

IN THE FIELD

JULY 2025

By Sir Johnny Scott Bt.

HOLTS AIRGUNS

Over the last two sales of Fine Antique and Modern Firearms, in December of last year and this March, Holts have sold fourteen antique 18th and early 19th century pneumatic air rifles, demonstrating the increasing interest among collectors in these rare and historically important guns. Among them, were superb examples from London gunmakers such as Fisher, Harrison, Beattie and Kolbe. The provincial gunmaker, Wallis of Hull and continental gunmakers; Bossler of Darmstadt, Schembor of Vienna, Hoffmann of Suerin and Wentzlaw of Ehrenbreitstein. Lot 70, in their upcoming July auction, is a magnificent cased 60 bore ball-reservoir pneumatic air rifle by Edward Bate of Brownlow Street, London, circa 1775, retailed by Isaac Riviere, with an auction estimate of £5,000 - £7,000.

Pneumatic air rifles and the exceptionally rare air pistols, were the height of the gun makers art, invariably beautifully engraved and expensive to acquire. Bullets were propelled by compressed air forced into a reservoir via a pump, which was either a ball reservoir attached to the gun at the fore end, in the stock, or the butt of a pistol; occasionally, the reservoir was contained in an outer housing surrounding the barrel. Used for small game and on the continent, for deer and wild boar, a fully charged air gun had a velocity of 1000 feet per second and was capable of driving a lead ball through a one inch pine board at 150 paces - roughly 450 feet.

The ultimate rich boy's toy, air weapons were also very popular for target shooting; the Duke of Atholl owned a matched pair of air pistols and the diarist, Thomas Creevey, recorded a cosy dinner party held by the Prince Regent at the Royal Pavilion in Brighton. The Prince had a considerable collection of different firearms and after dinner, encouraged the ladies to shoot at a target with one of his airguns. A Miss Bloomfield hit the ceiling; Miss Johnstone, the dining room door, but Lady Downshire received applause for potting a violinist in the orchestra.

Air guns had several advantages over conventional firearms; they were quieter, with none of the thick, sulphurous, corroding smoke associated with black powder ignition. Were quicker to reload, easier to clean, had virtually no recoil and relatively unaffected by rain. An ideal assassin's weapon; the District Captain of Linz, the capital of Austria, became sufficiently concerned to pass an edict that a licence was required to manufacture, or own an air gun. To avoid the cost of buying the licence, is supposed to be the reason 18th and 19th century air guns were disguised with faux flintlock mechanisms. In 1778, the Italian watch and gun maker, Bartolomeo Girandoni, developed a powerful repeating air gun, with the reservoir in the butt and a spring fed tube containing a magazine of twenty balls. News of Girandoni's remarkable gun



Sir (Walter) John Scott, Bt. MFH

Sir Johnny (as he is better known) is an author, natural historian, broadcaster, columnist, countryside campaigner, artisan snuff manufacturer and retired hill farmer.

He wrote and co-presented the BBC2 series *Clarissa and the Countryman* with Clarissa Dickson Wright. He writes for a variety of magazines and periodicals on field sports, food, farming, travel, history and rural affairs.

A lifetime devotee of the countryside and its sports, he is currently:

- Joint Master, The North Pennine Hunt
- Regional Director, Vote OK.
- President, The Gamekeepers Welfare Trust.
- President, The Tay Valley Wildfowlers Association.
- President, The Newcastle Wildfowlers Association.
- President, The Association of Working Lurchers / Longdogs.
- Centenary Patron and Honorary Life Member, British Association for Shooting and Conservation.
- Patron, The Sporting Lucas Terrier Association.
- Patron, The Wildlife Ark Trust.
- Patron, The National Organisation of Beaters and Pickers Up.
- Board member, The European Squirrel Initiative.

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reached Field Marshall Mortz von Lacy of the Austrian army, who commission Girandoni to adapt his gun for military use and translocated him from Cortina d'Ampezzo to Penzing in Austria, to begin production. By 1788, the start of the war between Austria and Turkey, about 1500 repeaters, complete with knapsacks containing two spare reservoirs, cleaning stick, lead ladle and a hundred .46 calibre balls, had been delivered to the depot at Petrovaradin Fortress.

Potentially the assault rifle of the era offering terrific fire power, the Girandoni had a limited life as a military weapon and the problems with them, were inherent to all 18th and early 19th century air guns. The mechanism was highly complex and required constant maintenance; to avoid air leak-ing and pressure dropping, the leather gaskets, washers, seals and valves needed frequent lubrication with whale oil. The rivetted and brazed iron reservoirs were fragile and easily damaged, took an age to fill - something in the region of 3,500 strokes of a hand pump - and prone to rupturing if compression capacity was exceeded. Regimental armourers tended to have the basic skills of a blacksmith and a damaged Girandoni repeater required the mechanical expertise of a clockmaker; added to which, using the rifle required specialist training, almost impossible to achieve in a largely conscript army. They were withdrawn at the end of the Hapsburg-Ottoman war and then reissued in small numbers with an improved reser-voir filling system and mobile pumps mounted on carts, when Napoleon invaded Austria.

As a military arm, the Girandoni proved to be a failure and by 1815, had been phased out of the Austrian army, but remained popular among civilians and was much copied by other gunmakers. Holt's sold three air guns made on the Girandoni system in their December 2024 sale; the Schem-bor of Vienna, a Stormer of Herzberg am Harz, an unsigned German gun and in the March sale, a repeater by Fisher of London. A Girandoni repeater famously accompanied the Lewis and Clark Expedition to explore the country after the Louisiana Purchase of 1803. Captain Merriweather Lewis used the gun at least sixteen times to impress and pacify the various Indi-an tribes he met on the journey, writing in 1806; "My air gun also astonish-es them very much, they cannot comprehend it's shooting so often and without powder, and think it is great medicine."



CONTACT HOLTS

info@holtsauctioneers.com

www.holtsauctioneers.com

+44 (0)1485 542 822