

# Mountbatten's personal pistols

Three decades after his murder by the Provisional IRA, Lord Louis Mountbatten's pistols go under the hammer. **Bill Harriman** previews the sale

Lord Louis Mountbatten —  
a distinguished naval officer,  
the last viceroy of India and  
The Queen's uncle



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**T**he murder of Lord Louis Mountbatten by the Provisional IRA in 1979 shocked the nation. Mountbatten was well liked, having been a distinguished naval officer and the last viceroy of India; he was also The Queen's uncle and mentor to Prince Charles.

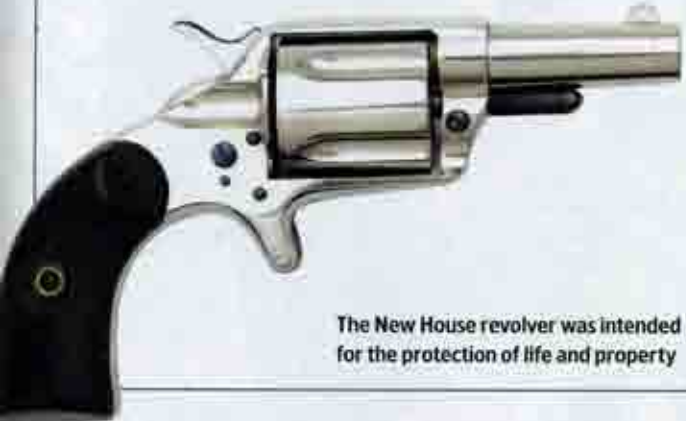
Three decades later, the family has decided to put the former viceroy of India's pistols on the market. They will be sold by the leading specialist auctioneers, Holt's, on 24 June.

In 1997, when private pistol ownership was banned, the Imperial War Museum took Mountbatten's pistols on loan and covered their value with a Treasury indemnity. In today's straitened times, HM Treasury frowns upon what amounts to free storage of private property by museums, and the guns had to be returned to the family, who reluctantly chose to sell them.

As can be seen below, the guns are an eclectic mix of firearms acquired over a lifetime of military and public service. ▶

**① Colt .41 New House revolver**

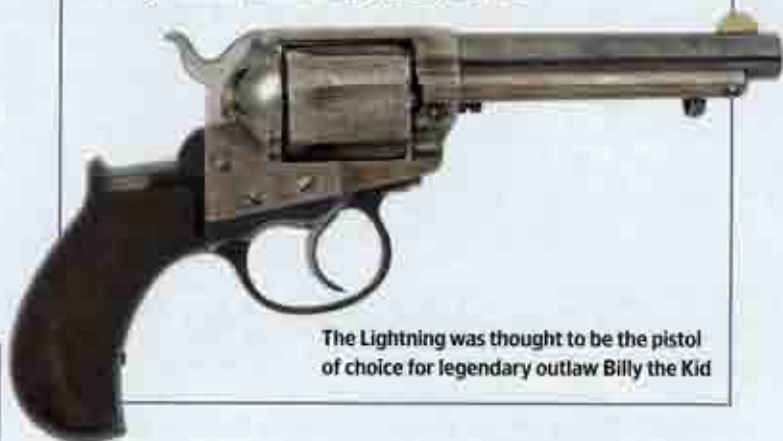
The earliest of these Colt pistols is a .41 New House revolver, dating from circa 1884. Colt introduced the New House model in 1880. It was intended for the protection of life and property, hence the name. It was a robust and simple design, which did not feature an extractor. Instead, the cylinder had to be removed from the frame and the empties knocked out with the cylinder pin. A quick reload was not an option; Colt took the view that, if you got into a scrape that needed more than five shots, you probably shouldn't have been there. For all that, it must have been a great comfort to have had a New House revolver in your pocket or in the bureau. Production of the New House lasted until 1886 and 15,400 were made.



The New House revolver was intended for the protection of life and property

**② .38 Colt Model 1877 Lightning**

Next is a .38 Colt Model 1877 Lightning double-action revolver, made circa 1879. The Lightning was Colt's first double-action pistol. It was a variation on the highly successful Single-Action Army (SAA) revolver, sometimes called the Peacemaker, introduced in 1875. Whereas the SAA's hammer had to be cocked for each shot, the Lightning could be fired simply by pressing the trigger. This made for rapid shooting at close quarters when pistols were simply pointed rather than aimed. Though it could be fired quickly, its mechanism was fragile and difficult to repair. Most did not survive for long in the tough conditions of the old west, and production ceased in 1909 with only 166,849 made. The American Express Co bought 1,200 Lightnings for its staff and the Mexico City police used it in small numbers. The famous American artist Frederic Remington owned one and tradition has it that it was the favourite of one William H. Bonney, better known to history as Billy the Kid.



