

HOLT'S

AUCTIONEERS OF FINE MODERN & ANTIQUE GUNS

IN THE GUNROOM

Collectors are a strange breed. Take John Ormiston. He buys an empty case, and is then obsessed with finding something to fit inside. For years all that case held was promise. "Dear old John," says Nick. "He's got it badly." A good friend since he first ventured into the gun trade, Nick was to play a role in John's search for something to fill the case for it was a leather rifle case by Lancaster, and it bore the potent initials "D. F-H.". John was hot on the trail of the Denys Finch-Hatton gun for which it was made. But the chances of finding the legendary big game hunter's rifle were slim. Finch-Hatton had lost his life on Wednesday, 13th May 1931 when the Gypsy Moth he was piloting to Nairobi plunged to the ground and burst into flames.

Was the rifle in the 'plane with him? At the time, Finch-Hatton was scouting for elephant from the air. The money-spinning potential of aeroplanes in Africa had occurred to him in 1928 when, answering an urgent call to outfit a safari for Edward, Prince of Wales, he flew over the Rift Valley for the first time. His reputation as a hunter had spread far and wide, and his reputation as a soldier was sealed when he was awarded a Military Cross in 1916 having faced off his attackers during an ambush in the now overlooked campaign in German East Africa. As a lover, Finch-Hatton's reputation went global after Robert Redford played him in Sydney Pollack's film, *Out of Africa*. A lushly romantic interpretation of Baroness Karen Blixen's memoir, it scooped seven Oscars. In real life, Karen Blixen's husband, Baron Bror von Blixen-Finecke, shared the honours as Africa's top PH with Finch-Hatton. Sharing became a habit and Bror Blixen took to introducing Finch-Hatton as "my good friend, and my wife's lover". Finch-Hatton had left from Karen Blixen's farm, the farm famously "at the foot of the Ngong Hills..." for that last flight. The lovers quarrelled; she watched him go and tried (in vain) to slash her wrists. Another lover, pregnant by Finch-Hatton at the time of his death, was the racehorse trainer and aviatrix, Beryl Markham. In her own (superior) Africa story, *West with the Night*, she credited him with intellect and strength, quick intuition and Voltarian humour. "As for charm," she wrote, "I suspect Denys invented it".

Here was a man for John to identify with; small wonder he wanted to add Finch-Hatton's rifle to his collection. "I think I would have liked him," he says. "Finch-Hatton was one of the Happy Valley set who knew how to enjoy themselves, real characters." I spotted John recently riding the Piccadilly Line absorbed in the pages of a *Holt's* catalogue and heading for a sale. Many of the lots were like old friends. "The sort of guns I like to collect - classic, best English sporting guns - tend to go round and around," he says. "There aren't all that many of them." Is it the search for

a gun, or its acquisition that most excites John? “The thrill is finding ‘the impossible’ and buying it when you can’t afford it,” he replies. “If somebody gave me £10m and said, ‘make yourself a gun collection’, I (half) wouldn’t want to do it. It would be no more than an investment fund.” John’s collecting bug had attacked early, the nine-year-old plundering antique shops for swords and daggers, unthinkable behaviour in our own milksop era. “In those days people didn’t knife each other,” he points out, lugubrious as Eeyore.

The first gun in his collection was a pinfire revolver with which his grandfather, a ship’s captain, had shot a mutineer – “either in the stomach or in the middle of the Atlantic, I’m not sure,” says John. He also remembers “going on the train from York to Bradford when I was at school to buy a double-barrelled percussion muzzle loader that I then used to shoot rabbits - I shot more rabbits with a muzzle loader than I did with a breech loader.” I have seen John shoot, and those bolting bunny exploits served him well. The Africa bug bit early too. “My prep school headmaster lent me a copy of *The Man-eaters of Tsavo*,” he says, recalling Lieut.-Col. J. H. Patterson’s 1907 tale of two lions in British East Africa who developed a taste for Asian and African railways builders, (135 of them), until the colonel taught them the ultimate lesson with his .303 Lee Enfield. The schoolboy was beguiled, and as an adult John lived the dream. He became the director of *Holland & Holland* and the founder of both *The Scottish Sporting Gazette* and *The African Sporting Gazette*, Africa’s premier hunting magazine. If ever there were a suitable candidate for ownership of the Finch-Hatton rifle, John was that man.

But would his quest prove impossible? If not in the Gypsy Moth, perhaps the rifle was one of those impounded by the Kenyan government in the 1970s? Now Nick takes up the story saying, “Unbeknownst to John, at the time when he actually bought the case, the gun was already in England.” As part of Karen Dixon’s estate, it had been left to Jock Dawson, another famous PH who transformed himself into a respected conservationist after Kenya banned hunting in 1977, and headed the *Rhino Rescue Trust* in the Rift Valley. Precisely when John was in his reverie about the empty gun case, Nick was in Kenya with Dawson who died in 2004, aged 84. Dawson’s son brought the elusive gun to England, and it found its way to a *Holt’s* valuation day at Powderham Castle in Devon. Minus its signature case, and with no clue to its provenance, the gun was a Charles Lancaster .450 double rifle in poor condition. “It was consigned with a suggested reserve of £1,000-1,500,” says Nick. “I rang Dave Perkins who used to own Charles Lancaster and told him the serial number. Dave Boy was fabulous. One of the old-school East End boys, all self-taught gunsmiths. And he told me who the rifle was made for. Then I started to research, and next thing I knew we’d increased the estimate to £3,000. We had everybody after it, the world....”

The impossible had been run to ground. “I couldn’t believe my eyes when I saw the lot described in *Holt’s* catalogue,” says John, and he measured the compartment for the barrels inside his case. “It matched the barrels.” Auction day dawned; how fast would the estimate be exceeded? “But I had never before been to an auction where I was so determined to buy a lot,” John recalls, voicing the rising thrill of obsession.

“My head normally rules my heart; not this time. Once the price went over £20,000, I was battling it out with a telephone bidder. In a muck sweat, I eventually got the rifle for £27,000”. John slid the rifle into the case. Like Cinderella’s glass slipper, “it fitted perfectly – even the mark where the sights had rubbed the lid’s baize lining aligned exactly.” The *Holland & Holland Shooting Grounds* was the backdrop when the rifle’s new owner first fired his acquisition. “I used the original *Eley Kinoch* .450 3¼ ammunition, and it grouped perfectly at 56yds, with a shot from each barrel ¼inch apart.” John’s imagination immediately took flight. “I wanted to take the rifle to Africa to follow in Finch-Hatton’s footsteps,” he says. Four trips later, with Zimbabwe and Botswana standing in for Kenya, John is jubilant. “The rifle has shot buffalo, elephant, eland - even warthog, its condition and accuracy making it the perfect companion for anyone wanting to shoot dangerous game. And because no other rifle belonging to Denys Finch-Hatton is known, this one is a piece of Africa’s history.”

Elizabeth Walton