

IN THE GUNROOM
PURDEY TARGET PISTOLS.

Donald Dallas

Lot 685 in this sale offers a very rare and desirable pair of percussion target pistols by James Purdey dating from 1832. Although Purdey is always associated with best guns and rifles, in the muzzle-loading period they also built pistols, albeit in far lower numbers with around 400 being recorded.

Of these 400 pistols, Purdey built all types, single-barrelled, double-barrelled, multi-barrelled, carriage, duelling, target, pocket and holster pistols, but they are best known for their duelling and target pistols being very distinctive in style and all of the finest quality.

Lot 685 is a pair of 50 bore target pistols with rifled barrels, back sights and no provision for ramrods built in the very distinctive Purdey style of the 1830s. In the records, not only of Purdey, but in many other makers as well, such pistols are often listed erroneously as “duelling pistols” as a “duelling pistol” sounded so much more exciting than a target pistol.

Purdey did build actual duelling pistols in their early days (the heyday of the duelling pistol between 1770 – 1830), whereupon the social climate changed, more people condemned the practice and courts ceased to be so lenient to such death. An association was formed to suppress duelling and petitioned Queen Victoria to ban it. This combination of social and political pressure resulted in an amendment dated 1844 to Number 98 of the Articles of War, the rule book of the British Army, hence from this date, any officer who took part in a duel would be subject court martial.

These Purdey pistols date from 1832 and although very similar, they are not duelling pistols, they are target pistols. Their date of construction is right on the cusp of the changeover from duelling to target pistol when duelling fell into disfavour. James Purdey realised this change and was quick to offer army officers and gentlemen a better and legal alternative, the target pistol.

Gunmakers were quick to realise about potential demand for target pistols and one or two set up shooting galleries on their premises to cater for a wealthy clientele practising indoors with their percussion target pistols. Such indoor galleries would be relatively short range and they must have been interesting places to visit with the amount of black powder smoke belching from the pistols. There was a bit of gambling involved too and this could only add to the attraction.

The most famous shooting gallery in the West End of London in the 1830s was within the gunmaker Joseph Lang’s shop at 7 Haymarket. With its proximity to all the gentleman’s clubs of the period, it was an ideal location for gentlemen to while away the hour.

This is where the co-incidence of lot 685, the pair of Purdey target pistols nos. 2078/9 comes in. James Purdey sold them on the 9th October 1832 to Joseph Lang for £30. Joseph Lang would then put them on display at his shooting gallery and hope to make a profit on them.

Purdey sold several guns to Lang in this period, the principal reason being that Joseph Lang was his son-in-law. Joseph Lang had met James Purdey's second daughter Eliza and in 1828 they were married. Consequently, the family connection underpinned the business relationship.

Since this pair of pistols were sold to Joseph Lang in 1832, there is no question that they were used at Lang's Gallery at 7 Haymarket. An illustrator of the period, John Tallis, drew many of the London streets during 1838-1840 and his view of Joseph Lang's shop at 7 Haymarket shows quite clearly above the front door the title, "SHOOTING GALLERY". These are the very premises that this pair of Purdey target pistols nos. 2078/9 would have been used.

With a provenance and history like this how can you resist lot 685 estimated at £12,000 to £16,000.....