

# HOWDAH PISTOL

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What do you do if it is the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, you are in deepest Africa and you have just fired both barrels of your big game rifle at about 50yds, yet the beast seems unstoppable and it is coming straight for you? Well if you are well prepared, whip out your double-barrelled Howdah pistol as your last means of self-defence and hope that the massive round will be your salvation even though its effective range is very short.



THE PRINCE OF WALES' ELEPHANT CHARGED BY A TIGER  
*[Reproduced from "The Illustrated London News," 1876]*

The Howdah pistol of the late 19<sup>th</sup> century has always had a certain kudos amongst antique gun collectors as the epitome of masculinity; big, powerful, lethal and as for their massive calibre double barrels. They were not made in very large numbers due to their limited use and became obsolete when the revolver was perfected in the closing decades of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. But Howdah pistols looked the part. If you were a big game hunter or an army officer, they were certainly an impressive looking piece of kit.

The word “Howdah” comes from the Arabic meaning “a bed carried by a camel”. Their most common usage was as a carriage positioned on the back of an elephant that was used to carry wealthy people, in the past for warfare, but in the 19<sup>th</sup> century for hunting. They were a symbol of wealth for their owners and were often lavishly decorated with expensive gilding, inlays and gemstones.

For the privileged they were an ideal way to hunt in Africa and India. Perched up high on an elephant, you had an excellent view and in addition you were relatively protected from the quarry that you hunted.

Since these pistols were so associated with big game hunting, at some stage in the 19<sup>th</sup> century gunmakers gave the name “Howdah pistol” to the type of pistol that was carried in the Howdah on the back of an elephant.

Howdah pistols evolved from the man stopper pistols of the early 19<sup>th</sup> century. Such pistols were muzzle-loaders of large bore designed for self-protection in Britain whilst out travelling. Their range was short but they packed a powerful punch.

Howdah pistols were essentially cut down big game double rifles and the majority were breech-loaders. Their barrels were short, six to eight inches long but they were of massive calibre firing the standard military rounds of the day. The most common round was the .577 Snider, short and fat and widely available all over the world due to the adoption by the military of the Snider rifle. Other Howdah pistols were built in 12 bore and the military rounds of .577/.450 Martini-Henry, .455 Webley and .476 Enfield.

The kick from one of these pistols firing such enormous rounds must have been fearsome and the recoil must have caused a hefty barrel flip. They could be either rifled or smooth bore and were intended to be used at short range. The pistols employed the standard closing mechanisms of the day, generally the Jones underlever, but in addition the side lever or top lever.

It is no co-incidence that standard military rounds were chosen by Howdah pistol makers. In addition to being carried by big game hunters, they were also very popular with army officers serving abroad. Consequently, their ammunition had to be the same as the standard army issue rifles and revolvers. A Howdah pistol carried by an army officer would have been a very effective deterrent in warfare or in a skirmish. Pointing such a large calibre double-barrelled pistol directly at an insurgent would certainly have a very intimidating effect. And as for carrying one all the way to India in your kit, how impressive would that look when you showed it off in the Mess.



Lot 1070 in this auction offers a magnificent 12 bore Howdah pistol no 2343 built in 1872 by Henry Holland of 98 New Bond Street, London. Apart from its rarity and its bellicose belligerence, it is in remarkable condition retaining much of its original finish. In addition, being 12 bore makes it even rarer as most were built in military calibres. Estimated at £3000 - £5000 it is worth every penny just to say, “Must show you my new 12 bore.”