

# HOLT'S

## AUCTIONEERS OF FINE MODERN & ANTIQUE GUNS

Guns with India's great Native Princes in their provenance are irresistible. They were built for connoisseurs of the gunmakers' art during the period when our most respected makers were in their pomp. "This was their heyday of British gunmaking," says Daryl Greatrex of Holland & Holland whose ledgers record frequent orders from the Maharajas of Surguja, (who killed 1,600 tigers), Bikaner, Jodhpur, Rewa, Mysore and many more. Competition was fierce between the Princes who were not only some of the richest men in the world but also religious, military and political rulers with a rich culture of kingship. Arguably the Maharajas of Patiala and Alwar, and the Nawab of Bhopal could boast the finest armouries in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Each of the five maharaja pieces in this sale is a thrilling combination of function and provenance - an exquisite prism through which to view the royal houses of both Great Britain and India, their chosen gunmakers and their shooting.

Queen Victoria's empire was the largest the world had ever known. She was proclaimed Empress of India at the first Delhi Durbar in 1877 and, devoted to the country and its people, was mindful of the debt owed to the Princely States for their loyalty throughout the Indian Mutiny. "We shall respect the rights, dignity and honour of the Native Princes as our own," she wrote. Her descendants shared this sentiment, and on visits to the land of the tiger, their politicking was made all the sweeter when the maharajas showcased India's fabled game for their pleasure so that duty and sport shared equal billing. Trailblazer was the Prince of Wales in 1875. His party bagged 28 tigers. At Peepul Perao in the Himalayan foothills, *The Times'* correspondent, William Howard Russell, marvelled at the royal camp. "There were 119 elephants, 550 camels, 100 horses, 60 carts drawn by oxen, many goats and milch cows," he reported. The human count numbered 2,500, including men of the 3<sup>rd</sup> Ghurkhas and their band, plus troopers of the Bengal Cavalry and Native Infantry.

The King's son, George V, travelled first to India in 1905 as Prince of Wales and was in thrall to what Lord Crewe, Secretary of State for India, despaired of as "his craze for shooting". Small wonder he returned to India in 1911 to hold his Coronation Durbar in person - the first English monarch to visit the East since Richard Coeur de Lion. His arrival in the Durbar amphitheatre was heralded by a 101 gun salute. "Most magnificent" was how the gratified King described the Durbar's elaborate ceremonies in a letter to his mother Queen Alexandra. Their Majesties were attended by 10 pages - "either young Maharajahs or sons of Maharajahs," he wrote. "All wore beautiful clothes of white & gold with gold turbans & they did look nice." Queen Mary burnished her Imperial glory with the "large square of emeralds

of historic interest engraved and set in diamonds, and a necklace and pendant of emeralds set in rosettes of diamonds” presented to her by the Maharani of Patiala.

Two days later the King departed to shoot in Nepal while the Queen and her entourage were entertained in Rajputana (today called Rajasthan) over Christmas. At Kotah, the Queen was sitting in a tiger machan, knitting. Suddenly she remarked, pointing to the jungle with a knitting-needle: “Look, Lord Shaftesbury, a tiger.” Her diary notes: “I saw the tiger beautifully 40 yards away coming towards us but Lord S. had his back to him & could not get a shot”. All too soon they left “dear India” never to return. Ten years later it was the turn of their son, later Edward VIII, to taste the maharajas’ world. It fitted him like a glove.

The extravagant paraphernalia of the life of Bhupinder Singh, H.H. The Maharaja Sahib of Patiala, soars beyond parody. In 1928 he bought the 234.65 carat de Beers diamond. Cartier set the light yellow stone with 2,930 other diamonds into a ceremonial necklace with which, tall and handsome, he adorned himself. Born in 1891, he inherited aged nine, and together with his wives and concubines, lived in the Moti Bagh Palace in the Punjab. Within its grounds, in the Lal Bagh Palace, lived his 52 children and their English governesses – and their own zoo. When the whole kit and caboodle, including the Jersey cows, departed for the Maharajah’s summer Chail Palace in the hills, the children showered the crowds with gold coins (mohurs) from the windows of his fleet of Rolls-Royces. The Maharaja captained India at cricket in 1911; at 7,500ft above sea level, his cricket ground at Chail is the highest in the world. His polo team was named The Patiala Tigers, and he owned India’s first private (British) aeroplane. Fervently pro-British in WWI, he served on the General Staff in France, Belgium, Italy and Palestine, and was promoted Honorary Major-General in 1918, then Lieutenant-General in 1931. He represented India at the League of Nations in 1925, and was chancellor of the Indian Chamber of Princes for 10 years. He died aged 46.

