

# IN THE GUNROOM

## LANCASTER 20 BORE HAMMER GUN

**Donald Dallas**

I love a pretty hammer gun, particularly the late built examples with low hammers, slim actions, evoking an era in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century when game shooting was at its height. The better-quality examples are fast and graceful and just lovely for the occasional day out in the field.

Lot 1505 in this sale ticks every box, a 20 bore thumb-hole hammer gun no. 4936 by Charles Lancaster built in 1879. Being a 20 bore is unusual for a best quality gun and what a stylish gun it is. It immediately screams Charles Lancaster with its distinctive hare's ears hammers, very much the trademark for Lancaster hammer guns. It has a second pattern Purdey thumb-hole snap action that only adds to its elegance and is a very comfortable action to operate to boot. The bold damascus barrels are another Lancaster feature and the whole medley of hare's ears, thumbhole and 20 bore damascus barrels means that it is a very elegant, desirable little gun.

The firm of Charles Lancaster has an interesting history. The original Charles Lancaster, born in 1791 was a barrel maker of some repute, stamping C.L. under his barrels. Many guns by the famous makers like Manton and Purdey will be found so stamped. He subsequently opened up his own business at 151 New Bond Street, London. When he died in 1847 the business was carried on by his son Charles William Lancaster. The firm was progressive with several patents to their name such as oval bore rifling and multi barrel guns.

The fortunes of the firm changed considerably when an outsider, Henry Thorn, entered the business in 1870. Henry Alfred Alexander Thorn was born in 1852 and aged 18 began his apprenticeship with Lancaster in 1870. Upon the death of Charles William Lancaster in 1878, Henry Thorn purchased the business entirely aged just 26. I have often wondered how such a young man was able to purchase a business like this with premises in New Bond Street, a factory, shooting ground, high production and a world-wide name.

A little research provided the answer and quickly established that Henry Thorn came from a prosperous family. His background was not in gunmaking but in coach building. His family firm was W. & F Thorn, coachbuilders established in 1824. His father, William Thorn, was one of the partners in the company. Their coachworks were in Islington Green but their showroom was in central London in Great Portland Street. They built the highest quality coaches and supplied many to royalty and the aristocracy. Whenever the motor car appeared in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, they progressed to building high quality car bodies to chassis supplied by many famous motor manufacturers. (Just as an aside there was another coachbuilder in London in this period named Holland & Holland, no connection).

It seemed that Henry Thorn would walk into this prosperous business, but for some reason he was far more interested in gunmaking. After completing his apprenticeship at Lancaster, the opportunity came up for him to buy the business in 1878 and although aged just 26, his wealthy background explains why he was able to purchase the prestigious firm of Charles Lancaster.

Henry Thorn was no young man with simply silver pockets, he was a gunmaker and took Lancaster to new heights with a great many patents to his name, multi-barrel guns, game counters, try guns, single triggers, hammerless guns, over and under guns and even a patented shooting cape.

Henry Thorn was also an excellent publicist and in 1889 published the well-known book *The Art Of Shooting* under the pseudonym of Charles Lancaster (He was astute enough to continue with this name as it was of known quality) This book ran to several editions and was a must have in any sportsman's library.

He claimed he was a successful gun fitter and one of his greatest publicity stunts was in building guns for the famous American shot, Annie Oakley. She first came to London in 1887 as the exhibition star of *The Buffalo Bill Wild West Show*. Within a few months of the opening at Earls Court, Annie Oakley had become a legend. Several makers presented guns to her, but it was Henry Thorn who fitted her with a pair of Lancaster 20 bores. She later wrote to him in 1888 saying that she had been using them for two years and that they were "such perfect fitting and fine shooting guns".

The little 20 bore Lancaster hammer gun in lot 1505 in this sale is a delectable little gun weighing in at just 5lbs. 6oz. It dates from the period when Henry Thorn had just acquired the firm and shows his influence in building quality, attractive guns. Estimated at £800-£1200 you won't find a finer hammer gun.

