

## THE GUN WITH THE GOSSIP

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We all love a bit of gossip, the more salacious the better; well lot 1553 in this auction has it all, a stunning quality little Purdey hammer gun and the butcher's daughter from Devon who married one of the lands wealthiest aristocrats and who flaunted her new found wealth to the extent that she drove around London in a carriage pulled by four zebras.

The gun is a very elegant, rare and beautiful Purdey 28 bore bar-in-wood hammer gun no. 11117 completed on the 9th August 1882 for Lady Meux. Certain guns stand out as icons and the Purdey bar-in-wood does just that. Purdey got the design just right with the woodwork covering the action to create a particularly handsome gun. Bar-in-wood Purdeys are highly sought after, but a diminutive 28 bore bar-in-wood? Now this is a rare gun indeed and I have never encountered another example. Its lines are exquisite, a scaled down 12 bore, light and extremely elegant and when it was delivered new, it weighed a tiny 4lbs. 15oz. It had a tiny stock too, only 13 ¼" long that only complimented its lines, as it was made for a lady – and quite a lady too.

On its own this little Purdey would stand out from the crowd, but in addition it has a provenance to die for as it was originally built for Lady Meux, a society beauty in the late 19th century who was the constant subject of raised eyebrows and tittle-tattle in the drawing rooms of London's West End and indeed all over the country.

Valerie Susie Langdon was a butcher's daughter from Devon who left that county for the bright lights of London. She was a stunningly beautiful woman and claimed to have been an actress in London, but the font of all knowledge,

Wikipedia, claims that this was a euphemism for a far older profession. Personally, I prefer the explanation in her obituary in The Times of 1910. "It seems doubtful whether she ever acted, except perhaps for a season in a Surrey pantomime when she was very young".

Whilst working as a barmaid at the Casino de Venise in Holborn she met a fabulously wealthy aristocrat, Sir Henry Bruce some nine years her junior. Sir Henry was smitten and aged 22 in 1878 married her and Valerie Langdon became Lady Meux. On their marriage certificate



his father's occupation was listed as baronet but she elevated her father's status to gentleman. And to get

over the age difference, the wrong way round in these days, they both simply stated that they were of "full age".

Sir Henry owned the extensive Meux Brewery, had substantial estates and was a very wealthy man. The marriage astonished the aristocratic world and the butcher's daughter with red blood running through her veins was not accepted by her blue-blooded betters.

Even The Times obituary of 1910 could not resist a dig, stating that at the time of her marriage she was to receive an income of £50,000 per year, a vast sum of money at the time. And just for good measure, although saying she was a very beautiful young woman, she was "perhaps slightly older than himself".

Her beauty was such that the well-known artist James Whistler painted three portraits of her, and it was probably these three portraits more than anything that brought her beauty to the public eye.

She now had access to substantial property, Theobalds Park at Waltham Cross, Sheen House, the Dauntsey Estate in Wiltshire, a chateau at Sucy en Bric near Paris and as a little town house, 41 Park Lane in London.

She spent lavishly on her main house Theobalds Park building a swimming pool, a Turkish bath, a racquet court and a roller-skating rink. She also built a museum for her collection of Egyptian mummies and other Egyptian relics. In addition, she collected Nelson memorabilia and owned Nelson's sword. Her jewels, especially her ropes of pearls were famous. In 1887 she purchased the recently demolished Temple Bar from the City of London and had it re-erected at Theobalds Park as the new gateway to the estate.

Such was her opulence and flamboyance, she drove around London in a carriage pulled by four zebras, so much more stylish than the ubiquitous personalised number plate. It is no wonder then that when

she wanted to shoot, the little Purdey 28 bore bar-in-wood was her preferred choice. She was a keen horsewoman, regularly riding to hounds and she bred thoroughbred stock having a stud at Theobalds Park, racing under the name of "Mr. Theobalds".

During the Boer War she became concerned about the defence of Ladysmith and at her own expense, some £20,000, she ordered six naval 12 pounders made by Armstrongs of Elswick and they became known as the Elswick Battery. After the war two of these guns were returned to her and they stood on the terrace at Theobalds Park. Her husband Sir Henry Meux died in 1900 but the couple were childless. In an astonishing quirk in the tale, she was visited by Sir Hedworth Lambton, commander of the Naval Brigade at Ladysmith who thanked her for her gift of the battery. He made such an impression upon her that she left everything to him in her will provided he changed his name to Meux.

Lady Meux died on the 20th December 1910 and was interred in the Meux family vault. Now how can you resist this little Purdey 28 bore with a provenance like this?

