

HOLT - *who goes there*

Nicholas Holt is a man who travels far and wide to feed his auction rooms and as a consequence he has built a substantial business. MIKE BARNES caught up with him getting ready for another big sale.

If I don't pull through after this operation, promise me you'll not let my wife sell my guns for what I told her I paid for them." The yarn is not attributed to anyone in particular, but it has a certain resonance. The reassurance in response should surely have been a suggestion that said guns be put up for auction.



NICK HOLT

RIGHT: A RARE SEALED PAPER-WRAPPED PACKET OF ELEY'S 16-GAUGE UNIVERSAL SHOT CARTRIDGES.

Increasingly this is a preferred route for unwanted guns, old and new. And if the size of their catalogues and their £6million turnover are anything to go by then Holt & Co may be the newest kids on the block, but they are surely accounting for a big slice of the action. Their most recent sale on June 19 had no fewer than 1,750 lots. Huge. The catalogue promoting it was of War and Peace proportions. So who exactly are Holt & Co.? Where did they come from?

Enter 43 year old Nicholas Holt who founded the company in 1993. His business operates out of premises on the royal estate at Sandringham, Norfolk - his sales take place at the Princess Louise Barracks in West London. He finds his lots all over the world - literally.

To meet at his office premises is to engage with a man who despite incessant phone calls (each one apparently more important than the last), is all

charm and energy, keen to share his kingdom of fabulous goodies, oddballs, rare finds and eccentrics. Everything must go. Best guns, old pistols, elephant's feet, model boats - it's all here, rooms bursting with the stuff. The Holt team a permanently immersed on the cataloguing process of a forthcoming sale. There are four big ones a year, and each take a lot of putting together. There is a great sense of camaraderie amongst the 18-strong workforce.

So where did it all begin? Basically, school is the answer - or to be more precise his struggles with education due to dyslexia. "I left school, St. Davids in North Wales, with one 'O' level. I spent much of my time there shooting and fishing, having failed to get into Eton, and follow my father and grandfather." Though Nick was born in London, the family home was near Bury St. Edmunds, Suffolk. His father was a successful banker in the city and a keen Shot.

Sporting interests run in the family - on Nick's mother's side his great grandfather was Sir Samuel Hill-Wood who bought Arsenal FC in 1900 - his uncle is Peter Hill-Wood, the club's current chairman. But for young Nicholas it was shooting that grabbed his



FROM TOP: ROLLS ROYCE - THE PERFECT SHOOTING BRAKE?

A RARE OAK-CASED 16-BORE LOADING KIT.

ROTHSCHILD SAFARI LEDGER 1928.

A G. & J.W. HAWKSLEY 'NORFOLK LIAR' GAME COUNTER.



imagination.”I started beating at 5 and shooting at 7 or 8. I was lucky in that dad used to shoot on the Shawgrave Estate near Saffron Walden and I loved going with him.”

When he eventually left school he didn't know what to do. “With only one ‘O’ level university wasn't an option, and eventually dad got me a job in the city. I worked there for three years, which was great fun, but ultimately the company I was working for, Robert Fraser, went bust. I then had no idea what I might try, but I thought I would have a go at something involving my love of shooting and guns. So I did a course at the Royal Armoury in London, then armed with a piece of paper I went round the auction houses - Christies, Sothebys, Bonhams - hoping for a vacancy in a gun department. I was taken on as a porter at Bonhams for £55 per week. This was 1986 and they hadn't had a gun department for 15 years. After three months they said that I could start one.”

So at the age of 22 he put together the first Bonhams gun sale since 1971. “I was very lucky - there was 15 years' worth of stock, the Chelsea premises were full of antique weaponry and the first sale was great. The catalogue however was full of spelling mistakes and I got a bollocking



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AUCTIONS

from Christopher Elwes, who was managing director at the time.”

