

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



B-quality Purdey boxlock

Imagine it is the late 1800s and you own one of the biggest shipbuilding yards in the world. You are an immensely wealthy man who is very keen on shooting and want to buy a Purdey. Do you buy a trio, maybe even a quintet? No, you buy a B-quality Purdey boxlock. For whatever reason, this is exactly what Gustav Wolff, owner of Harland & Wolff in Belfast, did in 1886. His decision is our good fortune as few B-quality Purdeys were built and today these fine guns are rare indeed.

During the third quarter of the 19th century, the demand for sporting guns was considerable

due to the great advances made in breech-loading. Best gunmaking concerns like Dickson, Holland & Holland and Purdey had on average three or more orders every day – an incredible demand they found difficult to cope with.

James Purdey & Sons had built guns of the finest quality only since its beginnings in 1814 and all had been made in its London premises. However, demand was so high in the 1870s with the introduction of the breech-loader that they decided to offer second-quality guns built in Birmingham and finished by the firm's own staff in London. Many customers had often asked for such guns.

There was absolutely no pretence or economy with the truth by Purdey in any of this. When the company introduced second-quality firearms in the 1870s it stated that the shotguns originated in Birmingham but were finished in London and they were clearly stamped to show this. A great many other makers did the same thing, outsourcing their second-quality products to reputable makers.

Grading system

In the 1870s Purdey introduced a highly successful grading system categorising its guns and rifles either B, C, D or E-quality, with each firearm being clearly marked. Best-quality guns remained of the highest standard and were graded "Best" (the letter "A" was never used).

As Purdey stated in its sales literature: "Best guns are made throughout the premises by the most skilful workmen and are distinguished by the perfection of balance, shape, finish and shooting power for which they have obtained worldwide celebrity."

The grades B, C, D and E were lower-quality guns built in Birmingham and finished in London. The difference in quality can be demonstrated by the prices of hammerless guns of the various grades as listed in an 1885 catalogue:

Gustav Wolff

GUSTAV WILLIAM Wolff, the original owner of no. 12565, was born in Hamburg in 1834 into a wealthy merchant family. He was educated privately and then entered college in Liverpool to study engineering and shipbuilding. He served his apprenticeship with Joseph Whitworth, the famous engineer who would introduce the Whitworth fluid-compressed steel with which his future Purdey gun would be barrelled.

Wolff completed his training with Goodfellow & Co. at Hyde and then secured a position with



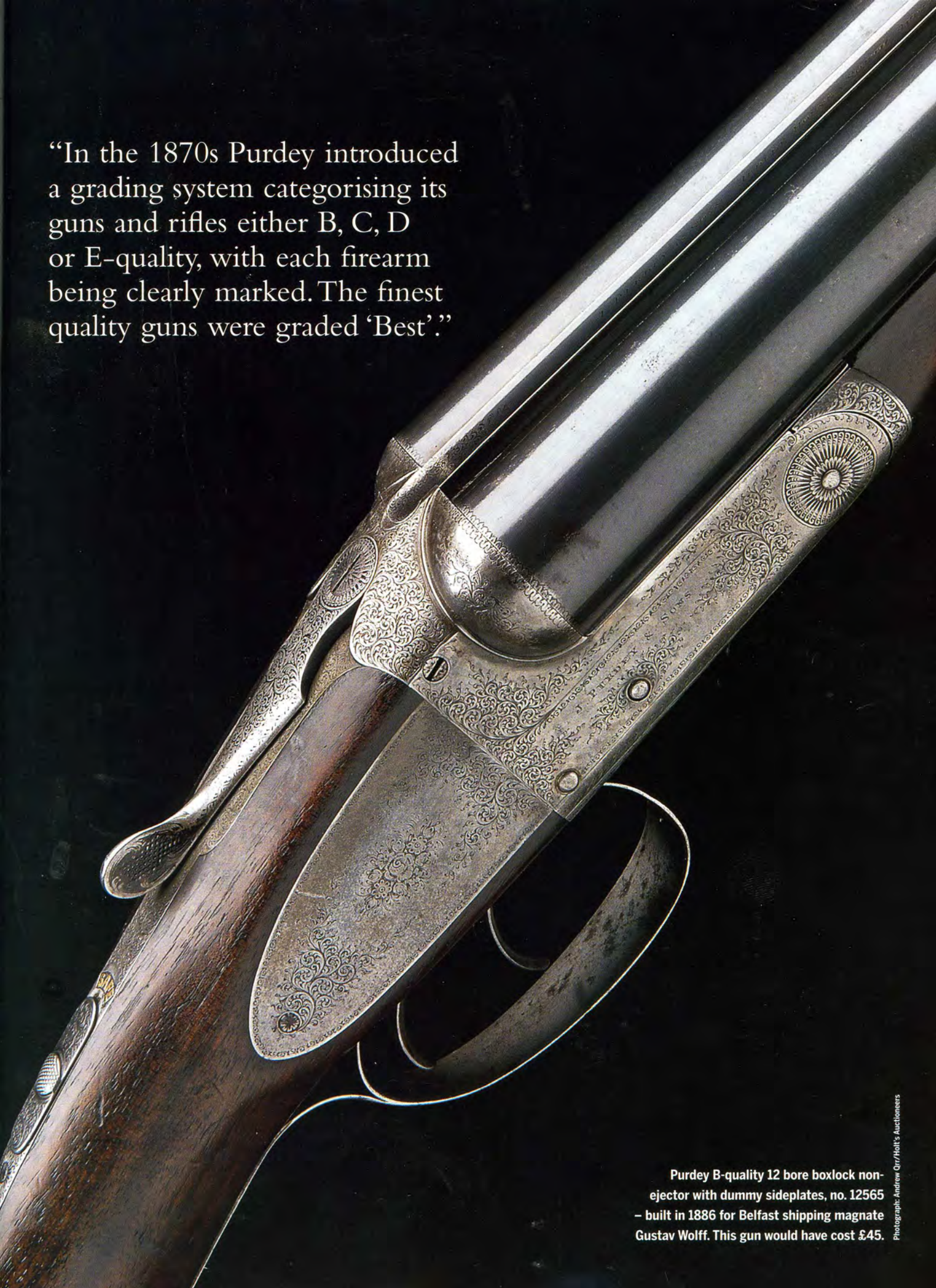
Gustav Wolff (1834-1913).

