

# Going, going, gun at auction

A good boxlock for £700, a tight provincial sidelock for £1,500? Gun sales can offer great bargains if you follow Mike Yardley's advice

THERE ARE many ways to buy a gun: from an established retail shop, from an acquaintance, by responding to an advertisement or, most riskily and potentially most rewardingly, from an auction. But this is not a course of action to take lightly – buying second-hand guns has all the pitfalls of buying second-hand cars. And the highly charged atmosphere of the sale-rooms exaggerates the risk. It is all too easy to get carried away in the heat of the moment.

## TIME SPENT IN RECONNAISSANCE IS SELDOM WASTED

Even those who go to sales on a regular basis make mistakes. If you put time into research, prepare yourself and exercise a modest degree of self-discipline, however, buying at auction can offer some good deals. The gun trade gets a significant part of its stock from auction (though it buys most of it from people who walk through its doors). If you remain disciplined with regard to budget, there are some great buys to be had in the rooms.

Auctions are a lot of fun as well. Many have a very “clubby” atmosphere and bring together people of similar interests. Nick Holt, in particular, has done a brilliant job of making gun auctions more accessible. They are not only good places to buy guns when you have done your homework and have a bit of luck (a factor never to be discounted entirely at auction), they also offer a great environment in which to improve your knowledge of older guns and related sporting impedimenta. Gun auctions often remind me of museums where you are encouraged to handle the exhibits.

## DEVELOPING A REALISTIC PLAN

Some say you should never go to auction without specific objects in mind. You must consider your sporting or collecting needs carefully and

your budget, of course. You should have some idea of what you want and may even have set your heart on a specific gun. But try to avoid tunnel vision with regard to everything else at a sale. One of the joys of auctions is that one can bump into something unexpectedly.

Select your auction house (some are more suited to first-timers than others), study the catalogue carefully (and recent catalogues of the same and other auction houses), and attend the view with plenty of time to spare.

Another basic rule – and I confess to breaking it on occasion – is never buy a lot unseen. (One of the best shooting guns I have ever owned – a W&C Scott sidelock pigeon gun – was bought in haste from a catalogue description alone. It turned out to be sleeved; I did not read the small print as I listened to the very tempting bidding.) Do not expect to get a good deal without effort. You might get away with it on occasion, but those who consistently do well from auctions do so because they study the form most carefully.

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## BE COOL

Always set yourself a limit on anything you bid for. I recently attended a gun auction where I saw an old glass-ball trap (the forerunner of the clay-pigeon trap) sell for about five times what it was worth when a bidding war broke out (and one bidder was bidding it up just for devilment, I suspect). Frequently one sees silly, frenzied bidding. Ego and the need to win can cost you a lot of money.

When you go to the view examine all the lots you can and make sure you know exactly what they include (especially in the case of mixed or combined lots) – open all the gun cases. Don't be afraid to ask questions and read the catalogues assiduously, they are stuffed with valuable information (and should be kept, with a record of prices achieved).

## SEEK ASSISTANCE

You may be able to find more information than there is in the catalogue. This may relate to the provenance or condition of the lot. In the case of old shotguns the wall thicknesses of the barrels are a big issue (guns can be re-bored but there are limits to this and it affects value). The proof status of the gun and its legal category will be stated as matter or routine but the exact condition of a gun, and in particular its stock and barrels, will be much harder to determine.

Assess guns dispassionately and remember that repairs to older guns can be extremely expensive. Re-barrelling a gun with a famous London name may cost £10,000 or so from the original maker or about half that from an independent outworker. Re-stocking begins from about £1,500 and rises exponentially in the case of London's best. When you assess an old gun in less-than-perfect condition, always estimate the cost of renovation (add 50 per cent to whatever figure you come up with). ▶



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MIKE YARDLEY



## LOOKING FOR VALUE

For the sake of discussion, let us say that you are interested in a better quality Birmingham boxlock ejector with an estimate of £700 to £800. It is the type of gun that you may have seen for about double in gun shops. You like the looks, the engraving is fine and the stock has some good figure but is a little bruised.

Should you buy it? Not an easy question. You shouldn't if there is evidence of its having been abused by an incompetent person or drolled up poorly for resale. Nor should you buy it if the barrels are grossly pitted without sufficient meat for lapping and re-proof or if they are mirror-bright but significantly under 20 thou wall thickness at their minimum point if measured with the proper tools. I have bought guns at 18 thou, but it is always a good thing if they are in the early 20s.

At the bigger houses a list will often be provided with wall thicknesses and bore diameters for all the shotgun lots upon it. This is not usually done at the "trade" auctions, nor at provincial auctions where a gun may occasionally appear (but they are not usually a good place for the inexperienced to buy guns anyway). One can purchase a bore micrometer and a wall thickness gauge but they are expensive precision tools, and there is some science in using them well. Far better, if you are interested in a particular gun or guns, is to get a gunmaker, gunsmith or other expert to measure it up at the view for a small fee.

## USING AN AGENT

An alternative to bidding at auction is to use the services of an expert third party to handle your sale-room transactions. This can prevent you getting carried away and buying the wrong gun or paying too much for it. Sadly, many punters buy guns at auction only to return them for sale in the next one.

Buying the wrong gun can be an expensive mistake: you will have to take the buyer's premium and a seller's premium on the chin, which could amount to 35 per cent of the purchase price. It is also possible that you may not re-sell it for anywhere near what you paid.