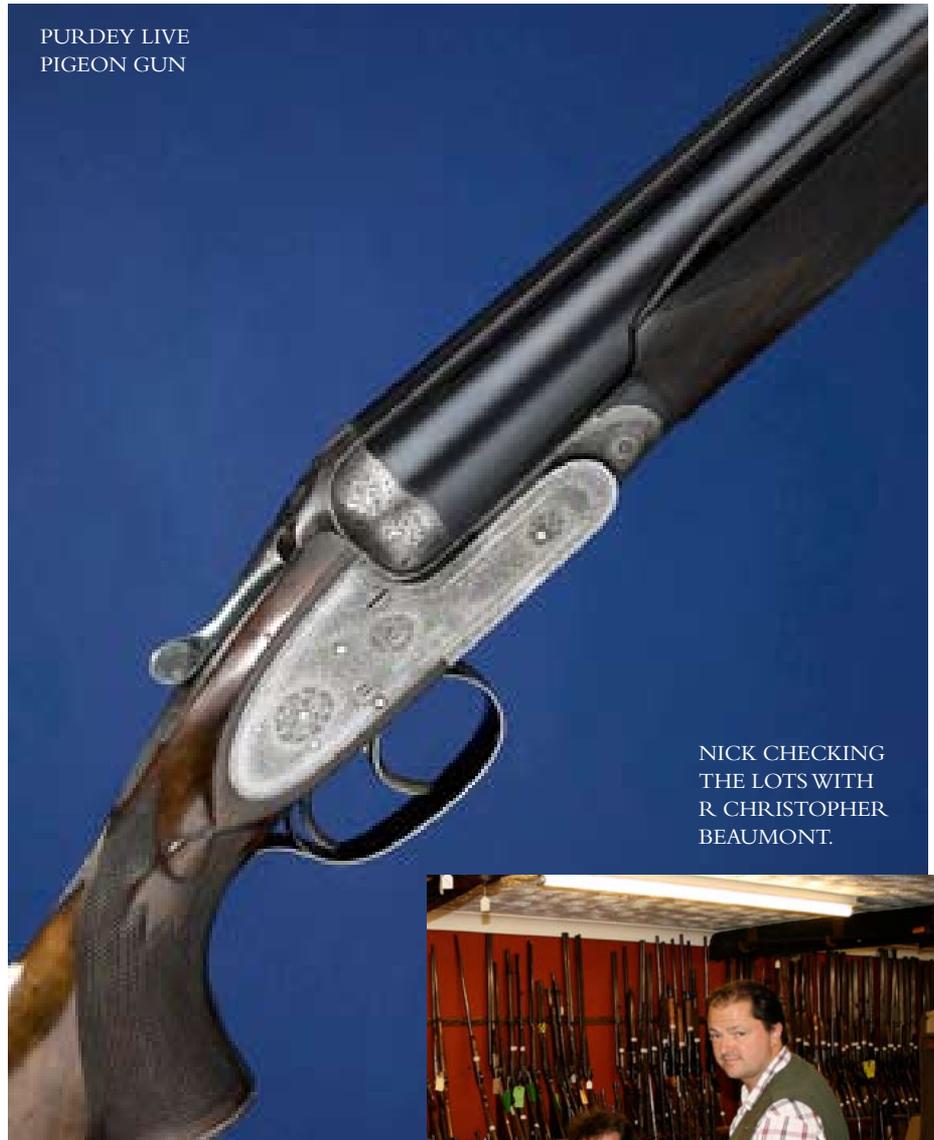
But it was the beginning of six busy years, in which he learnt a lot and really got the department up and running. However he became frustrated. “For me the guns were a passion – obviously for Bonhams it was the bottom line that mattered. I hated the way guns were all chained up at a sale preview. They were nearly always badly handled – it was horrible to see fine old weapons treated in this way, many having been lovingly cared for over the years. But obviously security was a big worry for them. There was little advertising budget, and, it seemed, no real effort behind it. I suspect I was being too idealistic.” Eventually he decided to leave and in 1993 he set up with another Bonham’s departee, George Kidner, opening a small auction house in Lymington, Hants.

