



ROYAL PISTOLS UNEARTHED

Nick Holt relates the fascinating discovery of two long forgotten pistols.

Howard Carter spent years digging in the sand before making his amazing discovery of the only untouched Egyptian tomb to have survived. And even though such a discovery is beyond the wildest dreams of most archaeologists or indeed anyone interested in antiques, everyone in the auction business dreams of doing just that. Whether it be an old master painting or a rare piece of Chippendale furniture, it is the buzz of discovery that drives us on. Even in the world of arms, armour and antique guns, such discoveries can be made, and recently here at Holt's such an occurrence happened.

At Holt's we scour the world for fresh material for our sales, often relying on our hard working foreign representatives to do the leg work. In a recent shipment from South Africa (which has constantly been a source of unusual and exciting items) there came a pair of pistols. Now it must be said at this point that they were in rather poor condition. They had once been flintlock but crudely converted to percussion, both hammers were missing, together with some internal lockwork and one pistol had been broken at the butt and repaired with what appeared to be Araldite. However, our expert valuer noted that the furniture on the pistols was silver, always a sign of quality, and that, coupled with the famous Royal gunmaker's name Barbar on the locks caused him to look further. Both pistols bore large silver escutcheons to the wrists in the form of crests, which, after careful study proved

to be identical to that of George, Prince of Wales (later King George III). However, they were surmounted with a Duke's crown as opposed to a Royal version.

After consultation with other experts in this field, the probable truth came to light. George was made heir ascendant in 1751 after the untimely death of the previous Prince of Wales. At this time George inherited various titles including one from his father, The Duke of Edinburgh. Three weeks after inheriting this title, George II, then King, bestowed a new title 'George, Prince of Wales'. As such it is believed that these pistols were commissioned from James Barbar, Gentleman Armourer to George II, to commemorate the receiving of the title 'Duke of Edinburgh' by George in 1751, explaining the Duke's crown above the crest and placing the order date to within a three-week period!

How these pistols came to be in private hands is a little more difficult to fathom. The vendor inherited them from a Mr. Ian Douglas, who had in turn inherited them from his mother Molly Douglas in 1977 who had the pistols on her hall table for as long as anyone could remember! Molly was born in England and had emigrated to South Africa in 1922, and was the daughter of a certain Norman Herbert Smith who had started an illustrious firm of solicitors in 1882. Residing in a large property, Hickling Hall in Norfolk, and having a reasonable amount of disposable income, Norman had been a collector of all sorts of fine antiques and curios, and it is believed that these pistols were part of his collection. Whether Norman was aware of the Royal connection is unknown, the subsequent owners certainly were not. In the book, 'A History of Herbert

Smith', Norman was described as being "of the diligent middle classes, but descended from two aristocratic lines."

The rest I am afraid is pure speculation. Looking at the simplified family tree, Norman's father was descended from Sir William Herbert (1st Earl of Pembroke - died 1469) whilst his mother was descended from the Charles Barry (of the Barry's of Eynsham) and prior to that the family tree traces the lineage from William the Conqueror, and Henry I, Henry II, John and Henry III... unfortunately not King George III!

There is a reference to Norman Herbert Smith's uncle being the "rich and powerful" Francis Tress Barry who in 1872 bought St Leonard's Hill, an estate overlooking Windsor Castle. He began to exchange neighbourly visits with Queen Victoria, who knighted him in 1899. In Ascot Week, Francis Tress Barry used to lend St Leonards to the Prince and Princess of Wales, the future King Edward VII and Queen Alexandra. The Royal thank you gifts included "a gold cup and a silver gilt ewer". Perhaps these pistols were also a gift. Norman Herbert Smith was his uncle's personal solicitor and later acted as one of his executors.

Further research may bring more information to fill in the gaps, but hopefully these newly discovered pistols of national importance will be restored and cherished by their new owner.

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