

IN THE GUNROOM

DICKSON SQUARE ACTION

Donald Dallas

The Dickson round action is a very well-known gun, one of the most beautiful hammerless guns ever built with its sculpted round action design, its elegance, light weight and fast handling. They are all of the finest quality and it is heartening to know that the Dickson round action is still in production today.

But a Dickson square action? It sounds a bit incongruous, but a Dickson square action is actually a round action with that beautifully shaped rounded action replaced with square sides and dummy sideplates so that it resembled a conventional sidelock ejector. Dickson square actions are incredibly rare with only eleven being recorded in the Dickson ledgers. This auction has one of these rare square actions in lot 1407, a Dickson square action no. 5694 dating from 1904.

Whenever hammerless guns appeared in the 1870s, countless patents abounded as makers vied with each other to build the best mechanisms. John Dickson & Son of 63 Princes Street, Edinburgh were no different, but they evolved an entirely different type of hammerless gun. Instead of the mechanism being enclosed in the action body or conventional sidelocks, they constructed a mechanism based on top of the triggers, a trigger plate action. This design evolved in three patents, 1880 and two in 1887.

By having the mechanism contained on the trigger plate, the action bar, devoid of mechanical parts could be considerably rounded, hence the term round action. The round action Dickson was immediately a beautiful and very distinctive gun with this shape. In addition to its beauty, it was also very strong as so little of the action bar had to be cut away. It was also light weight making it lighter than a conventional sidelock of this time. One of its real attributes was that it handled superbly with the weight of the trigger plate in the centre of the gun. John Dickson had actually conceived the gun as a fast-handling grouse gun where speed was vital in the grouse butt, up and over the sticks. This is why most Dickson round actions have the unusual barrel length of 29".

If it was such a shapely, elegant and inherently Scottish gun, then why on earth would it be spoiled by fitting square action sides with dummy sideplates to give it the appearance of a conventional sidelock action just like the majority of sidelock ejectors south of the border?

Well at least eleven of Dickson's customers preferred this as they ordered round action guns built to the square action design as per lot 1407 in this auction, Dickson no. 5694 of 1904.

In the late 19th century when the round action was born, it became rapidly popular in Scotland. Virtually every Scottish landed gentry family bought round actions and it became the best gun to have in Scotland. It was an inherently Scottish gun and it became de rigueur for the majority of wealthy Scottish sportsmen to purchase one or a pair for use on the many shoots that proliferated in Scotland. Although many London best guns were sold in Scotland at this time it was the Dickson round action that was the prevalent best gun in Scotland.

Right up until the First World War, very few Dickson round actions were sold south of the border or abroad; it was the gun for Scotland and this might explain the raison d'être for the square action.

The Dickson round action's unique "Scottishness" might be the reason why some sportsmen wanted it to look like a conventional sidelock ejector. On a shoot, a square action would look exactly like a London made sidelock ejector and perhaps this is exactly what some customers must have wanted. Often by researching the owner of a square action a clue can be found as to why they would want a round action to be altered in this way. Many had English connections and perhaps participated in shoots south of the border where a more conventional looking gun was the norm.

The gun in this auction, lot 1407 is one of a pair of square actions nos. 5693/4 sold on the 20th August 1904 to C.H. Cowan. They are round action guns but with square sides and dummy sideplates with round action patent use numbers 1146 and 1147. Charles Cowan was born in 1872 and lived at Westerlea House, Murrayfield in Edinburgh and was a member of the famous Penicuik papermaking firm of Alex Cowan & Sons of Valleyfield Mills, Penicuik. They made high quality paper including bank notes. But why on earth did an Edinburgh paper manufacturer want his Dickson round actions to be built like a conventional sidelock ejectors? Since he died in 1943 we have some difficulty in answering this.

