

IN THE GUNROOM

PURDEY GUN BALANCE

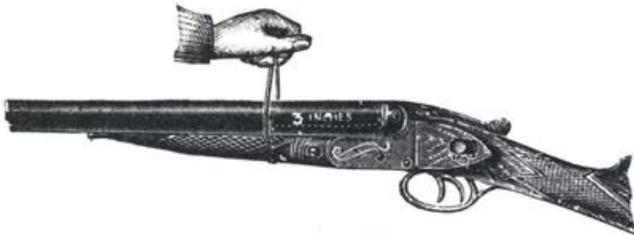
By Donald Dallas

How many times have you picked up a gun and thought, "I could really shoot with this – it feels just right." Whenever you throw a gun up to your shoulder and it feels just right, you instantly have confidence in it and my goodness most of us need all the help we can get in shooting. On the other hand some guns feel like lumps of lead, uncomfortable and not fit for purpose.

Although a great deal of this "feel" is to do with factors like stock dimensions, the main reason for a gun feeling instinctively "right" is down to gun balance. How often have fellow sportsmen mentioned that their guns are an extension of themselves, instilling confidence, and for the most part this is down to gun balance. Even when standing on the peg there is a certain amount of pleasure derived from just holding a gun that has good balance whilst waiting for the drive to commence.

The importance of gun balance has been well known from the beginning of the 19th century with makers like Manton, Egg and Nock ensuring that their muzzle-loading guns, often with widely different lengths of barrels balanced correctly, one factor in establishing the English sporting gun as the standard for others to follow. In some of these old guns a distinct rattle in the stock can be heard due to the lead that was inserted in a cavity in the butt to ensure good balance.

W.W. Greener in *The Gun And Its Development* published in the 1880s gave particulars on the proper balance of a sporting gun. He stated that the balance of a 12 bore gun with 30" barrels weighing 7lbs. or more should balance at 3" from the breech and if with 27" or 28" barrels, weighing between 5 ¾ - 6lbs. should balance at 2 5/8" from the breech. He recommended a thin piece of string to hold the gun at this point of balance to see if it balanced correctly. A simpler way was just to use a forefinger at this distance under the knuckle of the gun.



The balance of a gun as illustrated in W. W. Greener's *The Gun And Its Development*.

The Long Room at James Purdey & Sons in South Audley Street, London is a magnificent room combining the ambience of a gentleman's club, a drawing room for the Purdey family, and a wonderful collection of Purdey guns. In addition it houses a collection of fascinating Purdey artefacts built up over the centuries. Great oil paintings of all the Purdeys stare at you from all four walls and it is crammed full of interesting ephemera such as the Purdey family bible, the Norman sight developed by Purdey during World War One as an aircraft sight, the electric gun built for King George V in 1929 for indoor practice and the 1935 King George V Silver Jubilee miniature guns.

In the researches for my book *James Purdey And Sons, Two Hundred Years Of Excellence*, Purdeys were kind enough to allow me full access to all their material in the Long Room. As I scoured every nook and cranny and searched for long lost keys to open cabinets, I came across an object of obvious antiquity that at first I did not know exactly what it was. It was made of wood with a wonderful patina and of an unusual shape. Then the sharp edge on the wood and its wide splayed legs gave me a clue – it was a gun balance. This balance dated from the 19th century and was an original gun balance as used by Purdey to demonstrate the balance of a gun. I sought out an old Purdey in the Long Room and it worked perfectly as designed.

Original gun balances are very rare as they were simply working tools used by gunmakers in the workshop and were often just cobbled together out of spare bits of wood. It is unusual to come across a quality gun balance like the Purdey example and this one was obviously intended to be publicly displayed and used in the shop. It would be impressive to a customer to see his new gun delicately balanced on the gun balance conforming to best gun standards.



