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Gunroom

By Bill
Harriman



An Edwardian era gun provides an insight into the sport of live pigeon shooting

I'm often asked how I distinguish a shotgun specifically built for the sport of live pigeon shooting from other types of sporting gun. Holt's auctioneers is offering a fine W. & C. Scott live pigeon gun in its March sale. This means that I can combine text with image to give a thorough picture of a pigeon gun, rather than just describe the features that I would expect to find.

Live pigeon shooting was popular in Great Britain from the early 19th century until World War I. It was finally banned in 1921 after public opinion turned against the use of large numbers of sentient creatures for target shooting. It is said that Queen Alexandra found it distasteful and royal disapproval hastened its end. It featured in the 1900 Olympics and caused public outrage. Its demise was accelerated by the introduction of machines which threw inanimate targets.

Its legacy remains with the term "birds" used to describe clay targets, which are said to be "killed" when hit. The instruction to the trapper

is to "pull", which harks back to the string that was yanked to pull back the cover of the trap to allow the pigeon to erupt into the air. The earliest traps were just holes in the ground covered by old hats, which were jerked aside as the string was tugged.

During the sport's heyday, specialised types of shotgun began to be developed purely for pigeon shooting. As the birds were quick and had to be killed within a close range, the guns threw large charges of shot propelled by heavy charges of powder. Eventually, the rules specified ballistic maximum

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loads but in the earlier days, the bigger the gun, the better the chance of a hit with the larger shot string.

A sporting gun

The gun that Holt's has in its sale was built by the renowned gunmakers W. & C. Scott of Birmingham. Its top rib proclaims it to be "The Pigeon Club Gun", so there is no doubt as to its purpose. It bears the address of 78 Shaftesbury Avenue, which was Scott's London branch from 1900 to 1921. It has 1904 smokeless powder proof marks, so that narrows the date again.

Gunmaking suffered badly during World War I. Materials were short, and skilled labour had been pressed into the forces. There was neither the market nor the inclination to buy sporting guns as thousands of men were being killed in action or maimed for life. When the gunmaker Lancaster's petitioned for bankruptcy in the 1930s it stated that the war had wiped out a generation of customers. Ergo, on the balance of probabilities, the Scott gun was built in the decade from 1904 to 1914.

The other giveaway that the Scott is a pigeon gun is its weight of 7lb 9oz. This was designed to minimise the recoil caused by firing large charges. Both barrels are bored full-choke to concentrate the pattern and maximise the chances of a kill. The action is built with a treble grip and is marked "Scott's Improved Bolt".

The features that define it as a live pigeon gun and distinguish it from a heavy wildfowling piece are its side clips and bolsters. The side clips prevent any lateral movement in the breech, while the bolsters strengthen the action in front of the standing breech. These are normally the features of a double rifle built to stand up to the pressures of express cartridges. It is rare to see either on a wildfowling gun. On a more banal level, guns intended for fowling are often decorated with duck and geese, while those for pigeon shooting have images of pigeon engraved on them.

Live pigeon shooting is still legal today in some countries. Most sporting men and women in the UK would decry it as barbarous, especially when testing artificial alternatives abound. For all that, live pigeon shooting laid the foundations for clayshooting that so many enjoy today. In any case, it is pointless to judge past generations by modern morality — the past is another country and its borders are closed. ■



This 12-bore shotgun bearing the words "The Pigeon Club Gun" and a Shaftesbury Avenue address is typical of an early 20th century live pigeon gun

Next time Bruce Potts looks at the Krico 902, a classic gun that has some modern touches