“It was OK, he was a very nice man, but we wanted different things and after three years I left to start on my own.”

He was of course worried that without a big name behind him he would find life a little more difficult back in London. But he pulled off his first master stroke when he went to the Duke of York Barracks in Kings Road to see if he could use their premises to run an arms and armour auction. They liked the idea. “I then went to the police and said that as a military barracks it surely wouldn’t be necessary to chain all of the guns. We came to an agreement that if everyone had a pass with name and address there would be no problem.”

And so the first major Holt & Co sale took place in Knightsbridge, run from an office at 5 Rickett Street, West Brompton. He has never really looked back.

Having gone in search of guns around the UK



PURDEY LIVE
PIGEON GUN

NICK CHECKING
THE LOTS WITH
R. CHRISTOPHER
BEAUMONT.

with valuation days here there and everywhere, as well as the major fairs and shows, in 1997 he spread his net and started travelling abroad. English guns were after all made and despatched to all corners of the globe, and Nick went off after them. He now has 27 agents operating around the world from Brazil to Namibia and Moscow to Texas. Plus a further dozen in the UK.

But there were three more



“Having gone in search of guns around the UK ... he spread his net and started travelling abroad.”

A FABULOUS 1861 32"
SIDE OPENER BY WM &
RNO RIGBY OF DUBLIN.



GOOD BUYS

A request for a tip on 'best buys' prompts some deep thought, before responding: "Increasingly people are less concerned about big days and in my view you can hardly go wrong with a really good non-ejector. William Ford, Frederick Beesley, William Cashmore - guns of the 1900 period. Long barrels, nothing less than 30".

For up to £600 you'll get yourself a very nice gun. And do you really need an ejector? Better to extract the spent cartridges yourself, and put them in your pocket.

moves to take place. Firstly on the home front, five years ago Nick and his wife Kathryn decided to get out of London and head up to Norfolk. Following the purchase of the Duke of York Barracks by Lord Cadogan he also needed to find a new location for his sales. On a search for a new venue he met a member of the Artillery Company whose name was Digby O'Lone. "When I said

I was moving to Norfolk he replied that I must meet his brother, Marcus O'Lone, who just happened to be the agent on the Sandringham Estate." One thing led to another and I was offered these premises for rent, farm offices which were no longer of use.

They are perfect, and of course there is ongoing security. We have two young daughters and

we love living in the area, and Stansted Airport is no distance, so travel is not a problem."

Simultaneously he also moved his sales to the Princess Louise Barracks, which has again worked out really well.

Along the way he has built a good team - seven of whom moved with him to Norfolk, and another 11 have joined since.

His passion for guns and finding rarities is undiminished. "It's not money that motivates me" he says "though yes I want to run a successful company and we have school fees and all the rest, but the real driving force is my love of what I am doing."

Walking round he picks up a fabulous Boss over-under, then enthuses about an immaculate Purdey live pigeon gun, then "look at this" very rare Rigby of Ireland with wonderful Damascus barrels. There are guns galore, pistols of all shapes, sizes and vintage, a room full of heads, cartridges, new guns (a popular feature at sales), punt guns, it's incredible.

The search for old guns also throws up other unlikely miscellanea. This last year he sold a 1927 Rolls Royce shooting brake, one of the biggest set of elephant tusks on record and has just reunited a set of safari ledgers from the Twenties with the Rothschild family. The ledgers came to light in Mississippi having been bought 30 years ago at a sale in Southampton.

Guns however will always remain the thrust. "This is what I know. My own feeling is that second hand best London guns sell too cheaply. This I something of quite recent times but it can't last as insufficient new ones are being made. We are talking about works of art which should surely appreciate in value."

Despite rarity he sees no forthcoming shortage of items for his sales. On the basis that none of us lives forever, and on departure guns are one of the first things to go, his view is understandable! Just as long as they're not sold for what the owner said he paid for them...

www.holtandcompany.co.uk

■ The next Holt & Co sale takes place on September 25.



BRASS
MOUNTED
COPPER
POWDER
FLASKS.