

Gunmaking historian **Donald Dallas** examines a once-in-a-lifetime best London gun gifted to a Swedish son-in-law.

A wedding present from Purdey

It is certainly not very commonplace to receive a brand new Purdey shotgun as a gift, but what if the year was 1883 and you are about to marry James Purdey's daughter? What better wedding present could you have than a Purdey best gun, gifted to you by your future father-in-law, James Purdey the Younger?

James Purdey the Younger was given full control of the business on January 1, 1858, by his father James Purdey the Elder. James the Younger was just 29 years old at the time but it was deemed a sensible arrangement to secure the future of the firm. It would be James Purdey the Younger who, in 1863, would patent one of the most famous patents of all time: the Purdey bolt, the standard closing mechanism on most guns.

On March 19, 1851, young James married Caroline Thomas and, as was the norm at this time, they went on to raise a large family of seven children. Their fifth child, Constance Julia Purdey was born on December 28, 1863, at the family home, 1 Manchester Square in London. In her late teens Constance met a Swedish gentleman in London by the name of Carl Svedberg. Romance blossomed and they were married on June 30, 1883, when Caroline was 19.

Carl Svedberg was involved in the Swedish iron trade and there must have been some connection with the Purdey gunmaking business for Constance to have met

him. The 1881 census lists him as an "Ironmonger Merchant" living at 58 Charlotte Street, London. He was obviously affluent as during their marriage they lived at the prestigious address of 17 Lansdowne Crescent and employed five servants.

It would be interesting to speculate why James Purdey decided to give Carl the very generous gift of an expensive best gun. Did he genuinely like him? Did he want to

forge links with the Swedish iron trade or did he give his other sons-in-law similar presents? Whatever the reason, it was quite an honour to be given such a personal wedding gift.

The gun given to Carl Svedberg by James Purdey still survives to this day. It is a 12 bore sidelock non-ejector no.11684. The entry in the *Purdey Dimensions Books* for this gun is particularly interesting as it records "C Svedberg per Mr. Purdey". ➤

Gunmaking runs in the family

James Purdey the Elder (1784-1863) was the founder of James Purdey and had sired four daughters before his son James Purdey the Younger was born in 1828.

His second daughter Eliza had been born in 1811 and at around the tender age of 16 she met the London gunmaker Joseph Lang. Joseph Lang had established his business at 7 Haymarket in 1821 and in the early days was primarily a gun dealer. Not only did he sell second-hand guns, he also bought in new guns from established makers at a trade discount.

James Purdey was one of the established makers who used Lang's retail outlet as a means of boosting sales. The Purdey sales ledgers from the 1820s show that new guns were being sold to Joseph Lang at discounted prices. For example, Lang was purchasing new Purdey double percussion guns at £40 against Purdey's retail price of £52. Eliza



Joseph Lang in 1828, the year of his marriage to Eliza Purdey.

Purdey must have met Joseph Lang through this business arrangement and on January 12, 1828, aged just 17, the couple were married in St. George's Church, Hanover Square, London.

This betrothal can only have been of benefit to Joseph Lang's business as by the early 1830s he had stopped being primarily a gun dealer and was now building guns under his own name. ■



12 bore Purdey sidelock non-ejector no. 11684 presented on June 30, 1883, by James Purdey to Carl Svedberg on the occasion of Carl's marriage to his daughter Constance Purdey.

The Purdey business in the 1890s

The popularity of shooting in the late 19th century was so closely allied to the constant innovation in gunmaking that Purdey sales in this period were actually quite staggering.

James Purdey the Younger was making an enormous profit, to the extent that his business was valued at £90,000 in his will dated 1903 – a considerable sum of money at the time.

Around 300 new sporting guns and rifles were built annually – an incredible number bearing in mind that they were all top quality. The late 19th century was also the period when Purdey bought in and finished second quality firearms, and again hundreds of such guns and rifles were sold.

All these sales were primarily by reputation and word of mouth, as advertising and sales drives were very much in their infancy back then. Cartridge sales were particularly enormous, which is quite staggering to think about considering they were all hand-loaded in Audley House. In the year 1890, 363,000 black powder, 1,544,000 Schultze and 430,000 EC cartridges were sold.

Gun shops were gun shops at this time and there was no clothing on offer. Cleaning rods, cases and oil were all sold in large quantities and the repair business was very large as well.

This volume of business did come at a price, though, as the gunmakers had to work extremely long hours and invariably on Saturdays as well. ■



James Purdey the Younger and his wife Julia sketched by their son Sefton Purdey in 1907.

“A palace amongst gun manufactories”

James Purdey the Elder had first entered 314½ Oxford Street in 1826 – Joseph Manton’s old premises – and here the business would remain until 1882. The lease on Oxford Street was due for renewal, and thanks to the large profits that had been accrued by the business, James Purdey the Younger was determined to find a more prestigious address for the company.

In 1879 he bought the lease on 57-60 South Audley Street in Mayfair, and in 1881 he had the old buildings torn down to be replaced by a building, vaguely in Queen Anne style designed by William Lambert. This spectacular building on five floors, plus basement, was finally completed two years later, and on January 1, 1883, James Purdey & Sons entered these premises, now known as Audley House.

Purdey’s new shop created great excitement; it was by far the most impressive and prestigious gun shop in the country, if not the world, and Purdey still reside there to this day.



Purdey’s new premises at 57-60 South Audley Street, drawn in 1881 by the architect William Lambert.

In the 1880s, the periodical *Land & Water* ran a series of articles entitled “Crack Gunmakers” that gave detailed descriptions and histories of various London gunmakers. They were written by the editor G.T.

Teasedale-Buckell, and in the article on Purdey published in July 1889, he described the new building in South Audley Street as “a palace amongst gun manufactories”. ■

How daunting must it have been for the Purdey gunmakers knowing that James Purdey personally ordered this gun and no doubt would cast a critical look over it before he presented it to his future son-in-law?

The escutcheon is in gold and was engraved specially to mark the occasion “June 30th, C.S. From J.P. 1883”. What a wonderful present to have been given – a best gun by the most famous gun manufacturer in Great Britain as a personal present on the occasion of your marriage to his daughter.

This 1883 Purdey is built on the Beesley self-opening action patented by Frederick Beesley in patent no.81 of January 3, 1880. Beesley was an ex-Purdey stocker and Purdey bought his patent the day before the patent was published. Since this date Purdey has used

“In the 1880s Purdey added delicately chiselled fern leaves on the fences that gave its guns a very distinctive look.”

this action on all its hammerless guns. This gun is a non-ejector as the true Purdey ejector, invented by one of its gunmakers William Wem, was not patented until February 29, 1888. Carl Svedberg’s gun is one of the first to be fitted with Whitworth fluid compressed steel barrels. Sir Joseph Whitworth had invented fluid compressed steel in the 1870s and this metal

was proportionately stronger than Damascus. Purdey was the first gunmaker to use Whitworth steel and the first recorded use of this metal in the *Purdey Dimensions Books* is in 1878. It was more expensive than Damascus and consequently was only used on best guns.

A lovely little touch that Purdey added in the 1880s were delicately chiselled fern leaves on the fences that gave its guns a very distinctive look. The Svedberg gun sports such fences.

Carl Svedberg must have been very pleased with his wedding present from his illustrious father-in-law; a best gun from the owner of the best gunmaker. So what is a Purdey sidelock non-ejector worth – £1,500-£2,000? But as we know provenance is everything in the gun world, and when the gun was sold late last year it went for £9,000. ■