

# IN THE GUNROOM

## ALEXANDER HENRY, TRIUMPH AND TRAGEDY

By Donald Dallas

I have been very privileged over the years to examine in detail the records of many famous British gunmakers, Purdey, Boss, Holland & Holland and so on, but out of all the records I have studied, the ledgers of Alexander Henry stand out from all the others.

Today the name of Alexander Henry is owned by John Dickson & Son and the Henry records reside in their premises at 21 Frederick Street, Edinburgh. The Henry records stand out for two reasons. Firstly, each firearm is recorded over two pages and the detail given is quite remarkable, patent use numbers, type of sight fitted, charge and type of cartridge etc. Every conceivable fact you would want to know is there in contrast to other makers records that might simply say "a new 12 bore breech-loader".

Secondly, to read through the customers names is like reading through a Who's Who of the world in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Most British royalty is present as is most European royalty, Indian Maharajas abound, the aristocracy feature in every second entry and many well known characters in the sporting world are recorded. I have never encountered such a profusion of glittering personae before. The name of Alexander Henry was known throughout the world and it is telling that when the Prince of Wales visited Edinburgh in 1870, he requested one audience only, a private meeting with Alexander Henry.

Yet what is remarkable about Henry's position of considerable standing in the sporting and military world is that he achieved it in a very short space of time; he was in business for only 42 years from the commencement of his business in 1852 until his death in 1894. After his death the business was passed to his two sons but this did not work out and it was a shadow of its former self.

For all his undoubted success, Alexander Henry experienced immense personal tragedy in a horrific accident in 1860. How he managed to continue after this is difficult to comprehend and this was compounded by the fact that he knew his two sons would not make a success of the business after he was gone.

Alexander Henry was born on the 4<sup>th</sup> June 1818 in the port of Leith just to the east of Edinburgh. His father John Henry was the superintendent in the carriage department for the Royal Horse Artillery in Leith Fort. This must have kindled an early interest in weaponry as young Henry could not fail to be impressed by the soldiers in uniform, their firearms and artillery pieces.

In 1830, aged just 12, he began his apprenticeship with Thomas Mortimer of Edinburgh. His workmanship was quickly noted and a contemporary account described him as, "He (Henry) very soon manifested a special aptitude for the trade in which he was destined to achieve such fame". At a mere 22 years of age he was made manager of the Mortimer firm in 1840.

By the year 1852 Henry was 34 years old and in that year decided to set up on his own business specialising in rifle manufacture. He took over Samuel Gourlay's premises at 12 South St Andrew Street, Edinburgh where the business would remain for the rest of his life. In an uncanny co-incidence, my daughter Katy works at these premises today. I did mention this fascinating fact to her, but at the mention of the word gunmaker, I could see her eyes glazing over and when I suggested she should have a rake about in the basement, "There will be spiders" finished that conversation!

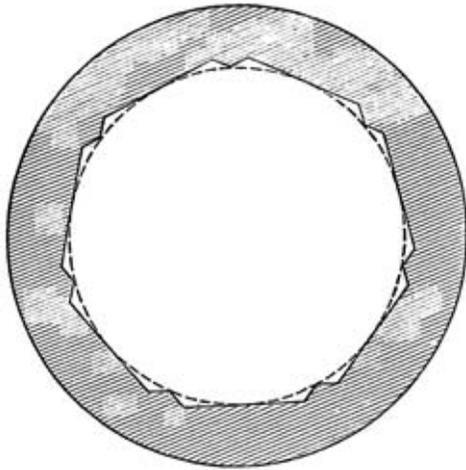
Henry was one of the leading figures in the establishment of the Edinburgh Rifle Volunteers in 1859. A few months after its formation in that year, over 900 men joined and Henry himself was in the 1<sup>st</sup> Citizen Company and by 1874 was made an honorary captain. He was a first class shot himself regularly winning many inter volunteer competitions and taking prizes at Wimbledon. Coupled with his regular appearances at rifle competitions the length and breadth of the land, Henry offered his rifles as prizes and soon Henry rifles began to be duly noted for their superior accuracy.

On Tuesday 25<sup>th</sup> September 1860 an unimaginable accident happened to Alexander Henry, an accident I came across by pure chance searching through the archives of *The Scotsman* newspaper. To the best of my knowledge nothing was written about it after the event and it certainly was never mentioned in any of the extensive writings on Henry or in his obituaries.

His first son, James Henry was born on the 24<sup>th</sup> April 1848 and young James took such an interest in gunmaking that he was earmarked to take over the business. On that Tuesday afternoon on the 25<sup>th</sup> September 1860 young James aged just 12 was helping his father along



Alexander Henry 1818-1894 in his Edinburgh Rifle Volunteers uniform.



Henry rifling

with a friend to regulate a muzzle-loading rifle. Alexander Henry had his own shooting range in open country near what would soon become the road leading to Hibernian Football Club in Easter Road. As he had done several times before young James sheltered behind a wall near the butt when his father fired the rifle. His job was to come out after the shot and point on the target where the bullet struck. Being a single shot muzzle-loader it was a well practised ritual with the delay between shots. But of course with the benefit of hindsight the arrangement was fraught with danger.

For some reason young James left the safety of the wall, it was assumed to pick up spent lead, Alexander Henry did not spot him, pulled the trigger and killed his son instantly with a shot through the head.

