

IN THE GUNROOM
PAIR OF PURDEYS FOR THE PARIS EXHIBITION

Donald Dallas

In the year 1889, the French decided to celebrate the hundredth anniversary of the Storming of The Bastille in 1789 by holding a major exhibition in the centre of Paris, an Exposition Universelle. The centrepiece of this Paris Exhibition was to be the Eiffel Tower constructed between 1887 and 1889 and only just opened in the nick of time, without lifts though.

The Paris Exhibition was open between May and October 1889 as a "showcase for scientific and technological advances" and over 32 million visitors attended.

A large section of the Exhibition was devoted to firearms and a great many makers from Europe exhibited their creations. Great Britain had scores of gunmakers taking part with their stands crammed full of their latest gun and rifle developments.

Lot 1355 in this auction comprises a magnificent pair of 12 bore hammer ejector Purdeys nos. 13213/4 completed on 30th July 1889. In the record in the Purdey Dimension Books for these guns there is a note "Made for the Paris Exhibition". The guns were built to exhibition standards with highly figured stocks, gold ovals and extra fine engraving with Purdey pulling out all the stops to exhibit their best work.

The hammer ejector was the pinnacle of development for the hammer gun in the 1880s and 1890s, but since hammerless ejector guns were by this time the very latest development, very few hammer ejector guns were ever made. Consequently, such guns today are highly collectible and in addition very usable. One reason for their undoubted attraction is that hammer ejectors were favoured by many of the famous sportsmen of the late 19th century, Lord Ripon, Lord Walsingham, the Prince of Wales and the future King George V. They all claimed that the hammers were an excellent aid to sighting.

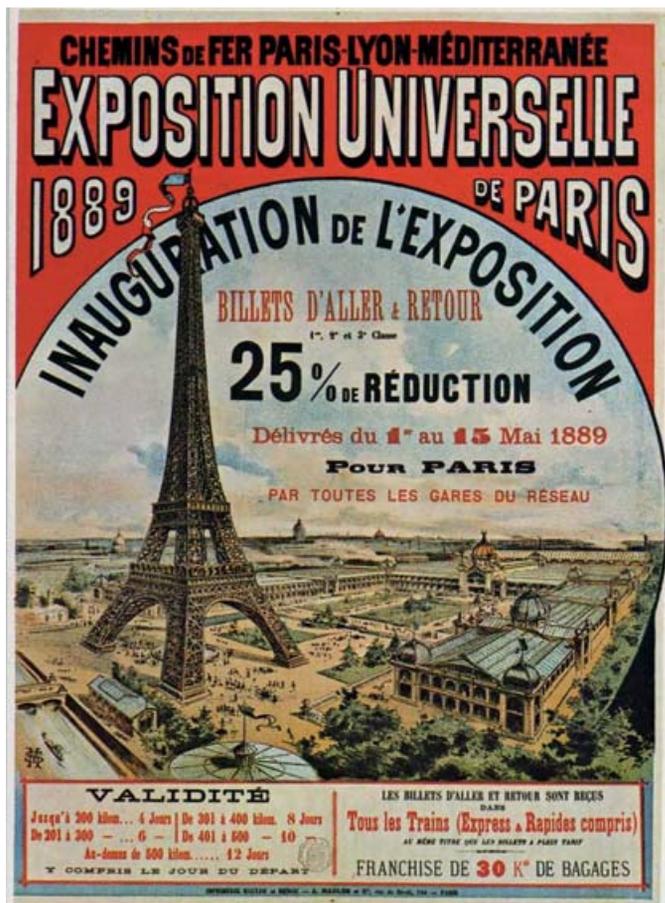
Purdey soon acquired "the name" for hammer ejector guns as all these famous sportsmen used such Purdey guns, hence Purdey built more hammer ejectors than any other maker. With such credentials and pedigree, it is hardly surprising that Purdey would want to show off their hammer ejector gun at the Paris Exhibition of 1889.

However this pair of exhibition grade Purdey hammer guns never actually arrived at the Paris Exhibition! When the idea to build this pair of guns was conceived a year earlier in 1888, Purdey had every intention of taking a stand at the Paris Exhibition and consequently built the guns to the highest standards.

A *Field* article of June 1889 on the British exhibitors bemoans the fact that the really famous British gunmakers, Purdey, Holland & Holland and Boss were conspicuous by their absence. A great many other makers were and Charles Lancaster, James Lang, Cogswell & Harrison, E.M. Reilly & Co, W.W. Greener and W & C Scott & Sons all won medals. The top medal, the Grand Prix, was won by Westley Richards.

The reason for the absence of the Big Three at the Paris Exhibition lies in the dilemma that these makers constantly faced, whether to take part in trials or exhibitions or not. Their reputation was such that if they took part and did not come out top, then their reputation could be tarnished. It was far better not to take part as they had more to lose than any other makers if they were not successful. Purdey had in fact taken part in international exhibitions in the 1870s and 1880s and had won medals but the size of this exhibition made them pause for thought.

One can almost hear James Purdey the Younger milling it over in his mind, deciding in 1888 to exhibit at such a prestigious event in Paris the next year in 1889 and having this pair of hammer ejectors begun along with other to show the best Purdey standards, then deciding later on not to exhibit. There was also a reticence on Purdey's part not to advertise in any way, as in this era it was thought to be slightly vulgar



for a top class firm to do so, relying on word of mouth and recommendation instead, and as a result of this, there are no Purdey advertisements in periodicals like *The Field* in this era.

I think this understanding of why these guns never reached the Paris Exhibition only adds to their exclusivity and attraction. They were intended for exhibition, built to the highest standards, but Purdey decide not to exhibit. "Paris Exhibition" the Dimension Books state and Paris Exhibition guns they are.



Lot 1355: Made for the Paris Exhibition J. Purdey & Sons
A fine pair of 12-bore toplever hammer ejector guns £16,000-20,000