

IN THE GUNROOM

JUNE 2012

By Elizabeth Walton

"BURIED TREASURES"

An auction house such as Holt's boasts irresistible attractions when it comes to the serious business of buying and selling. Not least of these attractions is the possibility that base metal will be turned into gold. Alchemy, however, never comes easy, and anyone who thinks of alchemy as mere luck is missing the point. Luck only favours the prepared mind. It takes an expert such as the Holt's representatives across the world to make a brilliant piece of observational association that will unlock the value of a piece consigned for sale, and thereby improve the seller's luck.

Take for example a pair of pistols in Johannesburg and Holt's man in Africa, Charles Montgomery. "By pure accident, a friend of mine suggested that I should have a look at a collection of guns being stored with an antique furniture dealer," Charles recalls. "In this pile of guns was a pair of old pistols which were very, very stressed and had been converted to percussion from flint." Consigned to Holt's, they were shipped back to England where their provenance turned out to be rewardingly regal. "Nick and Robert Morgan picked up on a crest at the back of the pistols," says Charles. "They deserve all the credit." Made by James Barbar, Gentleman Armourer to King George II, the pistols bore the royal crest of George, Prince of Wales and at Holt's last sale they made £11,000.

For Nick, the fact that the pistols turned out to be redolent with Britain's history proves an important point. "Until an expert examines a piece, or until you put it up for auction, you never really know what you've got," he says. George II's son, Frederick, Prince of Wales, died of pneumonia in 1751, and thus the king's eldest grandson became heir apparent. While there is no automatic succession to the title of the Prince of Wales; it is normally passed on when the existing Prince of Wales accedes to the throne. The unusual circumstances of this particular succession allow a precise dating of the pistols. "We can actually date the pistols within three bloody weeks in 1751!" says Nick, cock-a-hoop. "It's an absolute gem to find something of this significance," adds Charles, "and especially in South Africa."

Such pieces create a heritage, both national and personal. Molly Douglas, formerly their owner, had moved to South Africa in the 1920s. She was the daughter of Norman Herbert Smith who in 1882 had established a firm of solicitors that is now Herbert Smith LLP, one of London's leading international law firms. "How she got the guns, no one knows," says her grandson Richard Smith speaking from his Johannesburg home, "but Norman Herbert Smith was nephew, personal solicitor and executor to Sir Francis Tress Barry, Bt." Barry's Windsor neighbour was Queen Victoria, and in Ascot week he would lend his St. Leonard's Hill estate to the future King George V, (also his regular shooting guest.) Royal thank-you gifts were lavish; Norman Smith was an



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avid collector of antiques. Is it too fanciful to suppose the pistols came into the Smith family via this route? "And they stay in the family," Richard Smith reports. "The guns have been bought by my cousin to retain the family connection."

Africa again yielded hidden treasure when Charles was asked to value the residual firearms and edged weapons from the collection of the late John Davis in Cape Town; the majority having been consigned to Holt's during Davis' lifetime. "Amongst them," says Charles, "was a cased (unlabelled) Boss doubled barrelled 14 bore, black powder shotgun. It was in very good condition for a gun built in 1858, and No. 2 of a pair, serial number 1607. After tagging and receipting, the gun was taken back to Suburban Guns to await shipment to Holt's. Meanwhile, in early January, I had a visit from a regular purchaser from Holt's who was down from Johannesburg. I was showing him some potential items for the forthcoming Holt's sale, when he spotted the Boss 14-bore.

"He told me that he had something that looked very like this one - in fact exactly like this one! He made a call to his wife to check on the serial number of his Boss and found that it bore the serial number 1606, and No. 1, and it turned out to be the matching pair of the one I had found 3 months earlier. Thank goodness it transpired that he had no interest in black powder shotguns; he had bought his gun a few years earlier in Jo'burg on the chance of a quick re-sale. I convinced him that he should consign his No. 1 along with No. 2 for the March sale." Charles is quietly satisfied. "Amazing- to match up a pair of guns built in 1858. That was a find."

Back at Church Barns, Chris says, "the timing just could not have been better. I remember Nick coming in and saying, 'you'll never believe this... We've just found the No 2 to that Boss'. And the sale reunited the pair; that's the lovely thing." The enthusiasm at Holt's HQ speaks to the power of a good story, and for Chris personally one auction yielded the best story yet with the sale of the Enfield .38 service revolver dated 1940 and carried by Lord Lovat on D-Day. The hammer fell to two officers from the regiment with its origins in the Lovat Scouts. "Seriously big guys. In desert fatigues," Chris remembers. "It was a moving moment. That pistol could have gone to some collector or museum on the other side of the world. But it went back to the regiment and that, to me, was the perfect ending to the story."

At the time of writing, Chris is checking out a story with possible potential about a Mauser Broomhandle pistol consigned for the next sale. The piece's provenance could involve a World War II air ace, and it makes compelling listening when he, as an expert, describes various probabilities and possibilities. "If we can put some concrete evidence to this it could be a fantastic story," he says. "But the only certainty so far is that when its present owner took it to a collector and asked, 'is it worth anything?' he was told:

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'about five years, meals included'. It's a Section 5 piece."

For the same sale, Roland is hot on the trail of more thrilling memories of our past. They concern a Colt .45 whose previous owner was Major Alexander Konstanty Ilnatowicz KMC of the Polish Army who served with the British SOE in WWII. He escaped to France from Poland, and when France surrendered in 1940, he arrived in England. As an instructor in use of allied and German small arms, he carried out invaluable work. Then, in the latter stages of the War, Maj. Ilnatowicz was parachuted behind enemy lines to assist a guerrilla unit in occupied France. Everyone loves a hero, and who could resist such a story?

Fired up, Nick has the last word. "It's nice to think that just by hard work and a little bit of research, we can generate interest, which in turn generates hands in the air." It has become accepted that an auction is the fairest and most efficacious method of selling any property. "It's a very simple thing – an auction does what it says on the tin," says Nick. "It's the transparency that I like: everyone knows what Holt's makes out of the deal. The buyer and the seller know exactly where we're coming from. Job done. We're not selling a dream; nobody's being tucked up. History is fact." Furthermore, history is endlessly obliging for it goes on evolving. A story doesn't stop with a sale. The auction merely adds another, perhaps valuable, chapter.

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