

Hidden treasures at Holts

Donald Dallas takes a deeper look at some unusual auction lots.

There is no doubt that the star lot in the Holts December sale was Lot 1350 – a trio of Watson Bros. 12 bore over-under guns all with an extra set of barrels. The reason they were the leading item was on account of two factors:

Firstly, they were of stunning quality and virtually brand new (completed in 2016.) They were round-bodied sidelock ejectors (Nos. 20371/2/3), each engraved with Watson Bros. heavy midnight forest acanthus scrollwork by Erich Friedrich. In addition, the No.1 had a grouse scene, the No.2 a covey of partridge and the No.3 a rising pheasant. Not only did they have 29" barrels, they also had an additional set of 32" barrels for high pheasants. The complete set took three years to build.

The second reason they were so noteworthy was the price they achieved. A brand new Watson Bros. over-under 12 bore today costs £55,000 – hence a trio will total £165,000. These three second-hand Watsons went for £150,000 in total, and if the auctioneer's commission is taken into account, they went for the same price as brand new guns – a remarkable achievement for Holts and Watson Bros.

Lot 535 was a very attractive little rifle – a cased 60 bore single shot percussion park model (No.10619) by Reilly, New Oxford Street, London. Built around 1850/60, this diminutive rifle was in very nice condition and was contained in its original oak case, lined in green velvet with a number of accessories. Estimated at £1,500-£2,500, it went for £2,100.

A magnificent black powder double rifle was on offer in Lot 992. This was a Holland & Holland double hammer rifle in .450 (3¼") Express calibre. It was sighted to 250 yards and had a Jones underlever. It was border engraved only and, although second quality, it was a magnificent double rifle intended for deer stalking in Scotland or abroad. Built around 1880 it was estimated at £3,000-£5,000 and went for £3,100.

Another very nice rifle was Lot 1134, another Holland & Holland model, but this time it was a bolt action take-down rifle built in 1928. It was originally in .240 Magnum calibre but was re-barrelled by Hollands in .270 in 1975. It had a B Nickel Supra telescopic sight and was contained in its original leather case. Estimated between £2,000-£3,000 it made £3,700.

Traditional British guns by lesser known makers are an absolute bargain these days. Take for example Lot 1321, a pair of William Powell & Son 12 bore sidelock ejectors Nos.11594/5. They were built in 1906 as second quality guns and were border engraved only. They had 29" barrels and estimated at £2,000-£3,000 they went for £2,500. How much would a similar pair of guns cost to build today?

An unusual gun was Lot 1716, one of the highly collectible Greener Blue Rock live pigeon boxlock ejector guns. These guns were originally built for live pigeon shooting but today are sought after as high pheasant guns. No. 79011 has the trademark blue rock dove engraved at the breech end of the barrels. It has 2¾" chambers, bored half and full choke, with treble grip action and weighs 7lbs 10oz. Estimated at £850-£950 it went for £1,100.

A gun case I particularly liked was Lot 135, a double oak and leather Purdey case for guns Nos. 22878 and 23063. What made it desirable was that it came with a full set of accessories and also that the original canvas outer was in excellent condition. There must have been others who thought like me, as estimated at £500-£700 it made an amazing £1,900.

Joseph Manton is probably the most famous maker of all time and in Lot 470 there was a superb Joseph Manton flintlock duelling pistol (No. 4208) from around 1805. It was a 40 bore pistol with 10" barrel and platinum touch hole. Estimated at £1,500-£2,500, it reached £2,400.

A particularly fine percussion rifle was Lot 540, a Whitworth .451 single match or sporting rifle circa 1860. It had a heavy, round 30" barrel with a lovely scroll engraved lock signed Whitworth and a charming dolphin hammer. Birds and serpents appeared elsewhere on the rifle. The entire rifle was of very high quality and it was in excellent condition as was reflected in the estimate of £2,000-£3,000. It managed to make £2,700. ■



Trio of Watson Bros. round-bodied over-unders with extra barrels that made £150,000.