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Leading gunmaking historian **Donald Dallas** tells the story behind a famous gun every month.



A rare pair of Boss tubelocks

I received an email from a keen collecting friend in Australia late last year. He has a superb collection of muzzle-loaders, buying only the best and the rarest. "Have you seen what's coming up in the next Holt's sale?" he wrote. "A pair of

Boss tubelocks in their original case – I've got to have them. What do you think they will fetch?"

The "best and the rarest" is an apt description of this pair of Boss tubelocks. Nos. 688/9 are a pair of 15 bore tubelock guns built in 1846 by Thomas Boss in

"They are the rarest – Thomas Boss made only 22 tubelock guns in total."

their original case, complete, and in very good original condition. Being Boss, it goes without saying they are "best" and, in addition, "rarest" since Thomas Boss made only 22 tubelock guns in total.

The tubelock – dangerous but effective

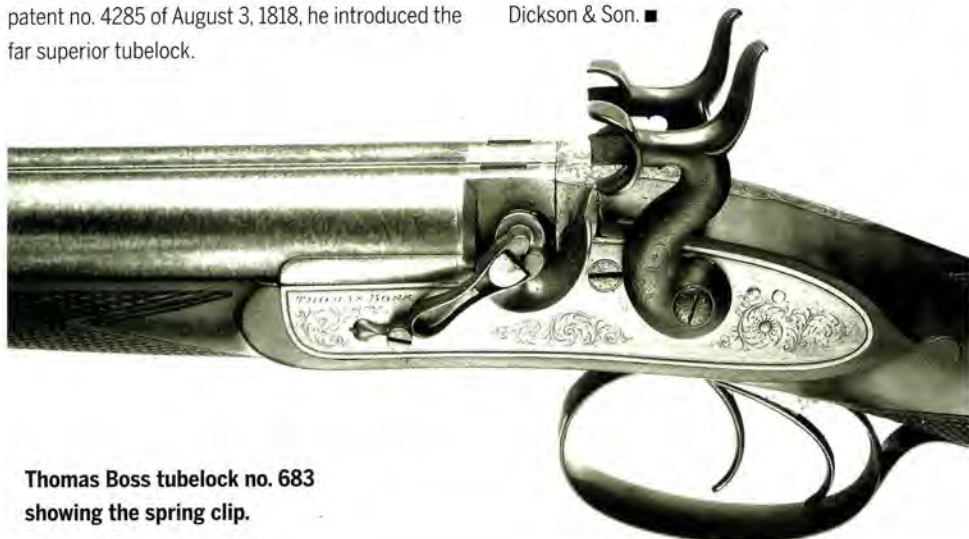
THE REV. Alexander Forsyth introduced the detonating system in 1807. The first detonating guns used complicated rollers and slides in the form of a magazine to admit detonating compound to the main charge. These primers were difficult to make and were only found in the most expensive guns.

The detonating system had such obvious advantages over the flintlock that soon other gunmakers devoted much time and effort to finding a simpler percussion system.

Joseph Manton was an early proponent of the percussion system and in 1816 brought out a pellet lock whereby a pellet of detonating compound ignited the charge. It was not satisfactory but in patent no. 4285 of August 3, 1818, he introduced the far superior tubelock.

A little copper tube was filled with priming powder and pushed into the breech, being held in place by a spring clip. Its detonation was violent, but certain, with hardly any misfires and impervious to water.

The defect of the tubelock was that it was mildly dangerous to fellow shooters if the tube blew out of the side of the gun. Once again it was an expensive lock to construct and whenever the simple copper cap appeared in the early 1820s, tubelocks became obsolete. Wildfowlers often preferred them for their certainty of ignition in the harsh conditions of the estuary. Even though the tubelock was obsolete by the early 1820s, one Charles Gordon bought brand-new tubelocks in the early 20th century from John Dickson & Son. ■



Thomas Boss tubelock no. 683 showing the spring clip.

The history of Boss

Thomas Boss was born in 1790 in London and after apprenticeship to his father William Boss, who worked for Joseph Manton, set himself up in business as a gun and truss manufacturer in around 1816. Circa 1827 he moved to 33, Edgware Road, London, and after a couple of further moves, he established himself at 73, St. James's Street, London, in the year 1837, remaining at this address until 1908.