The distress that Henry and his wife suffered must have been unfathomable and how he managed to continue in the gun trade after this I have no idea. What is puzzling is that although the registration of births, deaths and marriages was made compulsory in Scotland in 1855, there is no death certificate for James in 1860. The staff at the Scottish Record Office were very helpful in trying to locate it but they eventually could offer no explanation as to why it did not exist. The cemetery records do state the cause of death however as "Accidental Shooting". A report on the tragedy was published in many of the leading newspapers of the day including *The Times* such was the awfulness of the event, but there the reports finished and it was never mentioned again.

On the 15<sup>th</sup> November 1860 Henry took out patent no. 2802 that patented the famous Henry rifling. His patent showed several forms of shallow rifling from 4 to 10 grooves but eventually he settled on 7 grooves with a twist of one turn in 22 inches. The great merit of Henry's shallow rifling was that every single surface of the bullet was gripped by the rifling imparting a powerful spin to the bullet. As can be seen from the diagram, the dotted line represents the bullet and it will be noted that the bullet is gripped round its entire circumference.

His rifling was not only well suited to the muzzle-loader as it was easy to load, but also the breech-loader and it quickly became revered for its accuracy with a great many makers using it for their own rifles. It was only when nitro powders appeared in the 1890s that it became obsolete as it could not cope with the higher velocities now in existence.

A patent of equal importance to Alexander Henry was his drop block patent no. 1071 of 17<sup>th</sup> April 1865. It was a beautifully designed falling block and set the standard for others to imitate in a single barrelled breech-loading rifle. At first a hammer sidelock was employed and it is interesting that for a short while in the late 1860s and early 1870s a left

hand lock was utilised to make the rifle easier to load. However it looked awkward and Henry returned to the original arrangement. Several other drop block patents followed along with a hammerless drop block. All these rifles were in .500, .450 or .360 bore and were all beautifully made to the highest quality and quite rightly fetch high prices today.

Alexander Henry became a household name in Great Britain when the Martini-Henry rifle was adopted by the British army in 1870. In 1866 the Secretary for War called upon gunmakers to come up with a breech-loading rifle to replace the Snider. Henry submitted his drop block rifle but after intense trials the Martini action was preferred as it had fewer parts and it was cheaper but Henry's rifling was retained to create the Martin-Henry rifle.

Alexander Henry had two remaining sons Alexander (Jnr.) born in 1859 and John born in 1863. Alexander (Jnr.) was apprenticed to Joseph Brazier the famous lock maker in Wolverhampton and then entered his father's business along with his brother John. It was apparent that all was not well and that the brothers they did not get on as Alexander Henry, although leaving the business to then equally in his will, left detailed instructions as to how they might divide the business should either wish to get out.

Alexander Henry died on the 27<sup>th</sup> January 1894 from "concussion of the brain" and the business passed to his two sons. His younger son John promptly sold out followed by his elder brother Alexander (Jnr.) who then set up business on his own. It was an odd situation with two Alexander Henry businesses in Edinburgh. The original firm was run by Alexander Brown who had been the manager of the business for a



Alexander Henry (Jnr.) 1859-1931

considerable time and in 1895 the premises relocated to 18 Frederick Street. The quality of the firearms deteriorated though with most now being bought in from Birmingham.

Alexander (Jnr.) was in business at 89 Leith Walk, Edinburgh and around 1903 he took out an extraordinary patent for a rifled golf ball. (All the Henry family were keen golfers) It was a fascinating idea but did not work well as the ball tended to fly too straight making curved shots impossible. They are very rare golf balls today and one of these rifled balls sold for an astonishing price at auction recently.

He invested a great deal of money in this golf ball patent and his business suffered serious financial difficulties. He failed to supply golf balls to people who had paid for them and worse still sold guns that had been sent in for repair. On the 7<sup>th</sup> February 1906 Alexander Henry (Jnr.) was convicted of fraud at Edinburgh Sheriff Court and sentenced to four months in jail, an ignominious end to such a famous name. The original Henry business was mortified and issued several advertisements in newspapers "*The Alexander Henry who appeared in Court yesterday is not the proprietor of this well known business*".

Alexander Henry should be regarded as the pre-eminent rifle maker of the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century both in muzzle and breech-loading. The next time a Henry rifle appears in this catalogue just look at it and ponder at its quality and style. There is none better.

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Patent No. 4360

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### ALEXANDER HENRY, GUN AND 89 LEITH WALK, EDINBURGH RIFLE MAKER

**GOLF ILLUSTRATED, October 16th, 1903.**—Mr Alexander Henry, of Edinburgh, whose name is so well known in connection with the British Service Weapons—the Martini-Henry and the improved Lee-Enfield Government Rifle, Hammerless ejector guns and other scientific inventions—has turned his attention to golfing weapons and projectiles. He has applied the principle of Rifling (which steadies and straightens the flight of a bullet) to golf balls, and has produced a ball with the rifled pattern on it in place of the usual markings. The ball has a beautiful appearance, and it is claimed for it that it is specially adapted for driving against the wind, as it does not soar but bores through it. This novel invention, which is also rubber-cored, is well worth a trial. It is undeniably a ball that goes off the club at a terrific pace, a pace that is well maintained in the carry, while the globe runs well after dropping. It is also reliable upon the green.

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Alexander Henry's (Jnr) rifled golf ball.