

EXCLUSIVE 'Shooting has a great case for its defence' Simon Hart MP on our sport's future

SHOOTING TIMES

& COUNTRY MAGAZINE

The UK's leading weekly shooting title since 1882

17th October 2012

GUNDOG TRAINING

Working to the whistle

Perfect your remote control

SHOOT OF THE WEEK

One shoot, two stories

Tales from the peg and the beaters' wagon

NIGHT SHOOTING

The lamping revolution

No more lugging big batteries

Boomtime for blackpowder

Smoke, noise and fun!

www.shootingtimes.co.uk £2.30
4 2 >
9 770037 416211



ON TEST Savage's all-in-one bargain package for just £730

The otters' return: how to spot if they're in your backyard

Gunroom

By Bill Harriman



French gunmakers from the 19th century did not always focus on beauty alone

It is always interesting to find a gun with a feature that makes it the exception that proves a rule. By its nature the history of any form of technology must always be a series of generalisms because of the imitative way that objects are manufactured, especially in the industrial age.

At the start of the 19th century, the flintlock mechanism was at the height of its development. Though the basic concept had not changed in more than a century, British gunmakers devised minor refinements to improve the speed of the lock. The idea was to reduce the time lag between the priming powder taking fire and the main charge going off. As gamebirds were increasingly shot in flight, this was now becoming an issue for sportsmen who did not care to have their bag size reduced by sluggardly lock mechanisms. These refinements included anti-friction rollers, water-resistant priming pans, half-cock safeties and tumbler détentes.

A British shotgun of about 1810 by a top London or provincial gunmaker was the apogee of technical merit but something of a Plain Jane. By contrast, its French

as presentation pieces for VIPs or as bribes for eastern potentates. Berleur and his fellow master gunmakers had a ready market for their talents.

The Berleur gun that caught my attention was typical of the period. By today's standards it would be a long-barrelled small-bore with its 32in 22-bore barrels. The iron furniture was finely chiselled with flowers, urns and floral swags. The breasts of both cocks were engraved with cornucopias, echoing the pastoral theme of the rest of the decoration. Both fore-end and wrist were finely chequered, with the intersections between the diamonds enhanced by a myriad of tiny silver pins giving a beautiful metallic contrast to the dark richness of the walnut. The trigger-guard bow was engraved with a harpy seated upon a globe, atop a cannon barrel. This is a highly unusual mixture of classical and contemporary images and was presumably a nobleman's crest.

At first blush, this was a top-quality French sporting gun indistinguishable from others of its class and type — until I looked at the frizzens. They seemed ordinary enough but both had secondary pan covers, which could be left in place to protect the priming while the striking area was pushed forward. This was intended as a safety device to permit a loaded and primed gun to be carried without the flint hitting the steel if the cock flew forward when the gun was jarred. For all of its ingenuity, this would not have been practical: the safest way to walk with a loaded flintlock gun is with your thumb on the cock in the half-cock position. The cock can be rapidly drawn back in anticipation of a shot. Fiddling about within the steels would be impractical and slow.

So, this unusual gun is the exception that proves the rule — that the French built high-quality pretty guns, while the Brits stuck to plainness and technical virtuosity. ■



▲ This beautifully detailed 22-bore Berleur sporting gun has unusual locks

A British shotgun of about 1810 was the apogee of technical merit but something of a Plain Jane

counterpart was less technically advanced but built to the highest standards of quality and artistic taste. This was especially the case if the gunmaker — *arquebusier* in French — enjoyed royal or imperial patronage. The greatest *arquebusier* of the age was Nicholas Boutet, who signed his work "Directeur Artiste", the only gunmaker to do so.

Deluxe firearms

Recently, I saw a French flintlock double sporting gun that was not only exceptionally high-quality but which also had an unusual refinement. It was built circa 1800 by a Belgian gunmaker called Guillaume Berleur, the younger brother of Michel Berleur, who made large numbers of military arms as well as civilian sporting guns.

Guillaume enjoyed official patronage at the state arms factory at Versailles. This was the era of the Consulate, when the young Napoleon Bonaparte carried all before him in a series of victories that forced the Austrians out of Italy. The new administration commissioned deluxe firearms

HOLT'S

Next time Lewis Potter examines an unusual underhammer breechloading 16-bore shotgun with unknown origins