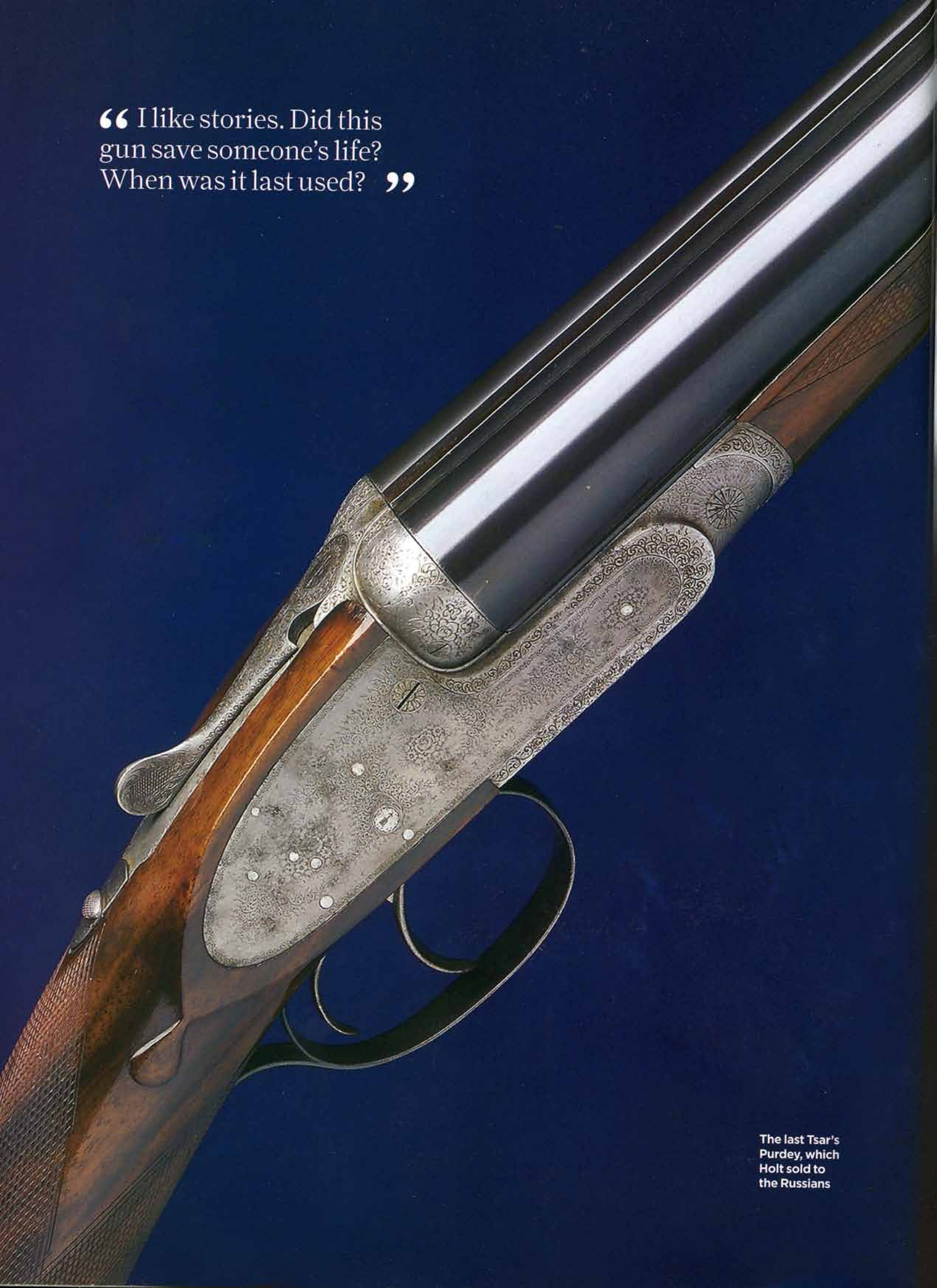


“ I like stories. Did this
gun save someone's life?
When was it last used? ”