Only the very best

From the very beginnings of his business, Thomas Boss built guns of the highest quality only. He didn't offer various grades of guns or anything second quality – there was only one quality built by Thomas Boss and that was best. He established a first-class reputation that has stood the test of time, with Boss & Co. proudly – and justifiably – proclaiming in all its literature "Builders Of Best Guns Only".

“The defect of the tubelock was that it was mildly dangerous to fellow shooters if the tube blew out of the side of the gun.”



A pair of Thomas Boss 15 bore tubelock guns, nos. 688/9, built for Viscount Seaham in 1846 – only 22 tubelock guns were ever made by Boss.

Thomas Boss established his business just at the time when the percussion system was coming into being in the 1820s. The familiar copper percussion cap came into general use in this decade and the majority of Boss guns in the muzzle-loading era were built to use this system.

Thomas Boss constructed 22 percussion guns with tubelock ignition. The tubelock dates from 1818 and by the time Thomas Boss was building percussion guns it was out of date. However, some sportsmen still demanded tubelocks because their ignition was certain. A tube filled with fulminate, when hit by the hammer, was guaranteed to set off the full charge.

Violent detonation

The percussion system had been introduced by the Rev. Alexander Forsyth in 1807 and was a massive improvement over the unreliable flintlock, but the primer mechanism that Forsyth used was difficult to make and potentially dangerous.

In 1818 Joseph Manton patented the tubelock. A small copper tube was filled with priming powder, inserted into the breech and held in place by a spring clip. When hit by the hammer, there was a violent

The Boss barrel maker – who was TP?

JUST LIKE today, a great many gunmakers in the 19th century bought in their barrels from outside suppliers. This is because barrel making is fairly specialised, involving much heavy machinery, lathes, forges, and extremes of heat. This was particularly the case in the 19th century when twist and Damascus barrels were being made, involving a great deal of heat and hammering.

In the 1840s and 1850s, the barrel maker used by Thomas Boss was one of the top makers of this era, Thomas Parkin of 5, Meards Court, Soho, London. Underneath Boss barrels, the stamp "TP" is often found, denoting they are Parkin

barrels. All the top London makers used Parkin barrels at this time.

Today, Thomas Boss's orders to Parkin have survived in a book entitled "Parkin's Orders". In his order, Thomas Boss would specify in great detail what he wanted – the type of breeching, twist, length, bore, weight, etc. The barrels were all supplied relatively quickly, usually within a month. Boss was often quite frank with Parkin – "be careful not to injure the brown" was a common remark.

By the early 1850s, Thomas Parkin must have died or gone out of business as Thomas Boss had to go elsewhere for his barrels. ■



detonation that shot a hot flame directly into the main charge. The system was impervious to moisture and ignition was certain. One of the dangers was the copper tube could fly out of the side of the gun. In addition, the tubes had to be inserted correctly – quite difficult in the heat of the moment or on a freezing day.

But detonation was guaranteed – even copper percussion caps could occasionally misfire if there was a dud cap, or if the nipple became clogged with soot – and this was the reason some of Boss's customers wanted tubelocks.

Yours for £30,000

These particular guns were originally built in 1846 for Viscount Seaham, George Vane-Tempest, the 5th Marquess of Londonderry, was born in 1821. The family owned considerable land at Seaham Hall in Sunderland; Wynyard Park, Durham; and at Mount Stewart in Co. Down. He died in 1884.

Alas, my friend was unsuccessful in his attempt to purchase the tubelocks at the Holt's auction. A hammer price of £30,000 was paid by Boss & Co. itself. They were obviously eager to get these rare guns back into their possession. 🐕

Would you threaten a gunmaker?

IN THE relatively lawless and harsh times of the early 19th century, I am not sure how wise it would have been to threaten a gunmaker. This was something that Thomas Boss would experience in the year 1848.

Boss owned a dog who he exercised regularly in Green Park near his shop. I don't know the full background to the incident, but one of the park keepers, a Mr Millar, obviously took a dislike to Boss or the dog. Boss wrote about the incident in the following letter to the Green Park guardians dated October 5, 1848, complaining about the conduct of the keeper.

"Gentlemen,

It is my duty to complain of the violent conduct of one of the Green Park keepers, the name of Millar, for injury done by him to a harmless dog. I keep and pay tax for a House Dog; by throwing a large stone at it and so severely injuring the dog that it has not yet recovered from the effects of the blow; he also threatened to send it home on two legs or shoot it without the slightest provocation; the dog is therefore excluded the use of the park through his violent conduct.

Yours respectfully,
Thomas Boss". ■