

IN THE GUNROOM

THE 14-BORE GUN

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This auction is very unusual in that it offers a small collection of very rare 14-bore centre-fire guns, a calibre that was hardly ever built by British gunmakers. Lot 704 is a 14-bore Purdey hammerless non-ejector gun dating from 1879 estimated at £2000-£3000, lot 705 another Purdey 14-bore hammerless ejector gun dating from 1894 estimated at £2000-£3000, lot 741 a Lancaster slide and drop 14-bore hammer gun built around 1860 estimated at £700-£900 and undoubtedly the star of the show is lot 1550, a Boss 14-bore sidelock ejector built at the very late date of 1938 estimated at £9000-£12,000.

During the muzzle-loading period, shotgun bores were anything but standard. They didn't have to be and as long as you had the correct sized wad punch, you could have any bore size you wanted. In the latter stages of the percussion muzzle-loader, a little bit of standardisation crept in and 14-bore tended to be the most common bore size. If you owned a Boss, Purdey or the like and were involved in the new driven game shooting, you certainly did not cut your own wads and they were bought off the shelf in the more standard sizes.

Whenever breech-loading appeared in the late 1850s, almost right from the start, the standard breech-loading cartridge rapidly became the 12-bore. Unlike a muzzle-loader a sportsman couldn't "make" his own charge, he had to buy a self-contained cartridge from a cartridge supplier. Early cartridges were made of thickish card and to get all the load in along with the newly created cartridge chamber, the bore size was enlarged slightly to 12-bore.

The 12-bore became the standard bore size and by far the majority of pinfire guns were built in 12-bore. Centre-fire guns likewise were mostly 12-bores apart from a smattering of 16-bores and 20-bores. The 16-bore was always regarded as a continental bore and not very popular in Britain and the 20-bore as a lady's or boy's gun. The 12-bore was the man's gun and that was that. Even if you preferred a light load and a light gun in the twenties and thirties, you bought a 12-bore two-inch gun, a 20-bore would certainly not do.

And yet the old muzzle-loading bore size of 14-bore did continue into breech-loaders. Several of the early Lancaster breech-loaders of the late 1850s were 14-bores as is evidenced by the Lancaster in lot 741. The big cartridge manufacturers did offer 14-bore pinfire and centre-fire cartridges right up until the Second World War. They were certainly very uncommon and they must have been a devil to find as they would no doubt have been a special order at your local ironmongers.

W.W. Greener in his classic late 19th century book, *The Gun And Its Development* was quite scathing about the 14-bore. "The 14 bore breech-loader is rarely made and possesses no distinct advantages and has the severe disadvantage of being a size for which cartridges are not easily procurable. It was a convenient size to convert muzzle-loaders to breech-loaders as few of the old 13 bore muzzle-loaders were made sufficiently stout in the breech to allow them being chambered for 12 bore cartridge cases."

14-bore shotgun cartridges were listed in the major cartridge manufacturers catalogues right up until WW2. In the 1899 Eley catalogue no less than five different qualities of cases in this size were available, varying from the cheap but serviceable brown quality to the brass covered Ejector and all brass Perfect cases.

A 1930 Eley catalogue list the charges for a 14-bore as either 31 grains Smokeless Diamond or 38 grains Schultze, both nitro powders. Even a black powder version was listed with 2 ¾ drams load. In all cases the shot load was 1oz.

And if 14-bore was uncommon, Cogswell & Harrison in the early 20th century introduced a new bore size, 14 ¾. The idea was to split the small difference between 14 and 16 bores, but no matter what the theoretical advantages were, best of luck trying to buy 14 ¾ cartridges.

The 14-bore centre-fire gun that began its life in the 1850s soldiered on right into the middle of the 20th century That beautiful 14-bore Boss in lot 1550 was ordered as late as 1938. So why on earth would a sportsman want to buy a 14-bore gun with all the attendant difficulties of cartridge procurement? I think the answer lies in the sportsman who just wants something a little different, something to get the tongues wagging at a shoot and a talking point over lunch. The only problem, like I find with my 2" gun, is that at the sweepstake cartridge count at the end of the shoot, it is very obvious how many cartridges you have expended and you cannot lie about it.

