

HOLT'S

AUCTIONEERS OF FINE MODERN & ANTIQUE GUNS

IN THE GUNROOM

In the gunroom, a miniature field cannon on its carriage has all the *chutzpah* of a Jack Russell terrier. Lot 99 is just the thing to set Nick Holt's pulse racing, and it's a singular treat to view antiques through an expert's eyes. "Fabulous quality," Nick tells me. "All handmade. I've never seen one before. I was doing a road show in Essex, and a lady walked in with a square cardboard box. 'Obviously you can't get a gun in it...' I thought. The lady explained that her brother had died, and she had come across the box in the attic. I lifted the lid, and it was a gateway to the past. The cannon's rifled and fully functional and even better it still has the correct bullets in two magazines either side of the cannon. Look, there's the wheatsheaf..." Sir Joseph Whitworth's trademark reveals the provenance, and Nick suggests the cannon was a salesman's piece. Whitworth was one of the foremost mechanical engineers of his day, and produced both muzzle-loading and breech-loading cannon as well as target rifles using his famous hexagonal bore rifling. "Fabulous thing," says Nick. "Not worth a huge amount, but imagine having it on your desk..."

Holbrook House in Somerset yielded similar excitement with a fine pair of Boss guns, Lot 1308, and a very personal story. "A lovely gentleman turned up with these guns; he'd inherited them from his father-in-law, and shot with them for years and years. I knew straight away that I had some very rare guns here: Boss made very few of this particular model, and they had been looked after incredibly well. But as I got more and more enthusiastic, this poor gentleman was sliding down his seat and I could tell he wanted to hear they were worth very little. In his heart of hearts he did not want to sell them." Eventually the die was cast. A less precious single gun would replace the Bosses, which are now valuable, collectible and not to be hard-used. It was Roland Elworthy who eventually learnt why the owner was so reluctant to sell. "As a young man, he was on a day of driven grouse and in the adjoining butt was a somewhat forbidding figure who was shooting this very pair of 12-bores," says Roland. "He was trying to pluck up courage to ask the grouse shot for his daughter's hand in marriage. After witnessing a classic 'four in the air', he seized the moment, took a deep breath and did the deed." And they have lived happily ever after.

The same guns, supermodel elegant, are in the studio where photographer Andrew Orr is adjusting reflectors around them. "Don't touch...!" he barks. Nick, chastened, waits for the click of a Nikon D3 before liberating one of the pair to demonstrate the full glory of a self-opening Boss. "Take the fore-end off," he says, "and there are two

extra pivots coming out of the action. You normally have two cocking dogs, but these..." The gun flies open. "Even if it's like this," he adds, upending the gun. "See what I mean? All sprung-loaded." I am suitably impressed, but I can't vouch for Andrew, for he of course, is excited by a gun's visual appeal. "It's the engraving that does it for me," he says, "and we see the best of it here." A master engraver takes the eye clean through the surface of his pictures into their depth and I ponder the challenge of capturing the work's intricacies. Andrew explains, "It's all a question of lighting - and that means reflected light. Sometimes it's like trying to photograph a mirror, so it's not so much putting a direct light on the engraving as reflecting a light into it or, indeed, taking some of the light out of it." He maintains that the Italians transform their guns with engraving, although modern British makers such as Watson Brothers are taking their lead. Lot 1416 has him in thrall: Artemis and her handmaidens are bathing in a leafy glade. "Antonio Zoli is the maker; the engraving is signed 'Galeazzi'. See? He's carved over the cocking indicators: there's a woman's foot that will rotate..."

Leaving him to his reverie, I slip into Chris Beaumont's den - who could call it an office? - that is full of everything from guns to motorcycle leathers and radio controlled helicopters. A portrait of his AJS serves as a screen-saver. "A model 18CS," he says, "originally an 18C in 1951, but uprated to a sprung frame." Chris may be as cool as Nick is ebullient, but his passion for the art of gunmaking is unrestrained. Lot 1418 is a shotgun that came in at the CLA Game Fair, and it has, Chris confesses, "Got the juices going. We see an awful lot of very, very high quality guns," he says, "and they tend to be similar in style. Occasionally something comes through that is very nice quality, but different somehow. Smaller makers can allow themselves to be more idiosyncratic. This gun is made by James Kirk from Ayrshire, a maker you come across very rarely, but when you do it puts a smile on your face. This one is in such lovely condition which, again, is quite unusual. Guns got worked a lot harder the early part of last century than perhaps most of them do now, so to find one from that period in this sort of condition is really nice. Surprisingly often, it's the less expensive guns that get you going... It's all a question of 'feel'," he smiles. "There's an odd romanticism in what we do. We sell guns, and our best input is to try to do justice to the work done by the gunmaker that goes so much further than building a working tool. They are producing items of beauty. In a way guns are living things. Pick one up that's been put together by a master, like this James Kirk, and it almost does the work for you."

Howard Dixon has just spent 10 hours behind the wheel on a dash back from Scotland from a last minute road trip. Ironically, having walked past a rack full of his normal fare of muskets I find him sitting surrounded by assault weapons, Lots 1040-49, collected by a very colourful individual who invented his own rules, Major 'Dirty Harry' Connors, a highly decorated veteran of Vietnam and numerous other conflicts. "It's a very interesting mix," Howie reports. "Everything from a little Calico carbine and a Colt AR-15 to a piece that is most emotive for me, being an historian at heart, this German sniper rifle. Not a thing of beauty, it was standard issue from around 1935, a Mauser actioned service rifle known as a Kar 98K, and its been mounted with good quality sporting 'scope. We developed a specific 'scope for our snipers, but some of the best pre-war sporting optics firms were German and they did not need to follow suit. This rifle was a battlefield trophy pick-up in 1944 during the Normandy breakout. Harry (Connors) bought it from the son of the GI who 'rescued' it, added a

WWI style trench magazine that takes 20 rounds and used it to shoot – not people – but targets.” Nick takes up the story. The collection came in via our representative in Germany, Ralph Paschen. Harry Connors is about to return to America from Germany and because of the legislative constraints, he cannot take his collection with him. He was awarded in excess of sixty combat decorations – including two DFCs – and his booby traps earned him his nickname. He met Clint Eastwood, they became friends, and the seed was sown for the name of the famous movie character. Eastwood gave Harry a photograph of himself inscribed, ‘To the real Dirty Harry’. Great story, don’t you think?”