The last Tsar's
Purdey, which
Holt sold to
the Russians

No Holts *barred*

Elizabeth Walton meets the auctioneer who has done - and found - wonders for the gun trade

AUCTIONEER Nick Holt is a throwback to our buoyant, buccaneering past and he has taken the gun trade by storm. Like so many entrepreneurs he was hard-wired by dyslexia for an instinctive, tangential and ultimately liberating approach to business. With an enviable capacity for hard work, his dynamism enabled Holt & Company, the auction house he set up in 1993 that now has 42 agents worldwide, to announce an annual turnover of £6 million in 2007. While many auctioneers and dealers are motivated by the bottom line, for Holt it is the guns themselves, both old and new, that excite him - their history, superb craftsmanship and, above all, their romance: their provenance. "Stories" is Holt-speak for provenance. "I like stories," he says. "Did this gun save someone's life? When was it last used? I have to value a gun because that's what I do, but the valuation comes only after I have dissected the story. Then, hopefully, having done all the research, we make a good price in the room. And as I work off commission, the more money I can make for the seller, the more money I make myself."

A PASSION FOR GUNS

At Holt's headquarters on the Sandringham estate, the stories "all flood out", so keen is Holt to share the passion for guns that underpins his success. It took hold at the age of five when he first accompanied his father, a City man, into the shooting field and was consigned to the beaters. Almost 40 years on, Holt shoots the pair of Westleys made for his grandfather in the Thirties. But, with working guns, romance is little sister to efficiency, and the "old girls" are to be usurped by a bespoke pair of over-and-unders that delivers a heavier load. "We need to be seen to use the best tool for the job," he says. "You've really got to kill that bird." The Holts are a sporting family, and as a schoolboy, side-stepping Eton, Holt perfected his fishing technique during term-time at St David's College, Conwy where he established an ability to turn a profit by selling his catch to the masters. Three years in the City followed - "I loved it, but it was never me" - then a course at the Royal Armouries and a stint at Bonhams. ➤



It is the guns themselves that excite Nick Holt (above), such as the revolver that once belonged to Tom Mix, "Hollywood's first cowboy" (right)



Soon he found himself irked by the rules and regulations governing the sale of guns at auction. Out of their cases and disarmed, guns are lined up on a rack, stripped of their dignity and appeal. "Guns all chained up like mutton," he says. "And when somebody comes in he looks at the gun, picks it up, and forgets this chain going through the trigger-guard, then you hear barrels knocking all down the line. I used to hate it." This was no way to sell "a wonderful bit of history". Holt knew exactly what he would find exciting: "Lovely old guns come in... and there's Sudan and Kenya labels on the case where they've been on the steamboat going over to hunt, and the case opens up and you've got this fabulous smell of Rangoon oil, all the accessories, and you're catapulted back in time. That's what you want to sell." And that's precisely what Holt's does sell because its auctions take place by invitation only in military barracks with security courtesy of the British Army and SA80s.

LEGENDS ABOUND

Our conversation thus far has been interrupted by HM The Queen and Tom Mix, an unlikely pairing anywhere but here. Erect on Holt's desk stands a bullet for a 2-bore black powder rifle commissioned by HM The Queen. Built by Giles Whitome, it is the world's largest hand-held rifle and was recently test-fired by Holt. "I felt my fillings dropping out," he reports. "It weighs 30lb, so your left arm goes. Giles stood behind me to prop me up because of the recoil. Now it's off to be engraved with Father Thames, Buckingham Palace, The Tower, Parliament and the RA's new building, and colour-hardened." A catalogue cover next caught my eye. It features Tom Mix, the ranch hand plucked from wrangling cattle for Wild West movies to become a star with a \$6 million pay-packet. Animated, Holt relives the thrill of discovery. "I was in Johannesburg, and a family came in with this beautiful pistol by Webley in fantastic condition: gorgeous engraving, sweet little case. It had 'T' engraved on one side and 'M' on the other, standing for Tom Mix. I suddenly realised there, in front of me, was Hollywood's first cowboy's pistol." But why did Mix have an English gun? It should have been a Colt "and bigger than a girlie .38". Holt's sleuths cracked the conundrum. In 1922, the Lord Mayor had entertained Mix to lunch at the



