

IN THE GUNROOM

DANIEL FRASER ROOK RIFLE

Donald Dallas

There is always a great interest in rook rifles in the obsolete category on account of their diminutive size, elegance and charm, evoking a bygone era of a gentleman pottering away with black powder cartridges, of small bore, at close range on an estate or farmland. A great many of these rook rifles are of top quality and along with a “big name” on them, will command a high price.

Very occasionally, a rook rifle will come along that stands out from the rest, such a rifle being lot 749 in this sale, a .300 boxlock ejector rook rifle no. 3505 made by Daniel Fraser of Edinburgh around 1900. Apart from the renowned name of Fraser, what makes it a bit special is that it comes with its original Fraser patent telescopic sight. Since they were close range rifles, it is quite unusual to find a rook and rabbit rifle with a telescopic sight.

Daniel Fraser was born in Inverness in 1848 and when his father travelled south to Edinburgh to find work, young Daniel Fraser, aged just twelve years, was taken on as an apprentice by the famous Edinburgh rifle maker Alexander Henry. He received a thorough grounding in rifle manufacture and like Henry was an excellent shot with the rifle. This combination was winning and when he set himself up in business at 4 Leith Street Terrace, Edinburgh in 1878, it was rifle manufacture that he specialised in.

He built rifles to the highest quality, double and single Express rifles, falling block rifles, match rifles, rook and rabbit rifles and so on. He had a rifle range at Duddingston in Edinburgh for customers to practise with their purchases and just to create the right impression, a large trophy head of a black maned lion glared down at you whenever you entered the shop.

In August 1902, after a day’s shooting, Fraser developed a chill and a few months later on 7th December 1902, he died aged just fifty- seven. The firm was taken over by his two sons, Donald and James but finally closed after World War One.

Apart from its undoubted quality and rarity as very few Fraser rook rifles were built, what makes this little rook rifle a bit special is that it has its original Fraser patent telescopic sight.

The telescopic sight first came to prominence in Britain due to the development of it by Lt. Col. David Davidson of Haddington just to the east of Edinburgh. Davidson was in the Bombay Army and whilst in India made a series of experiments with telescopic sights. When he returned from India in 1848, he ordered a best single rifle by John Robertson of Haddington (whose son, also John, catapulted Boss to stardom when he bought the business in 1891). He promptly fitted his telescopic sight to it.

Prior to this time, a telescopic sight was of little use on a muzzle-loading rifle due to their poor trajectory, but when better rifling and the Express rifle came to fruition in the 1850s, a telescopic sight was desirable due to the longer range now possible. Davidson had his telescopic sights made for him by the Edinburgh optician Alexander Adie & Son of 50 Princes Street and in 1862 he took out a patent for his own design of telescopic sight.

Lt Col. Davidson offered his sight to John Dickson & Son at 63 Princes Street and they fitted this new sight to their two-groove Express rifles in the 1850s. In his book "Rifle And Volunteer Rifle Corps" by Llewellyn Jewett published in 1861, he eulogised the Davidson telescopic sight writing, "One of the most remarkable inventions of late years is the Telescopic Sight by which the most scrupulous accuracy is attained. The splendid instruments made by John Dickson & Son are in our opinion the most perfect".

Daniel Fraser was very aware of the advantages of the Davidson telescopic sight and soon offered them on his own rifles. His advertisements of the period state, "Specialities, Express Double & Single Rifles fitted with Col. Davidson's Patent Telescopic Sights".

Davidson's patent expired in 1876, but Daniel Fraser was determined to have his own telescopic sight and on the 6th November 1885, he took out his own version of it. The sight was virtually identical to the Davidson sight, but what he claimed was that it had improved mounts and a push button release. It is this patent Fraser telescopic sight that is fitted to the boxlock ejector rook rifle no. 3505.

It was Fraser's practice to engrave his telescopic sights with the number of the rifle and consequently this sight is engraved 3505, the number of the rifle. The rifle is contained in its original case with a compartment for the telescope and estimated at £4000-£6000 it is a very desirable little rook rifle indeed. Try and find another.