

IN THE GUNROOM

LOT 525 – THOMAS BOSS PERCUSSION BALL AND SHOT GUN

By Donald Dallas

When it arrived on the Holts premises, I was immediately struck by its condition. For a percussion gun built in 1854, this Thomas Boss gun was in excellent original condition. The stock was crisp, there were traces of colour hardening upon the locks and the whole gun looked like it had seen very little use.

However when I picked it up I was struck by how heavy it was, far heavier than you would expect from a normal percussion gun. Then I spotted a patch box in the butt – unusual – then I spotted a rear sight on the top rib – unusual. I glanced at the bore – smooth bore – and for a few moments I was confused. What was it?

The one factor that makes a Boss gun stand out from all their contemporaries is their consistent quality. From Thomas Boss's early ventures in the 1820s right up to the present day without exception, Boss have built one class of gun only, the best. Their motto "builder of best guns only" is entirely apt.

This gun, no. 1360, a 15 bore percussion gun is of the usual Boss quality coming out of the workshop at 73 St James's Street in the year 1854. But what is it? I looked up the Boss records regarding the gun and they were quite confusing as they were rambling and included a lot of details about the original buyer trading in a pair of Mantons and so on. But amongst this were the details of this gun. It was described as a "heavy gun" and the patch box, rear sight and sling swivels were all mentioned. This gun was built to the order of Captain The Hon'ble Ashley Ponsonby of the Grenadier Guards and is engraved as such on the under rib.

Thomas Boss specialised in percussion shotguns and they made up the bulk of his production. He did build single and double rifles as well but they are quite rare with only 31 percussion rifles being recorded.

This gun no. 1360 is not a double rifle as it has no rifling but is also not a shotgun as it has substantial barrels, a back sight, a patchbox and sling swivels. What it is, and this makes it even rarer than Thomas Boss percussion rifles, is a Thomas Boss ball and shot gun. I have never come across another Boss percussion ball and shot gun hence lot 525 is an extremely rare item.

A ball and shot gun means that the gun could be used as a conventional shotgun but in addition, the slightly more substantial barrels could fire solid ball as well. As a ball gun the range was relatively short as is evidenced by the 100yd. rear sight. They were primarily used in this capacity as park rifles for shooting deer at close range in enclosed parkland. The barrels are shorter than normal at 28" and this was designed not only to pare down weight but to bring them on to a moving target quickly. The patchbox was necessary in the butt as the balls were wrapped in cloth patches soaked in wax for lubricant. I did smile when I saw the beautiful Sumner engraving of a lion on the

patchbox as Captain Ponsonby would have been either very brave or foolhardy to go anywhere near a lion with a 15 bore ball gun! I think it is quite interesting that Captain Ponsonby had his name and regiment engraved on the under rib. It was quite common for an officer serving abroad in India or Africa to take sporting guns and rifles with them in pursuit of the wide variety of sport available. Very popular was the combination gun, one barrel rifled and the other barrel smooth to cope with all eventualities. This 15 bore ball and shot gun could fit into this category if Captain Ponsonby decided to take it abroad whilst on active service hence the engraving on the under rib.

Due to its remarkable original condition it was more likely used at his home in Gloucestershire both as a game gun and as a deer rifle in the parkland upon his estate. It is a wonderful item and has a little bit of star quality as it is so rare and desirable.



Thomas Boss's premises at 73 St James's Street, London where no. 1360 was built.