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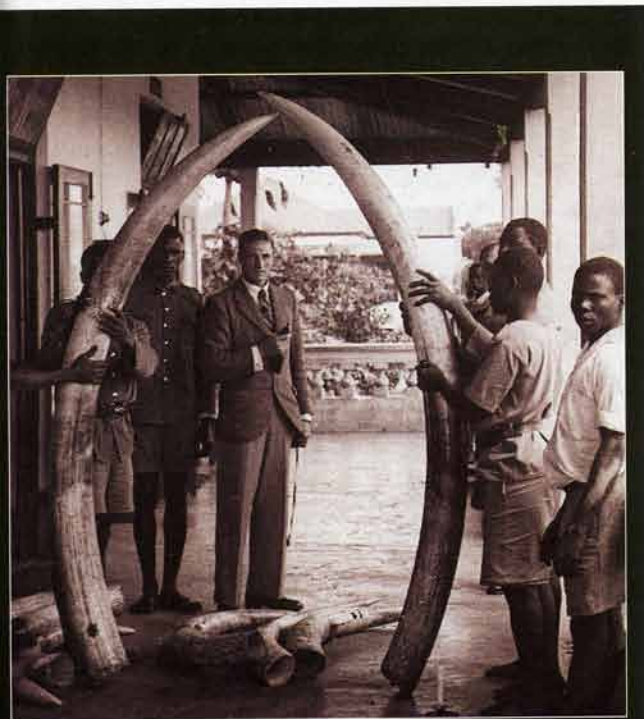
Mansion House where a six-shot double-action revolver was presented to him. Returning to London in 2008, the gun went under the hammer for £4,000. At Holt's, a catalogue entry is as long as the story, not the estimate.

Charlie Montgomery was another serendipitous find. "He got me into Africa," Holt explains. "Charlieboy came to see me at the IWA sporting arms fair at Nuremberg and said: 'We're in a real mess in Africa.'" Evidently, gun seizure without compensation has opened up a sizeable market. "Totally spookily, Charlieboy's father was at Eton with my father." That continent now yields magical bounty such as the record-breaking tusks from a rogue elephant shot in Mozambique in 1936 by the hunter Harry Flederman. "The amazing thing about this particular three-week hunt is that the whole thing was recorded on audio. I had the recordings

transferred on to CD and, listening to them, you're back in 1936 in the bush. The way Flederman describes the moment when he finally pulled the trigger and the bull fell, the sorrow of killing this magnificent beast engulfing him – absolutely stunning. Sold for £80,000 to Baron Benjamin de Rothschild. Wilbur Smith was an under-bidder."

Africa legends abound. A Charles Lancaster .450 double rifle in very poor condition came in for valuation. Karen Blixen had bequeathed it to Kenya's Jock Dawson and Holt turned to Dave Perkins, the East End gunsmith who owned Charles Lancaster gunmakers, for its particulars. "Whassa number?" Holt told him. "You're an arse. Know who that rifle was made for?" The name Denys Finch Hatton meant nothing to Holt. "Next thing I knew we had increased the estimate to £3,000 and it sold for £25,000 to John Ormiston, who'd

The sale of side-arms belonging to Lord Lovat (above) is a hard-hitting tale



The record-breaking tusks from a rogue elephant shot by Henry Flederman in Mozambique, 1936



The last pair of pistols Purdey ever made (for the Maharajah of Bulrampore in 1864) was sold for £12,000

bought the case 10 years previously." The world rolls on, and contemporary mores render some antiques too hot to handle. One such was a Bushman, taxidermy by Rowland Ward. "In 1900 it was legal to hunt Bushmen in Namibia," Holt tells me. "An eight shillings licence entitled you to one trophy."

