

IN THE FIELD

MARCH 2025

By Sir Johnny Scott Bt.

CHURCHILL LIVE PIGEON GUN

Lot number 1672 in HOLTS March auction is the 'Premiere Quality' over and under Churchill XXV Live Pigeon Gun, made in 1934 for Robert Churchill's wife, Rosina (Rose), to her exacting specification, including details such as no top rib and an ivory foresight. The original pistol grip stock, inlaid with her initials in fancy Roman letters, was just over 12 inches long - Mrs Churchill was a short, stocky lady - including a rubber recoil pad and had a pencil of lead inserted to ensure the gun mounted muzzle high in order to get onto the bird quickly. The gun had to be ready for the end of January and one assumes it was required for the live pigeon season in Monte Carlo, the epicentre of international pigeon shooting and its most prestigious venue, which ran from January until the end of April and at which both Churchill's were regular competitors.

Live pigeon shooting started in the Georgian era and with advances in gun making from flintlock to percussion cap and then to breech loading, had become phenomenally popular in Britain, Europe, Australia and the Americas, by the late 19th century. From amateurish beginnings, live pigeon shooting had evolved into a highly organised and competitive sport, with enormous sums in prize money attracting the best shots in the world. A live pigeon ring was between 50 and 60 yards in circumference, with the shooting station at half that distance from the pigeon "traps". To score, the pigeon had to fall dead or wounded within the ring and participants were eliminated once they missed two birds in a row, or if they fell outside the ring. In the early days, competitors used guns with the largest bore they could find, until a rule was introduced restricting gauge size to twelve. To increase the volume of shot, special live pigeon guns started to be made chambered in 2¾ inches with 30- or 32-inch barrels choked ¾ or full for knockdown power and heavy enough to absorb recoil - 8lbs or more was not unusual.

Gun makers and cartridge manufacturers were quick to spot the potential of live pigeon shooting as a means of advertising their wares in an environment where new ideas for improvements to gun and cartridge making could be tested under consistent conditions, which would not be possible in the field. These could then be incorporated into the manufacture of field guns and ammunition, and a successful competition pigeon shot was in high demand by British gunmakers in particular, as their best source of advertising and publicity. The two bird ruling imposed enormous pressure for gun making excellence at championship competitions, which could be lost on a simple malfunction, but success reaped huge rewards: Even before Robert Churchill took over his uncle Edwin's firm in 1910, EJ Churchill guns had won prizes at every shooting ground in the UK and across Europe at Paris, Monte Carlo, Madrid, Vienna, Ostend, Namur and San Sebastian.



Sir (Walter) John Scott, Bt. MFH

Sir Johnny (as he is better known) is an author, natural historian, broadcaster, columnist, countryside campaigner, artisan snuff manufacturer and retired hill farmer.

He wrote and co-presented the BBC2 series *Clarissa and the Countryman* with Clarissa Dickson Wright. He writes for a variety of magazines and periodicals on field sports, food, farming, travel, history and rural affairs.

A lifetime devotee of the countryside and its sports, he is currently:

- Joint Master, The North Pennine Hunt
- Regional Director, Vote OK.
- President, The Gamekeepers Welfare Trust.
- President, The Tay Valley Wildfowlers Association.
- President, The Newcastle Wildfowlers Association.
- President, The Association of Working Lurchers / Longdogs.
- Centenary Patron and Honorary Life Member, British Association for Shooting and Conservation.
- Patron, The Sporting Lucas Terrier Association.
- Patron, The Wildlife Ark Trust.
- Patron, The National Organisation of Beaters and Pickers Up.
- Board member, The European Squirrel Initiative.

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Churchill had become intrigued by the possibilities of shorter barrelled game guns as soon as he started working for his uncle in 1898. The previous year, the American millionaire William Gould Brokaw had ordered a gun from EJ Churchill with barrels a fraction over 26 inches for quail shooting. Brokaw and his fellow tycoon, Clarence Mackay, owned vast adjoining quail estates in North Carolina and Brokaw had such success with the shorter, lighter, quicker shooting gun, that in 1906, Mackay ordered a pair of best quality Churchill's with 26-inch barrels. Two further orders for short barrel guns for quail shooting came in 1911 and Churchill, convinced that with modern smokeless powder, reducing barrel length did not affect pattern or striking force, began cautiously experimenting with shorter barrels to produce a lighter, better balanced gun. Gradually, sales of his "stubby" shotguns increased and really took off in the mid 1920's with the development of the high, tapered, "Churchill" rib, that gave the optical impression of barrel length.

By now he was receiving recommendations from authorities such as Major Pollard, the shooting expert for Country Life, who stated that the Churchill 25-inch game gun was ballistically equal to 28- or 30-inch guns in range, pattern and penetration. It was stronger than guns of equal weight and the balance was better distributed so that it felt lighter; was speedier to get on to a bird and easier to carry. In 1931, the Prince of Wales ordered a pair of 12-bore XXV Premiere guns and in 1933, the already famous Churchill guns were given the ultimate seal of approval, when they were awarded the Royal Warrant. It was the Prince, in his role of unofficial trade ambassador, who reminded Churchill of the importance of advertising and having his wife using one of his 25-inch barrelled guns on the live pigeon competition circuit, when the norm was for 30- or 32-inch, was the best possible form of publicity.



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