

PAIR OF ROOK RIFLES

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In an auction such as this with thousands upon thousands of lots on offer, it is all too easy to become blasé about the pairs of Purdeys, Boss and so on up for auction. There are a profusion of stunning guns up for sale, but very occasionally a lot stands out that opens your mouth agog and sets the auction tittle tattle flowing.

Such a lot in this auction, lot 1253 is a matched pair of hammerless rook rifles by Alexander Henry of Edinburgh and London. A matched pair of rook rifles. Never in my life have I seen a pair of rook rifles before built as an actual pair and contained in their original case too. Why on earth would somebody want to buy a pair of rook rifles I have no idea, but this very rare pair have certainly started everybody talking as to their *raison d'être*.

This pair of rook rifles, nos. 6431/2 were constructed in 1890 for the renowned Edinburgh rifle maker Alexander Henry. In the second half of the 19th century, Henry was the pre-eminent rifle maker in the world selling a great many top quality rifles all over the world. Very occasionally, he would sell rook rifles, but like all other makers he would not actually make these rook rifles. Rook rifles were made in Birmingham by a variety of manufacturers and the chosen rifle maker Henry used was Samuel B. Allport of Whittall Street, Birmingham. Samuel B. Allport in all probability made this pair of rook rifles for Henry.

What is very frustrating is that this pair of rook rifles have absolutely no information on them in the Henry ledgers. The numbers are there, but the rest of the ledger entry is blank, no details at all and no original owner's name. Henry also bought in from Allport 2nd and 3rd quality double rifles and falling block rifles, but although bought in, they all have full details in the ledgers.

Consequently, this lack of detail in the ledgers only fuels the speculation as to who on earth would buy a pair of rook rifles. If only the original owner's name was given then it might just have been possible to ascertain from his lifestyle why he wanted a pair of rook rifles. Whenever breech-loaders appeared in the 1860s it became far more practical to build small bore rifles and very quickly their name changed from the muzzle-loading pea rifle to the breech-loading rook and rabbit rifle. They were made in all qualities from the very best to the Belgian import and were sold in their hundreds of thousands in the second half of the 19th century. They were constructed in hammer form, sidelock or boxlock and later hammerless. They came in a variety of calibres, the most common being .360, .300 and .297/250.

Their era was the black powder era, but whenever nitro powders appeared at the end of the century, they became obsolete and were replaced by the ubiquitous .22 calibre.

Like many rook rifles this pair were modified from their original .300 Rook by being tubed to .22. No less a maker than Boss & Co were entrusted to do this job and this they did in 1925 engraving their name and address on the barrels.

All this leads to the big question as to why anybody would want a pair of rook rifles. The evidence suggests that it was a wealthy individual as their original oak and leather case bearing the Henry label is of the very best quality. We can all speculate as to why somebody would want a pair of rook rifles. Had they been in an exhibition for show and perhaps a customer saw them in Henry's shop and took a fancy to them? Did the customer have two sons, twins even,

and thought it was an ideal present Was the original owner somewhat eccentric and liked to have a go at the rabbits with his gamekeeper as loader?

Yet both stock lengths are the same, the case is of way above average quality for a rook rifle, they have seen little use, the whole outfit looks superb and they are an anachronism. To me this proclaims one man, Charles Gordon, the very wealthy Scottish collector who bought hundreds of very unusual guns rifles and pistols in the late 19th century from John Dickson & Son and to a lesser extent Alexander Henry. Gordon was still collecting in 1890 and a pair of rook rifles presented in a stunning case would have been right up his street. There is no evidence to support this as the ledger entry is vacant, but all the Gordon guns like this pair have vacant escutcheons both in the stocks and in the case lid. He only had his name stamped in the leather outer and this is missing from this pair.

You can make your own mind up, but one thing is certain, you will never see another pair of rook rifles like this and estimated at only £1500 - £2000 what an addition to your collection.