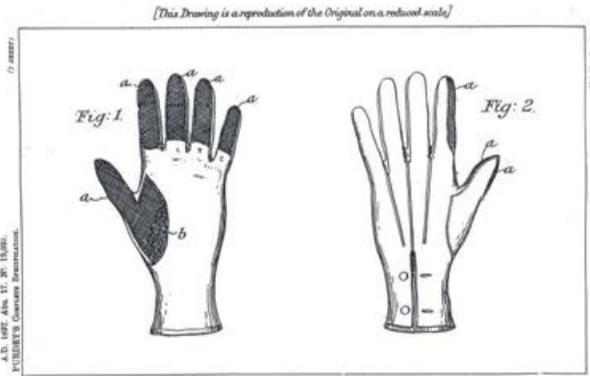
The original Purdey gun balance.



Lot 51 in this auction - a modern take on the original

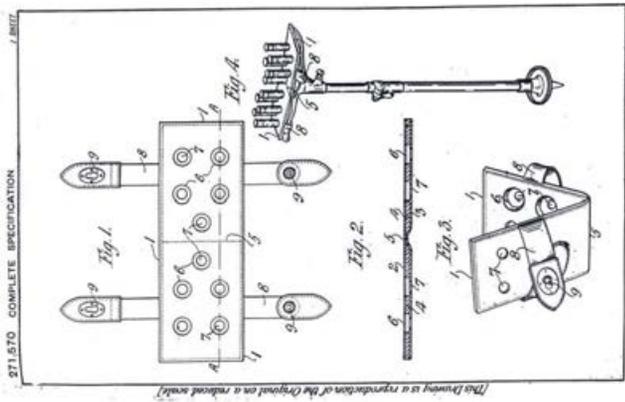
Little objects like this are fascinating, one of many interesting designs that Purdey have produced over the centuries. Purdey have many patents to their name, by far the best known being the Purdey double bolt of patent no. 1104 of 2nd May 1863 that has been used on the majority of shotguns since that date. However they had other unusual patents, quirky designs in the early 20th century that were simply little extras since the great era of invention had passed.

In patent no. 19027 of the 17th August 1897, Athol Purdey patented an "Improved Hand Protector For Sportsmen". This was the era of enormous bags with sportsmen like Lord Ripon using Purdey hammer ejector guns bringing down enormous numbers of game. The barrels of a gun in such an intense fire period became very hot and Athol Purdey invented a padded left hand glove to protect the left hand on the barrels. It certainly worked but the only drawback was that the glove was lined with asbestos!



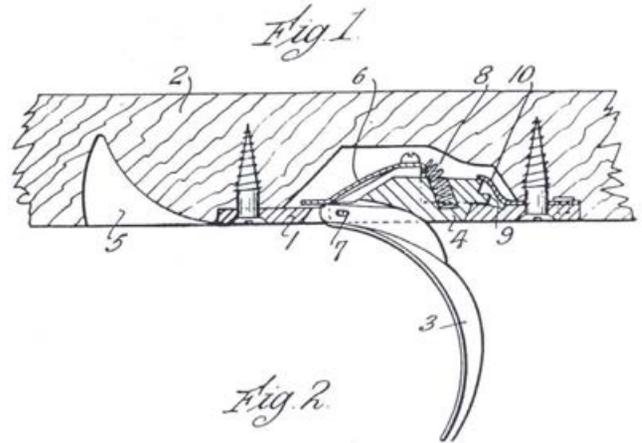
The padded glove patented by Athol Purdey in 1897.

On the 30th July 1926, Tom Purdey took out patent no. 19052 for an improved cartridge holder. This was no more than a piece of leather with holes cut in it for cartridge storage. It had clips to enable it to be attached to a shooting stick or shooting bag so that the cartridges were readily accessible on the peg.



Tom Purdey's cartridge loader patent of 1926.

Perhaps the most unusual patent was the one taken out by Athol Purdey in patent no. 15985 of 23rd May 1929 entitled "Walking Stick For Shooting Practice". This charming invention consisted of a normal walking stick but with a trigger fitted. The trigger was designed with a spring that gave a realistic trigger pull and gave a satisfying click when pulled. When not in use, the trigger could be folded forwards. How wonderful it must have been when a gentleman, out for a perambulation with his lady, immediately threw his walking stick to his shoulder and pulled its trigger as a pheasant rocketed from a hedgerow.



Athol Purdey's trigger designed to be used on a walking stick.