A stream of mesmerising detail supplies a context for everything here. The last pair of pistols Purdey made (for the Maharajah of Bulrampore in 1864) were outdated muzzle-loading pistols rather than cartridge-fed breech-loaders – why? "The British were getting jumpy," says Holt, and valuer Howard Dixon adds: "We deliberately tried to down-arm, not disarm. The .704 Brunswick service rifle sold for £1,500 in the June 2008 sale took the middle-ground between a musket and the then-current service rifle. We trusted the Sikhs, so we gave them the middle-ground rifle, the Sepoys the muskets, and made sure any European troops had the latest kit, .577 Minie rifles, so we could start on them at 600yd but they couldn't start on us until 75yd." Holt continues with, "Our gunsmiths used to have foreign surnames because Henry VIII sent his boys to Europe and, when the

Europeans weren't looking, stole their gunmakers. That's why we owned a third of the world – superior fire-power."

Holt's master-stroke was to set up sealed bids sales, a ruse to off-load the pea-shooter a seller brings in with his Holland & Holland. "Best thing I ever did," he says. "It makes me more money than the main work and people love it. The minimum bid's £5. Young boys come in with their dads, and they've got £60 pocket money. You see them painstakingly filling in their commission form. They sign it, date it, then hand it to me and you can see their excitement. It's bringing in the youth, getting them excited at a young age."

Sometimes the guns themselves can evoke raw emotion. When a Luger and a Webley came in, the pistols' owner pointed to a bullet mark on the Luger and said that his father, aged 17, was fighting in the First World War when he was confronted by a 17-year-old German boy. They stood, pistols pointing at each other, not knowing what to do. "His father shot first," says Holt, "hitting the German's pistol. Terrified, the German boy dropped it and ran, and the English boy shot him in the back. He took the German's pistol. You suddenly think, 'They were 17 years old, the whole thing's madness.'"

HANGED AIRMEN

Similarly, lodged beside a 12-bore Thomas Clough, Holt spied a letter which told him the writer's father was carrying the gun when he surprised two poachers on his Norfolk estate in 1942. They were US airmen; rookies newly arrived at the nearby base. "There was testosterone flying around. One of the boys shot the landowner, killed him. He was tried and found guilty, kept in prison until VE Day and then hanged. Because he was so young and fit, it took 20 minutes for him to die. That's pretty obscene, isn't it?"

The sale of Lord Lovat's .455 Webley Mk IV and Enfield .38 sears the concept of duty on to the mind. Two officers from the regiment that traces its origins back to the Lovat Scouts attended, under orders to take back either one of the side-arms to the regiment. In desert fatigues, austere and intimidating, they sat in the centre of the auction room. "They didn't put a single bid in until the end. Then there was a wonderful moment when they looked at each other, a hand went up, and the Dieppe raid revolver was knocked down to them for £3,000. There was a round of applause, they got up and walked out." Dixon supplies a devastating footnote. "Two weeks later the regiment was posted to Afghanistan; neither of them survived," he says. "They were not old." They never are.

Holt careers around the world. One minute he's in Baghdad removing Saddam's Purdey the day before the US troops arrive, the next he's in Moscow where the frontiersman mentality thrives beneath a veneer of sophistication: "We're like Bambi compared to the Russians." I doubt that. He sold the last Tsar's Purdey to them for £27,000, a further example of the focus and enterprise that's enabled Holt to drag our gun trade, kicking and screaming, into the 21st century. ■



The .704 Brunswick percussion service rifle (sold for £1,500) took the middle ground between a musket and the then-current service rifle