

IN THE GUNROOM

A QUIRKY SIDELOCK EJECTOR

Donald Dallas

There are thousands of guns and accessories on offer at Holts, but in every sale there are always a smattering of quirky, interesting guns that stand out; they may not be very valuable or very practical, yet they can be fascinating and draw comment and attention from many.

Such a gun is lot 1460 in this sale, a 12 bore sidelock ejector gun that is oh so different from the norm. This gun is by Frederick T. Baker who traded out of 21 Cockspur Street and 88 Fleet Street, London in the late 19th century. Numbered 6762, it dates from the late 1880s and is of top quality.

Although it is a sidelock ejector, it looks nothing like a conventional such gun with its very distinctive leg o' mutton back action locks and protruding ejector box on the base of the action. And just to add to its quirky look, a game counter is fitted to the underside of the fore-end to record the day's bag.

The reason for its very unusual look is that the gun is built to Joseph Needham of Birmingham's ejector patent no.1205 of 7th April 1874. The Needham ejector was in fact the very first ejector gun to be patented in Britain. Needham was a compulsive inventor with a profusion of inventions to his name, not only guns, but in diverse areas such as rotary engines, torpedoes, fountain pens and so on. In 1852 he patented a needle fire gun which can be regarded as the first hammerless gun and in 1862, a self-cocking snap action gun.

In his ejector patent of 1874 that this gun by Baker is built upon, his mechanism had a trigger plate action. Upon opening the gun, the rear barrel lump caught the cocking lever that extended slightly forwards from the action face and as the barrels continued to drop, the cocking lever slipped off the projection on the barrel lump and powered by the mainspring, the cocking lever snapped downwards to operate an ejector lever that fired the extractor to initiate ejection. Needham split the extractor into two halves, one for each barrel, hence ejection was selective depending upon which barrel had been fired.

One of the main virtues of the breech-loader when it came into general usage in the 1860s was that it speeded up the rate of fire, hence making driven game shooting all the more attractive. Fumbling with spent cartridges on a cold day with a non-ejector gun was always an impediment and whenever Needham's ejector gun appeared in 1874, it was a revolution and a real advance in gun technology. Patents can be enforced upon payment of regular fees for 14 years and such was the demand for Needham's ejector gun, he kept the patent in force for the full term of 14 years.

He licensed his patent to a great many makers over these 14 years and made a small fortune out of it. One of these makers was Frederick T. Baker of London and several guns were built by him to the Needham patent. This Baker gun was one of the last to be built to the Needham patent and is of very high quality. The action has beautiful carved serpentine fences and the entire gun is finely engraved with acanthus and scroll engraving. A nice little touch is the F.T.

Baker trade mark engraved on the underside of the action. It has Whitworth steel barrels and a handsome figured stock.

In addition to its very distinctive back action locks that are so delightfully different to the conventional style, the other gem of this gun is a game counter fitted to the underside of the fore-end.

In the late 19th century, with the breech-loader and particularly if you had an ejector gun, big bags were something to be lauded and many sportsmen vied with each other to this end encouraged by the likes of Lord Ripon and Lord Walsingham. Since it was difficult to remember the bag, many gunmakers patented and fitted game counters to guns. They are more commonly fitted to the butt. However, in this Baker gun the counter is fitted under the fore-end to be advanced a click by a knurled knob. Another nice little touch is that the gun still has its original cocking tool should the locks need to be cocked when the barrels are off the gun.

A gun like this Baker ejector gun would not have been cheap in its day due to its quality and mechanism. Originally it was one of a pair and it is contained in its original double case with “H.O. Crowther” engraved on the case escutcheon. This was Herbert O. Crowther born in Manchester in 1854. When he bought the guns in the late 1880s, he resided at 55 Wickham Road in Beckenham in Kent. He described himself in the 1881 census as an “advertising contractor” and obviously had means as he employed four servants in his household. He bought himself a very up to date expensive pair of ejector guns and today, estimated at £800-£1200 one gun is available once more, a very interesting gun with a fascinating place in gun history.