The Lightning was thought to be the pistol of choice for legendary outlaw Billy the Kid

**③ Model 1903 Hammerless Pocket Automatic**

**④ Model 1908 Hammerless Pocket Automatic**

The last of Lord Mountbatten's Colts are self-loading pistols that feature the genius of legendary firearms designer John Moses Browning. Colt and Browning had a truly symbiotic relationship. Browning came up with the concept for a firearm and Colt's design team

turned it into reality. Though the first Colt-Browning pistols were large, cumbersome affairs designed for military use, they were effective. Colt saw an opening for a smaller pocket pistol that could compete with Smith & Wesson's revolvers and Fabrique Nationale self-loading pistols, also designed by Browning. The Model 1903 Hammerless Pocket Automatic was Colt's first small-calibre self-loading pistol. It was popular and in production until 1945, with 572,215 being made. It was reliable and the lack of an external hammer meant that it would not



Colt's first small-calibre self-loading pistol was popular and in production until 1945, with 572,215 being made



The basic design was modified in 1908 so that the .380ACP cartridge could be used

snag on clothing when drawn. The US military bought 200,000, which were issued to senior officers and rear-echelon troops, who needed pistols for personal protection. In 1908, the basic design was modified so that the more powerful .380ACP cartridge could be used. This was called the Model 1908 and it too stayed in production until 1945, with 138,009 examples made. Both of Lord Mountbatten's Colt autos were made during World War II. One is marked *US property*, which suggests that it was probably part of the lend-lease programme.

**5 .455 Webley-Fosbery 6 Mauser C96**

Though the next two pistols are almost exactly the same age they could not be more different. The Mauser self-loading pistol looks to the future, whereas the Webley-Fosbery automatic revolver was an unsuccessful last-ditch attempt to bring the revolver into the modern age.

The Mauser C96 was the world's first effective self-loading pistol. It fired a cartridge with a high-velocity 7.63mm bullet rather than the lumbering man-stopper bullets of contemporary military revolvers. Its 10-shot magazine could be changed swiftly by means of a stripper clip. It was somewhat ungainly and collectors call it the "Broomhandle" after its curious wooden grip. It came with a hollow wooden holster that could be clipped on to the grip, making it into a useful carbine. Westley Richards distributed the C96, which was popular with army officers during the Boer war. Winston Churchill carried a Mauser at Omdurman in 1898 because of a bad shoulder. It was just as well, for he shot three Dervishes in the melee and might not have survived if armed with a sword. C96s were made in huge numbers well into the 1930s, including a fully automatic version.

By contrast, the .455 Webley-Fosbery was just a revolver with an ingenious automatic mechanism. On firing, the barrel, cylinder and breech recoiled together on the frame. The cylinder had small lugs running in zigzag slots, which made it rotate, and the recoil action cocked the hammer. This produced virtually no recoil shock and the Webley-Fosbery was capable of rapid and accurate fire in skilled hands. All six chambers could be reloaded simultaneously using a Prideaux quick-loader or a special steel clip. The Webley-Fosbery was popular for target shooting and claimed many successes at Bisley. It was tested by both the British and US military but rejected on account of its complicated nature. Though it was bought by individual officers, the revolver that wanted to be an automatic pistol was not a commercial success and only 4,267 were ever made. This pistol was originally owned by a Gordon Highlander officer, the Hon A. Crichton, who carried it during World War I.



The .455 Webley-Fosbery was capable of rapid and accurate fire in skilled hands



The world's first effective self-loading pistol, the Mauser C96

**7 Gold-plated .22 Pencil Gun**

The pièce de résistance of the Mountbatten guns is the gold-plated .22 pencil gun presented to Lord Louis by the Maharajah of Jodhpur in 1948. This is the most convincing writing instrument-gun combination that I've ever seen. It features a working propelling pencil and its deadly capability is given away only by its weight. Most pen guns are too large and non-functional as writing instruments, with obvious external triggers. This has none of these and looks just like an elegant pencil that might be found on any gentleman's *escritoire*.



A gold-plated .22 pencil gun given to Lord Mountbatten in 1948

*In conclusion*

Though all of the Mountbatten guns are classified as prohibited weapons, the Mauser pistol and the Fosbery and Colt revolvers may be owned — but not fired — as historic handguns, providing that the owner has a suitably conditioned firearms certificate. There is also a strong argument for saying that these four pistols ought to be classified as antiques and removed from licensing controls altogether. They are technologically obsolete and their ages range from 100 to 131 years. On those grounds, I doubt that a jury would convict anybody prosecuted for owning them without a certificate.

The Colt auto and pencil also qualify as historic handguns, as they easily satisfy the historic importance test. However, as they are chambered for readily available cartridges, they may be kept and fired only at Home Office-designated sites — more akin to prison compounds than sport shooting centres.

When the guns come under the hammer I expect that their provenance will create a lot of interest. The British royal family has a strong following in the US; and it would not surprise me if they were bought by Americans. If this were the case, part of me would mourn the loss of our heritage overseas. Another part would rejoice that they were going to a country where they would be appreciated and where they were not subject to the tyrannical firearms controls that shame our nation. ■