

A photograph of two men standing in front of a stone wall. The man on the left is wearing a flat cap and a long coat, looking off to the side. The man on the right is wearing a blue blazer and holding a shotgun. The background is a rustic stone wall.

HOLT'S
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CHURCH FARM BARN

Holt's Auctioneers

How Much is Your Gun

Really Worth?

Text: Selena Barr | Photos: Tweed Media

“DON'T THINK ME STRANGE, but the first thing I do when valuing a gun is smell it,” says Nicholas Holt. The founder of Holt's Auctioneers, which specialises in firearms and sells around 10,000 a year, isn't going mad. Sniffing a firearm can tell him a great deal about it. Has it been cleaned recently? Is it musty from being locked in a gun cabinet for years? Does it still have the eggy smell of a black powder cartridge?

After putting his nose to work Nicholas then identifies the action, checks the woodwork on the stock and fore-end (for originality) and measures bore diameters and barrel thicknesses, using micrometers to ascertain usage and check its proof status. He also evaluates the gun's general condition, quality, estimated date of manufacture and maker.

For Nicholas, knowing the gun's provenance and history is a major contributor to its value. He not only uses the serial number to try to trace the gun's origin, but also talks to the owner to find out if it was bought from a dealer or inherited, what they know about it, how long they have had it, what they shot with it and so on. “The provenance side is hugely important these days. It not only helps sell the piece but also contributes enormously to its value. Clients love to know the history of a gun they are interested in buying,” Nicholas says.

As well as evaluating practical aspects, a valuer also relies on the experience he or she has gained over the years, combined with a certain amount of gut feelings. “Carrying out a valuation is quite an esoteric thing and you do get an instinct about a gun,” explains Chris Beaumont, Holt's second-in-command, who believes that actually holding the gun in his hands is vital. “When someone telephones and tells me about a gun it's very hard to make a judgment. Without wanting to sound odd, holding it tells me a lot. It's almost as if it comes to life.”

Nick Bongers de Rath, Holt's Gunroom Manager, looks out for what he calls quiet guns. “The guns we get excited about are the sleepy ones,” he says. “If it's an antique then we don't want it brightly polished nor do we want it black and overly dented. So I look out for a quiet, understated gun that has an element of history.” A few knocks or scrapes do not necessarily detract from the price, as Nick explains. “These add a story. A brand new gun can be quite dull, so signs of use add a sense of history and interest.”

Nicholas Holt explains that the value of a gun also depends on who is going to



Left: All Lots are available to inspect before the sale in the preview room.

Bottom left: Handling the Lots can be an important part of a purchase.

Bottom right: Bidding in the auction room can be an exciting experience.





buy it, how they perceive its worth and what global political events and fashion trends are taking place at the time. “When valuing I don’t just rely on the UK, but also on overseas markets. That means I need to think about what’s going on in the world. For example the current situation in the Ukraine and Russia means those markets are now closed, while American buyers tend to keep their wallets in their pockets when the dollar is weak. Hence, exchange rates have an impact.”

Fashions in the shooting world also affect values, with bubbles occurring as different types of firearms fall in or out of favour. Two-inch chambered guns, for example, saw a major bubble a few years back while hammer guns experienced one a decade ago. “Suddenly everyone wanted a hammer gun and we saw some remarkable prices paid for rather mundane specimens,” says Chris Beaumont. “Then of course the bubble burst and values dropped.”

One of the biggest issues to impact value is barrel length, as Nick Bongers de Rath notes. “Short barrels are not fashionable at the moment so a short-barrelled gun that should be worth £5,000, will fetch around £3,000 today just because its barrels are an inch shorter than fashion dictates. Mind you, in the 1950s short barrels were in fashion and long barrels weren’t so. It is a cyclical trend.”



Value is also added to a firearm through design elements such as engraving, quality of the wood and unusual features. Beaumont explains. “You may not know who made the gun, but a specific feature will give you a clue that it was built by a quality manufacturer. On a sidelock, for example, you can generally see a circular disc on the lockplate, the exterior of the tumbler pivot - where the hammer is attached to the side plate. On higher-grade guns this pivot will have a line cut into it that is filled with gold so it acts as a cocking

Senior Valuer Roland Elworthy casts his eye over some potential Lots at one of Holt’s Auctioneers’ free Valuation Days.