

HOLT'S

AUCTIONEERS OF FINE MODERN & ANTIQUE GUNS

IN THE GUNROOM

There is ice on the ground; the air is sharp-edged. Charles Montgomery, *Holt's* representative in Africa, glances up at a classic and noisy feature of the north Norfolk sky in winter. "Pinkfeet," he murmurs. "Saw thousands of them yesterday when we were shooting partridge." A crack shot, Montgomery is lured away from Cape Town each season by the traditions of English gameshooting. "I love it," he sighs. The irony is that guns and ammunition only became "a full-time passion" when this native Rhodesian discovered clay pigeon shooting. "I love the outdoors, and I grew up playing rugby, cricket, polo. We lived on a farm; we had birds to shoot; animals to hunt. And then I was invited to a competitive clay shoot. At the end of the event I went out and bought a Perazzi o/u shotgun, and by the end of the year I was chairman of the Mashonaland Gun Club. That's how passionate I was about the sport, and that is how I got into the gun trade."

In 1993, Montgomery added a cartridge-making factory to his business interests. Soon it was turning out 1,500,000 cartridges a year and supplying all of Zimbabwe's gun clubs. But in 2002, with Zimbabwe's infrastructure imploding, it was time to leave. He and his wife sampled Australia and New Zealand, but the siren call of Africa was irresistible. On a visit to Cape Town, an ex-Rhodesian friend said his gun shop was up for sale. Two months later, Cape Town was home and Montgomery the owner of *Suburban Guns*, Southern Africa's best-known supplier of arms, ammunition and shooting supplies. He also held a licence to manufacture shotgun ammunition. The association with *Holt's* was an indirect consequence of South Africa's 2004 Firearms Control Act. "South Africa is not the safest place in the world," he says. "From 1994 when Nelson Mandela formed a new government, it had been open season on buying guns. These guns fell into the wrong hands and gun crime was on the up."

"Under the new Act, we can own four guns," Montgomery tells me, "a handgun and three long guns, or four long guns. And they don't licence you as they would in England where, if you have a 12-bore licence, you're good to buy 12-bores. In South Africa you buy one shotgun, and that gun is licensed. I have to justify my ownership of each of my four Perazzis. They gave everyone six months to either licence a gun or hand in anything unlicensed." Compensation? "Nope," he says. "We got zero. Many South Africans are multiple gun owners and they own huge collections. And they're like squirrels - guns of Boer War vintage, Martini-Henrys and .303inches, have never been destroyed, ground down or disappeared. They are in such good condition, and you can understand why these guys don't want to hand them in. It's a very sensitive issue." With the shutters down on the gun trade, Montgomery

travelled to Nuremberg in 2003 in search of inspiration. “I walked on to the English stand, and the first person I bumped into was Nick Holt. I told him, ‘I’m in South Africa; I’ve got everyone handing in guns... it’s a winner for you’, and Nick immediately appointed me his agent for Africa, *Holt’s* first agent out of England.

“We forged a relationship right from the start, and it turned out our fathers were at Eton together, in the same year. Our first consignment appeared in *Holt’s* 2004 sale. The punters in South Africa loved it; suddenly we had changed the prices of guns, it was like a gravy chain. Take a Mauser Broomhandle selling for R3-4000 - we were getting the punters up to five times that price. The ‘phone was ringing off the hook,” Montgomery smiles. “There is a market developing in Namibia, which is still a very big hunting area, and we are mopping up what is left in Zimbabwe Rhodesia. With improved communications people are always very aware of prices; there’s no bargains to be bought or sold. I go in wearing the *Holt’s* cap, as an honest auctioneer, not to wheel and deal. I say: ‘That gun is worth £1,000’. And I get them £1,000 and I take my commission. That, I think, is how we’ve grown our business.” As *Holt’s* tentacles spread across Africa, Montgomery and his team drive the operation. “Some lovely pieces have come out of Zimbabwe where three gun shops continue to trade,” he reports. “Big game hunting still goes on there. The government reserves have game, and Zimbabwe is a popular destination for the rich and famous: hunting there is very expensive. We can’t export guns to Zimbabwe - if you are English, you can’t even take in your own weapon to hunt; Americans don’t have any problem. There’s no big game hunting in Kenya, nothing. The best quality big game comes out of Tanzania and Zimbabwe, and I’m talking natural, wild game where you are not shooting within a boundary fence. All the hunting in South Africa is inside barbed wire. I was never really into shooting big game,” he reflects. “It hasn’t got to me yet.

“The guns that we get out of Africa have some wonderful stories. They were very, very brave people in the old days. Lots of people who bring in a rifle say, ‘If it wasn’t for this rifle I wouldn’t be alive...’ Or there are the Afrikaners who produce a Webley and say, ‘This revolver was taken off an English soldier...’ A great ‘wow’ was finding a pistol that belonged to Tom Mix, Hollywood’s first cowboy, and when I went up to Zimbabwe on one of my trips I got in Frederick Courteney Selous’ .461 falling block Gibbs rifle. It came from the Colenbrander family, and Johannes Colenbrander was Selous’ 2IC. Selous was probably the greatest hunter who wrote his stories down when some of the Afrikaners were in fact the most intrepid and rugged hunters, but they couldn’t read or write.” The merest whiff of a story and Nick Holt is soon centre stage. He is, it transpires, quite the expert on Montgomery’s personal provenance. “Did you know Charlie’s great great grandfather was a captain in the 5th Dragoon Guards, part of the Heavy Brigade at Balaklava?” he asks. “His uniform and swords are at Benvardeen, the family home, in Co. Antrim. And his chargers’ hooves – as ink wells.”

And there is more. “My first ever find, one I will always remember, was when I was starting out aged 22,” says Holt. “It was a pistol used in the last recorded pistol duel to take place in England. The duel was between Colonel Montgomery, one of Charlie-boy’s ancestors, and Captain McNamara. They were walking their dogs in Hyde Park. So stupid – there was a bloody dogfight, and McNamara threw down a glove. Duelling was pretty commonplace, but it was totally illegal. Colonel

Montgomery was killed, and Captain McNamara was up for murder. He was a naval captain and his boss was someone rather important, Admiral Nelson. Nelson actually turned up in court, and said, 'Look here. Captain McNamara, he's a good, honourable, deserving young man who should be acquitted on all charges'. And he was. And I found one of the pistols that had been used... and here is Charlie." Montgomery, it must be said, looks a trifle bemused and turns his attention to the midget revolver that's taken my fancy. "Came from my parish," he says. "A little Webley .320. Quite rare..." The Webley is another cue for Holt. "So, matey," he declares. "We've got to go back into the bush and get some more..." "Who's 'we'...? ventures Montgomery. "You!" says Holt, roaring with laughter as he makes his exit.