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ABOVE: Holt's auction sales catalogues always feature beautiful images of finely-crafted antique guns, which are all prepared in the Holt's in-house studio (opposite)

When weapons become true objects of desire...

Antique weaponry continues to fascinate its buyers. Deep in the Norfolk countryside **Bel Greenwood** is offered a tour of Holt's auctioneers – a business that consistently sets the sights high

Start talking guns at Holt's Auctioneers and you start talking stories. Every gun, modern or antique has a tale locked into it and releasing that story is part of the fascination of the business that Nick Holt set up in 1993. A gun with a known history is somehow catapulted into the auctioneer's front line. It has a glamour that gives it added value and it turns Nick's staff into historic sleuths, hunting out the truth and expanding on an item's provenance. It makes the whole business of authenticating, valuing and selling modern and historic guns to an international market a deeply satisfying

and sometimes thrilling affair.

Ask Chris Beaumont who looks after the modern guns department from a boy's own den of books, papers, computers and weaponry.

"The history of these things is quite a pull, especially with the modern guns. When you get involved with famous big game hunters," he explained, "people want to have a share of a life that no longer exists." Chris, with his Hollywood action hero looks, covers a field that is divided between the utility tool and guns that meet the collector's perspective. He outlined one of the best gun stories to have emerged from his department: the sale of a 1940s

Enfield .38 service revolver which belonged to Lord Lovatt and was wielded by him on D-Day. The 15th Lord Lovatt was a celebrated commando during World War II and the revolver was sold to a couple of soldiers from a regiment that had its origins in Lovatt's wartime unit. A second revolver used by Lord Lovatt during the war was later purchased by the Lovatt family, bringing to a satisfactory end the wandering of those particular guns when they both returned safely home.

Holt's home is in the most surprising of places. Their headquarters are located on the Sandringham Estate in a



ABOVE: Holt's Christopher Beaumont in the gun vault which holds the next lots of guns for auction. Media Manager Andrew Orr (above right) is responsible for compiling the complete auction catalogue in Holt's on-site media studio (right).

quiet square of converted farm buildings. You would never guess what lies behind each of the innocuous exteriors that once housed agricultural machinery and a herd of cows for this is the hub of an international operation. It's extraordinary and not a little challenging that the business operates on all four continents with 40 foreign agents, and organises and hosts quarterly auctions in Hammersmith, all from the heart of the Norfolk countryside. And it's inspiring that the business can have such reach from KL magazine country. Holt's pre-eminent technical maestro is Andrew Orr, who is also media manager and who, with the help of Andrew Jackson, takes all the finely-styled and meticulously lit photographs of the lots up for auction for publication in sales catalogues which are beautifully printed, quietly stated, works of art.

It's no surprise that Andrew freely calls himself a technical geek; he's needed to be during his continuing battle against a prevailing, wavering, rural broadband connection. Andrew pays for an uncontended ADSL connection. "It is pretty much instant and no one else shares it," he says. "They are particularly necessary in London. Those companies in London who survive have to have that connection. At the end of the circuit here in Norfolk it's crucial. It's at the heart of what we do."

"We'd like to have decent quality broadband as the norm," adds Andrew. "It's essential for modern life, let alone the needs of business. If anyone wants to have a chat about it, my door is

open." Local politicians, take note. Andrew has designed and runs the Holt's website which now gets between 1.3 and 1.8 million hits a month. He introduced another vital innovation after witnessing the online auction of the legendary James Brown's effects about ten years ago. He set up a system for online bidding for the company. "It's very simple and straightforward," he said. "There are a large number of our clients who have a stated preference for buying through the live online bidding program."

Those clients are vying for modern and antique guns and more. The antique guns are cared for by Robert Morgan who started identifying antique weaponry when he began collecting flintlocks at the age of 14. By the time he blew out the candles on his 17th birthday cake he owned 145 guns. It's a lifelong passion and Robert is a mobile encyclopedia of antique weaponry. His department is an eclectic collection of pikestaves, a Japanese Nagianata Pole Arm from the 1860s and ancient flintlocks that would have served many a highwayman. There's even a small functioning cannon that would take off a leg at the knee. The oldest gun he has ever sold was a Dutch flintlock from around 1690. The smallest is still with him, a tiny automatic weapon that looks like a 1950s cigarette lighter and fits into the palm of a hand: perfect for Rosa Klebb. And the trove continues with a host of collectables, cufflinks, fishing rods, taxidermy books relating the history of hunting campaigns or detailing the minutiae of country estate shootings, and big game diaries from

the African savannah. Holt's preserves, identifies and sells a rich cultural heritage.

It's a heritage which has always inspired Nick. "I have always had a boy's thing about shooting and the country," he says. It was such a passion that he began an apprenticeship making guns in Stansted with gunsmith John Wilson but he left to live a little more. He completed a course at the Royal Armoury at the Tower of London before setting up and running the armouries department at Bonham's Auction House in Knightsbridge. Finally, he set up his own company which started in London but after falling in love with a house in Norfolk, a county that had already become a holiday destination he moved the business to Castle Acre prior to being invited to become a tenant on the Sandringham Estate.

Not that Nick sees very much of the peace and beauty of Wolferton: Holt's Auctioneers is a member of the Society of Fine Arts and as an official valuer Nick travels incessantly to every continent, authenticating and valuing the world's ancient and modern arsenal of guns.