Diggory Hadoke at [www.vintageguns.co.uk](http://www.vintageguns.co.uk) specialises in handling auction purchases for private clients. He is becoming one of the best-known experts in this specialist field. He can provide a detailed pre-auction condition report or will handle a complete purchase; from initial appraisal, to bidding, to collecting, storing and shipping. Dig understands the market as far various guns are concerned and, importantly, he can be given a general rather than a specific brief. If you are considering spending several thousand pounds or more, a £50 independent appraisal is money very well spent.

If the stock is cracked, I usually walk away, though some cracks may be repaired. If the stock is too short a recoil pad or extension may be added. If the screw heads are spoilt or the trigger-guard engraving is worn I am not usually bothered either: these things are relatively easy to put right. But there are a lot of ifs, buts and maybes. If you lack experience, buy something in good original condition that suits you.

### PROOF

This is a complex subject so seek professional advice if in doubt. When new, guns are marked with a proof size which, in the future, will allow one to determine how worn they have

become by using a bore micrometer. Typically English 12-bore guns measure .729in at a point 9in from the breech when new. The bores may get enlarged by repair (for example, when lifting a dent or removing pitting after which process they may be re-bored). At some point they will go out of proof.

However, bore diameter is not the only issue. The barrel walls may become dangerously thin with wear. Safety apart, anything under 20 thou vastly reduces a gun's value (because re-barrelling is so expensive, as discussed). I want to see no more than about five thou of enlargement from the last proof size and a wall thickness around 20 thou as noted.

**Are there cracks in the stock? Is the chequering original?**





With cheaper guns, the problem is that artisan work has become so much more expensive in recent years. With care and caution, you can assess barrel condition. Sometimes a hair-line crack lurks under a lock-plate, waiting to cost you vast sums of money if the stock breaks. I take turn-screws, snap caps, a bore light, a nylon or metal block for testing strikers and mainsprings, a tape measure and a magnifying glass to views (though I use the first-mentioned tool only with the staff's permission).

Most importantly, I have a mental checklist that I run through every time I look at older guns (I rarely buy modern guns at auction because usually a Beretta or Browning works out a better buy at a local gunshop). It is:

- 1) Is the gun in original, worn or refinished condition?
- 2) How much action colour is there? Has it been replaced?
- 3) Is the engraving crisp?
- 4) If the gun has been re-proofed, to what chamber length? When will it be out of proof?
- 5) What are the wall thicknesses? Is there sufficient thickness for safety and future repair?
- 6) Have the barrels been shortened or has choke been removed from the gun?
- 7) Are the ribs attached to the barrels? Suspend them from a finger and tap them with a pencil. Do they ring or is there a tinny, rattly sound? The latter indicates the ribs have come away and require relaying and that there might be rust damage to the barrels underneath.
- 8) Are there any cracks in the action? Look at the area where action face and flats meet.
- 9) Is the action face in reasonable condition? Has it been welded or otherwise refaced?
- 10) Is the gun "on the face" or does it require tightening? Or are there signs of poor-quality tightening?
- 11) Are the strikers and main springs in good condition? Test by using a nylon block against the action face of the disassembled gun.
- 12) Does the top-lever spring function well? Or does it feel spongy? If the latter, it will need replacing.
- 13) Does the gun have a single trigger? (English single-trigger guns are notoriously unreliable – I never touch them.)
- 14) What ejector system is it built on? Southgate is the most reliable and the cheapest to repair.
- 15) Do the ejectors function? Are they well timed, throwing out both snap caps at the same time?
- 16) Are there any cracks in the stock?
- 17) Is chequering original? If new, is it honest or disguising a repair? If the chequering is worn, is there enough wood to re-chequer?
- 18) Is the butt or fore-end wood oil-soaked?
- 19) Is the fore-end complete? It is surprisingly expensive to replace the wood in a fore-end.
- 20) Is the gun cased? If so, what else is in it?

There are other considerations. Regardless of name, does the gun have quality? Will the lot attract interest? Is it worth spending money on? Do you have someone who can fix it if required? Will it hold its value? Is it in fashion?

### SEEKING VALUE

Looking at today's market, good quality boxlocks are, generally, undervalued. Non-ejector guns can be ludicrously cheap (£100 or less). Provincial sidelocks of quality by lesser-known makers can be excellent buys too, in the £1,000 to £2,000 range. At the upper end of the market, the £10,000 to £15,000 Purdey, Grant or Holland & Holland can be good value when compared to the cost of a new gun. I had the chance to buy a new Boss for £20,000 a little while back, which was a fantastic saving on the new price. It was a beautiful best gun and I still regret not purchasing it.

I tend to avoid mid-market Continental shotguns of recent manufacture at auction (too many people use them and want to have a go at the £500 mark), but modern rifles can be especially good value (because not everyone will have the necessary Firearm Certificate variation and because dealers often can't be bothered to buy them in). Vintage rifles can offer value too, but be careful of bore condition and consider the availability of ammunition. ■

Re-barrelling is very expensive, so check carefully for wear



## GOING GREAT GUNS

### Holt's Auctioneers

This company has been built up by the dynamic Nick Holt and his team into the largest auctioneer of sporting guns in the UK today. It holds London sales throughout the year and members of the team tour the world valuing and collecting guns for the sales. Call the administration office on 01485 542882, email [enquiries@holtandcompany.co.uk](mailto:enquiries@holtandcompany.co.uk) or visit [www.holtandcompany.co.uk](http://www.holtandcompany.co.uk).