

IN THE GUNROOM

HENRY TWO-POSITION RIFLE

Donald Dallas

We have all heard the old adage about waiting ages for a bus then two come along at the same time. Well this is exactly what happened to me with the very rare Alexander Henry unorthodox two-position match rifle. There were only twenty-four such rifles built and I had only ever seen one in an illustration. Then out of the blue last year one appeared at my house brought by a collector friend and then Holts found another one that is for sale as lot 515 in this auction.

In the second half of the 19th century, Alexander Henry of Edinburgh was the pre-eminent rifle maker in the world selling rifles to all of British and European royalty, the Maharajahs, the aristocracy and sportsmen the world over. When he died in 1894 the business was bought by Alexander Martin but it was a shadow of its former glory selling bought in Birmingham guns and rifles.

Henry conducted a great many experiments with rifling to improve accuracy and in 1860 took out his famous rifling patent that created Henry rifling. Until the advent of nitro powders in the 1890s, Henry rifling was the most accurate rifling of all with competition after competition being won with rifles so bored. Even the British Army adopted Henry rifling with the Martini-Henry rifle of 1871.

Alexander Henry realised that favourable competition results would be excellent publicity for his business. The Volunteer movement was in full flourish in the second half of the 19th century with a great many volunteers shooting Henry rifles at their frequent meetings. In addition the N.R.A annual rifle meeting at Wimbledon saw Henry rifles always in the top scores.

To improve accuracy even more, Alexander Henry, in a joint patent with Daniel Fraser, took out a very unusual patent no. 1559 of 21st April 1877 for a two-position match rifle that could be shot in the back or prone position in competition. The unusual back position was the style adopted in the 1860s by John Farquharson, a gamekeeper from Perthshire who achieved outstanding results with this odd position.

Daniel Fraser had been taken on by Henry in 1860 as an apprentice and it seems highly likely that he thought up the design for the rifle. He either did not have the funds for the patent, or as seems more likely, as an employee of Henry, his boss insisted that the patent be in joint names.

A second pistol grip was placed on the fore-end with a second trigger and trigger guard ahead of it. This second trigger was connected by a long rod to the rear trigger to fire the lock in the usual way. Another part of the patent consisted of a deep hollow cut out of the base of the butt to accommodate the arm of the marksman in the back position. A further improvement was a sliding pad attached to the upper part of the stock to protect the cheek.

Alexander Henry only built twenty-four two-position rifles. They will be encountered in both muzzle and breech-loading form with the first such rifle being built in 1877. Most of the two-position

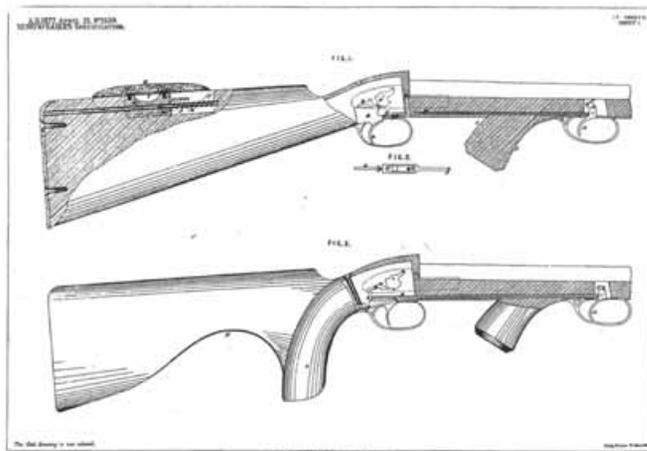
rifles had very specialised rifling. Standard Henry rifling was seven grooves but the competition two-position rifles had eleven grooves with a progressive twist.

The Henry/Fraser two-position rifle was a winner able to beat most other rifles. But its success and unorthodox style was also its downfall. It appears to have been banned in British competitions and consequently Alexander Henry had to sell most of these rifles abroad, primarily to South Africa. Albert P. Walshe was his South African agent and he bought the majority of these rifles.

Shortly after the joint patent between Henry and Fraser, Daniel Fraser left to set up on his own at 4 Leith Street Terrace. In age old fashion as had been done several times before in the gun trade, Fraser used Henry's name to his advantage emblazoning the front of his shop regarding his years with Henry. Although not illegal, Henry did not appreciate his name being used in this way and sent several lawyers letters to his erstwhile apprentice.

The two-position rifle offered as lot 515 is no. 4195, a percussion rifle in .451 calibre with 33 1/2" barrel and 11 progressive rifling cuts. It was sold on the 12th October 1877 to Messrs Deane & Co who exported it to South Africa. The rear sight is engraved "J. Barlow, Grahams Town." The trigger guard is engraved "H&F patent No 3, Alex'r Henry, Edinburgh" meaning that it is the third rifle built to the 1877 patent. It is border engraved only. Such rifles were expensive costing £30 as opposed to a standard Henry match rifle at £21.

This very rare and unusual rifle on lot 515 is estimated at £3000 - £5000.



The patent drawing dated 21st April 1877 for patent no. 1559 that created the Henry/Fraser two-position rifle. The upper drawing shows the adjustable cheek pad and the lower drawing the cut away on the underside of the butt.