Robert Hickson & Company at its Queen's Island shipbuilding yard in Belfast. The manager of

the yard, Edward Harland, bought out the company in 1858 and two years later Wolff went into partnership with him, creating one of the greatest names in shipbuilding – Harland & Wolff, the firm behind RMS Titanic.

Wolff's two main recreations outside shipbuilding were shooting and fishing. For a time around the turn of the century he was Conservative MP for East Belfast. He lived in an estate on the outskirts of Belfast at The Den, Strandtown, and retired from Harland & Wolff in 1908, passing away on April 17, 1913. ■

“In the 1870s Purdey introduced a grading system categorising its guns and rifles either B, C, D or E-quality, with each firearm being clearly marked. The finest quality guns were graded ‘Best’.”



Purdey B-quality 12 bore boxlock non-ejector with dummy sideplates, no. 12565 – built in 1886 for Belfast shipping magnate Gustav Wolff. This gun would have cost £45.

GREAT BRITISH SHOTGUNS

Best gun: £58 10s

Grade B: £45

Grade C: £35 15s

Grade D: £26 10s

Grade E: £22

The B, C, D and E-quality guns were all of very high standard, as shown by the high prices asked. All were stamped with their particular quality on the action flats along with Purdey's trademark four bullets.

The principal Birmingham makers building the guns and rifles for Purdey were W. & C. Scott, A. Smith & Sons, Richard Ellis, Richard Redman, Samuel B. Allport, William Jones and Charles Osborne & Co.

The introduction of the second-quality gun was a very successful move by Purdey. Considerably more guns and rifles could be sold but the division between best guns and second-quality guns was clearly marked. In the 1870s the company sold around 230 firearms per year, which rose to around 350 per year in the mid 1880s.

A great many of the second-quality guns and rifles were destined to be used overseas in the Empire, where many sportsmen didn't want best-quality guns; instead they wanted serviceable tools to withstand the rigours of colonial life and

The C quality hammerless rifle

THE .450/400 boxlock rifle no. 13963 is a very typical C-quality Purdey rifle. It was sold on March 15, 1891, to Sir William Rylands of Massey Hall, Thelwall near Warrington. He was the managing director of his family's steel firm, Rylands Brothers, and was passionate about shooting.

The rifle was built by the Birmingham maker Samuel Allport and was finished and regulated by Purdey in London. It is a boxlock non-ejector with Purdey third grip fastening and intercepting safeties. It is stamped "C Quality" on the action flats along with Purdey's trademark of four bullets.

It is a fine-quality firearm and cost £40 as opposed to £69 15s for a best double rifle. The figured stock has a pistol grip and cheek piece. The barrels are 28" long with matt rib and the entire rifle weighs 7lbs. 9oz. ■



C-quality Purdey boxlock non-ejector .450/400 rifle no. 13963 – sold in 1891 to Lancashire-based industrialist Sir William Rylands.

they knew that with "Purdey" engraved upon the gun, the quality would still be assured.

Demise of B-quality

Most second-quality guns and rifles came down from Birmingham in the white and were finished and engraved in London. They usually had Birmingham proof marks but had Purdey serial numbers.

With the perfection of the hammerless gun by the early 20th century, demand for guns tailed off. Coupled with the effects of the First World War

and the post-conflict economic recession, sales fell off and the second-quality guns never re-appeared, with Purdey reverting to best guns only.

By far the most commonly encountered second-quality guns are the C, D and E types. Grade B guns are very rare as they were so close to a best gun that most customers decided to stretch that little bit further.

Why Gustav Wolff wanted a B-quality is open to speculation. Often such guns were ordered for sons, but Gustav Wolff was a bachelor. The gun he went for is B-quality no. 12565, a 12 bore boxlock non-ejector with dummy sideplates, ordered in 1886. The action would have been bought in from Birmingham, but the rest of the gun is unmistakably Purdey. The 28" barrels are of Whitworth steel and the action has very fine Purdey rose and scroll engraving. It has the trademark "B" stamped on the action flats. The stock is finely figured and the whole gun just looks "Purdey", being of fine quality. It is a lightweight gun weighing just 5lbs. 14oz. and it is contained in its original case, stamped "G. W. Wolff, Belfast". ■

Best, B, C, D, E-quality hammer guns

AS WELL as offering various high-quality hammerless guns, James Purdey & Sons also sold hammer guns in the five categories: Best, B, C, D and E.

Its best hammer gun cost £56: "Finest work and finishing throughout". The B-quality hammer gun was described as: "Picked stock, fine Damascus barrels, superior make, balance and finish, approaching a best gun in style". Price £40 10s.

As for its C-quality hammer guns, the company stated: "James Purdey & Sons make a large number of guns of C-quality and strongly recommend them as excellent value to those who do not wish to go to a higher price". The C-quality hammer gun retailed at £32 8s. The D cost £25 13s and the E-quality (£20 14s) was listed as a: "Central fire double gun, choke or cylinder, top lever or lever over guard action, rebounding locks snap fore-part. A strong serviceable gun suitable for Colonial use". These prices were high compared with normal Birmingham-produced guns, showing that they were all built and finished to a high standard. ■