion, Canadian Infantry just after the outbreak of World War One. He led a charmed life as a soldier and took part in many of the major battles of the First World War rising to the rank of Lt. Colonel. He was a soldier of exceptional valour and in addition to being Mentioned in Despatches four times, was awarded the Croix de Guerre for action in the 2nd Battle of Ypres in 1915. He received the D.S.O. for his services at the Battle of Festubert in 1916 and a bar to this for the advance on the Somme in 1918.

He went on to win the Victoria Cross at the Battle of Arras in August 1918. The citation for this award states succinctly why his bravery merited this honour. On the 27th August 1918 in the Battle of Arras, his men came under heavy shell and machine gun fire making any advance impossible. Undismayed by the annihilating fire, Clark-Kennedy "By sheer personality and initiative inspired his men and led them forward. On several occasions he set an outstanding example by leading parties straight at the machine gun nests which were holding up the advance". By the afternoon due to his valour the Battalion had managed to advance. "Under continuous fire, he then went up and down the line until far into the night improving the position and giving wonderful encouragement to his men."

He was severely wounded, yet on the next day, continued to show leadership and established a strong line of defence. The citation ended "It is impossible to overestimate the results achieved by the valour and leadership of this officer." William Hew Clark-Kennedy survived his wounds and died a considerable time later on 25th October 1961.

It is this provenance that gives this gun completely different perspective. No. 7341 is no longer just another high quality Dickson gun, it is now a Dickson gun owned by a Victoria Cross holder from World War One, his bravery well-documented and as such this gun suddenly becomes so much more personal.

The gun itself is a lightweight gun so popular in the 1930's. It weighs a mere 5lbs. 13 1/2 oz., a very light weight for a 12 bore. It is engraved with the 32 Hanover Street address, the location that John Dickson & Son resided at between 1928 and 1937. In the 1920's and 1930's most Dickson guns were contained in cases lined with green velvet. This gun, in its original case is lined in green velvet and it also bears the blue panoramic trade label, a label that was introduced in the mid 1850's and then resurrected in the 1920's and 1930's.



William Hew Clark-Kennedy VC, DSO & Bar.

During the 1920's and 1930's, there was a great fashion for lightweight guns as sportsmen stubbornly remained faithful to the 12 bore rather than dropping a bore size to 16 or 20 bore.

Lightweight guns could take many forms such as Thomas Turner's extreme light weight guns, every part pared down, to Robert Churchill knocking 5" off the barrel length.

The Dickson round action was ideally suited to create a true lightweight gun that looked exactly like its big brother yet was still immensely strong. Since the mechanism was contained centrally upon a trigger plate, metal could be shaved off the action to reduce weight without compromising safety. Barrel length was also reduced to 27", a very popular length in this era. The butt could be bored to reduce weight and maintain balance.

The end result was a true 12 bore lightweight that weighed an astounding 5lbs 13oz. As a Dickson 1935 catalogue proudly proclaimed, "This action, owing to its exceptional strength, is specially adapted for the building of Lightweight Models. The 12 bore handles like a 20, yet retains the great killing power of any 12 and no undue recoil can be guaranteed".

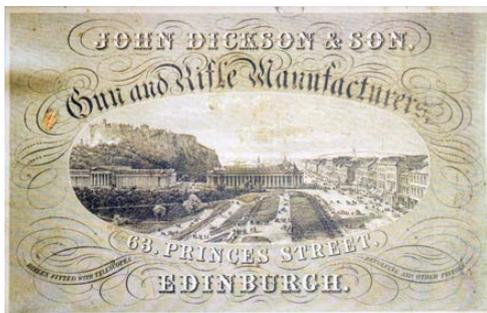
In the mid 1850's, John Dickson & Son introduced a beautifully engraved blue coloured panoramic trade label. It showed a panoramic vista of one of the most well known city centres in Great Britain, Princes Street, Edinburgh, looking west with the Royal Scottish Academy in the centre, Edinburgh Castle on the left and Princes Street Gardens in the foreground.

A busy Edinburgh street scene is shown with a bustling Princes Street full of pedestrians and horse drawn transport. Considering the

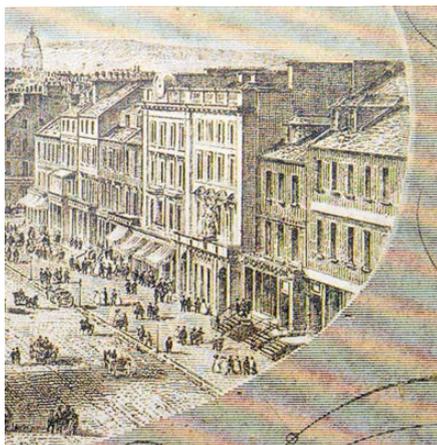
relatively small size of the label, 9"x6", the detail is exquisite with all the shops in Princes Street beautifully executed and all printed in light blue. In fact, the label is so detailed, that if a magnifying glass is used, John Dickson & Son's shop at 63 Princes Street can be seen on the bottom right.

This label continued in use until the 1880's, when a more fashionable plain leather and gilt label was introduced. The leather labels continued until just after World War One when the panoramic blue label was re-introduced with the wording slightly changed to bring it up to date. Such a detailed paper label was quite unusual in the inter war period as virtually all makers by this time used leather and gilt labels or plain paper labels.

My own hunch as to why the panoramic label was re-introduced, was that the Dickson business was sold in 1923, upon the retirement of John Dickson, to a manufacturer and farmer Alexander Prain from Longforgan near Dundee and that it was at his particular whim the attractive label be re-incarnated. This is born out by the fact that when he sold the business in 1937, the leather and gilt label was re-introduced.



The panoramic blue label re-introduced in the inter war period.



The right of the label enlarged to show Dickson's premises at no. 63 Princes Street.