A crack shot, the Maharaja bred his own gundogs - the 400 dogs housed in the Patiala Kennels joined their owner at Chail - and he was appointed president of the All-India Gundog League. Westley Richards was the principal beneficiary of his patronage, and he was particularly keen on new models and new calibres. His first gun was ordered from this maker in 1911; they received his warrant of appointment in 1923. Huge quantities of new guns were sent out to Patiala, and when one shipment was lost at sea, the entire order was rebuilt. The Maharaja’s peripatetic existence took him to London, and to his villa in Cannes where Westley Richard’s Mr. Redfern would find himself dispatched to take down orders. Guns were also returned for repair; a single bill sent to him in 1925 totalled £5,774 1s. 0d. - £200,000 today. He ordered (inter alia) a pair of .318 rifles in 1920, and the Westley Richards’ records include instructions from 1925 in which Major Bowles, the Maharaja’s Military Secretary, to supply “a consignment of 250 cartridges of No. 318 rifle ready for His Highness during stag shooting in Scotland; also at the same time he requires a number of cartridges suitable for grouse shooting ... His Highness is rather a quick shot and therefore may require a larger number of cartridges than what may usually be used in England. At the same time His Highness should not be laden with too much ammunition”.

With everything to his satisfaction, the Maharaja shot at the Duke of Sutherland's estate on October 2<sup>nd</sup>, then at "the shooting box of Lord Fisher", Kilverstone House in Norfolk. Variety is the spice of life. In Patiala, at the time when the Charles Lancaster 10-bore in the sale (Lot 1499) was built for him, the Maharaja had been keen to break the duck-shooting record held by the Maharaja of Bharatpur who owned land favoured by overwintering birds from Afghanistan, Turkmenistan, China and Siberia. "He built Bhupinder Saga – Saga meaning lake - especially for a two-day duck shoot once a year to try to beat the record," says Paul Roberts who, like Walter Clode and Malcolm Lyell, brought back guns from India in the 1960s. "His guests would arrive at the duck shoot where there would be a gun made-to-measure waiting for them which they then took home to keep," says Roberts who is a regular guest of Amarinder Singh, the Maharaja's grandson. His most poignant memory is of the shoot arranged by Amarinder Singh to mark the government's decision to drain Bhupinder Saga. As the sun went down, he was regaled with tales of Bhupinder Singh's shoots by the comptroller of the household who conjured up tales of past glories.

History does not relate whether or not the Maharaja of Bharatpur's record remained unbeaten. But we do know that he extended an Indian Prince's hospitality in all its style and splendour to the Prince of Wales and his party in 1921. They landed in Bombay where Indians kissed the dust over which the Prince's car had passed. The official historian of the royal tour wrote: "The Princes loved him ... in a position to do what they liked in their own territory, they ruthlessly cut down the tiring list of official functions and gave him riding, polo and shooting instead". With Bharatpur he hunted black buck from a Rolls-Royce, twisting and turning over rough country at 50mph, and rode in a sedan-chair "slightly larger than a Pickford's furniture van, slung between two enormous elephants gorgeously caparisoned in blue and gold", Lord Louis Mountbatten told his diary. Mountbatten shot his first tiger in Nepal. At Patiala, he shot a panther, only to learn it had come from a zoo. "They had originally laid out a rare and valuable black panther as well, but when they heard David was not shooting they returned it to the zoo and revived it". The Maharaja of Udaipur matched his finest boar against a leopard in an arena. The boar won.

In 1971, under Mrs. Gandhi, the maharajas became commoners. India's teeming game has vanished. Yet the maharaja guns bring alive a time when India was the jewel in the crown of the British Empire, and our gunmakers ruled the world. The appeal of the Maharaja of Patiala's 10-bore could not be more straightforward for Chris Beaumont. "It ticks all the boxes," he murmurs. "All of them."