



# Taking aim at history, art and craftsmanship...

*From important episodes in British history to unique works of art, Holts is one of the most famous specialist auction houses in the world. We talk to Nick Holt about his guns – and the stories behind them*



**D**escribing Nick Holt simply as a gun auctioneer does him something of an injustice. For Nick's world is one of supreme artistry, exquisite craftsmanship and extraordinary historical value.

Born and bred in London, Nick admits he wasn't terribly academic but knows exactly when he found his life's direction.

"As a young boy I accompanied my father on a visit to his gunsmith John Wilson for some repair work on his gun," he says. "I absolutely loved it, so as soon as I left school I started an apprenticeship with John as a gunmaker."

Nick then spent some time in the Tower of London with the Royal Armouries, studied the historical background of gunmaking and its importance to British history, and joined Bonhams as a porter - and within five years had set up a specialist gun department for one of the world's oldest and largest auctioneers of fine art and antiques.

"My father was full of wise advice," says Nick, "and he once told me that to succeed in life, you need to specialise in a small commodity - and then you'll become a wanted commodity."

Initially, Nick duly set up his own specialist gun auctioneers in southwest London, before moving lock, stock and barrel to an old dairy farm on part of the Royal Estate at Sandringham almost 20 years ago.

Since then, Holts has grown to become one of the only specialist gun auctioneers in the country - and one of the most famous in the world.

In Norfolk, Nick has a team of 24 people including ballistics experts, gunsmiths (one of whom is Scott Wilson, the son of his father's gunsmith), researchers, photographers, and media and digital specialists. In Kensington, he has a dedicated sale room which hosts four major sales a year. Wider afield, he has a network of around 30 people around the world sourcing guns and related items.

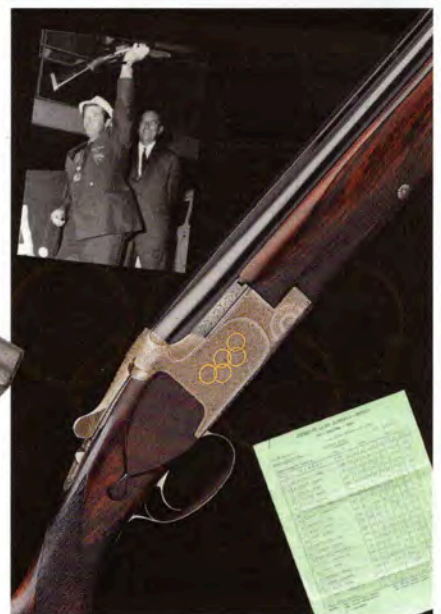
"That global network of agents has been essential to Holts," says Nick. "Shipping weapons around the world obviously requires a clear understanding of the local export legislation - and our own laws regarding imports from certain countries. And I'm afraid that I don't speak 30 different languages!"

Although Nick is a lifelong shooting enthusiast (he recently fired the largest handheld rifle in the world, losing four fillings in the process), his greatest passion is for the craftsmanship and history contained in his lots.



IMAGES: Andrew Orr - Holts Auctioneers

**PICTURES:**  
Two shotguns from the collection of musician Eric Clapton, with guns belonging to Sean Connery (below left) and the medal-winning weapon of Olympian John Braithwaite (below right)



"I've always put a special emphasis on provenance, and we all work incredibly hard at it," he says. "We never use words such as 'reputedly' or 'possibly' because the real value of these guns lies in being 100% accurate about their origins and history."

Over the years, Nick had sold guns belonging to D-Day heroes, recipients of the Victoria Cross, British and European royalty, at least three different James Bonds, rock stars such as Eric Clapton and Oscar-winning actors such as Sir Alec Guinness. He's sold the gun





**PICTURES:** The gun room at Holts has seen everything from the extraordinary rifle *The Triumph of Love* (opposite top) to the unique Asprey World Series Collection (opposite) and weapons used by the heroic soldiers of D-Day (opposite, bottom)

*“These are works of art, parts of history, & outstanding examples of one of Britain’s finest crafts...”*

that won Britain's first Olympic gold for clay target shooting, and the rifle owned by explorer Henry Morton Stanley - made especially for him shortly after he famously met Dr. Livingstone (he presumed) on the shores of Lake Victoria. He once even sold the gun of 19th century bare-knuckle boxer Ben Caunt, whose nickname of 'Big Ben' was given to the biggest bell in the clock tower at the Palace of Westminster. In fact, Nick is full of extraordinary stories.

“One in particular stands out,” he says. “We had a rather tired old Charles Lancaster double rifle consigned for sale which had been sitting gathering dust in storage for years. A little research into the rifle’s history brought to light that it had been made for none other than Denys Finch Hatton, the legendary big game hunter who fans of the film *Out of Africa* will recognise as the character played by Robert Redford.”

This impeccable provenance made a

significant contribution to what turned out to be a record-breaking result, but there was more to the story than that.

“What made it even better,” says Nick, “is that the collector who bought it finally succeeded in an seemingly impossible quest to find the rifle – having acquired the case for it nearly eight years previously!”

But it’s not all about hunting and shooting and the history of warfare. Sometimes it’s all about sheer artistry. Back in 2008, Holts sold *The Triumph of Love*, a breathtaking creation by the Swiss firm Mueller Murgenthal that combined the talents of artists, spiritualists, jewellers, silversmiths and gunsmiths. Described as one of the greatest rifles ever made, it was sculpted in 24ct white and yellow gold, sterling silver, rubies, aquamarines, white diamonds and rare bird’s eye maple wood - and featured a heart-shaped (and totally impractical) barrel.

And then there’s the Asprey ‘World Series’ Collection of six rifles designed to showcase the pinnacle of British gunmaking by making one gun for each continent. With different calibres suited to the continent in question and intricate engravings of native species and indigenous people, each rifle required over 1,000 hours to make (the engraving alone took a year per rifle) and the collection took 17 years to complete.

“Guns are obviously made for a purpose, but for many people that’s the least important element of them,” says Nick. “These are beautiful works of art, valuable parts of history, and outstanding examples of one of Britain’s finest crafts. And they never fail to excite you.”



## VALUATION DAY

On Tuesday 9th July, Holts will be holding a free Valuation Day at their Wolferton gunrooms – a rare opportunity to have your guns, militaria and related items assessed and valued by experts in the field. Holts' Valuation Days take place on an appointment system to maintain owners' privacy and peace of mind - and don't forget to bring any documents or information relating to the item's provenance, as that can have a significant impact on its value. To book your appointment, please telephone Holts on 01485 542822.