

IN THE GUNROOM

DOUBLE COACHING CARBINE

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Flintlock blunderbuss are fairly common with about three or four appearing in each sale – but a double-barrel flintlock coaching carbine, well this is a different kettle of fish altogether, a very rare item.

Before the establishment of the Metropolitan Police in 1829 by Sir Robert Peel, Great Britain was a lawless place. Anybody who possessed property or wealth had to defend it themselves and this meant owning a blunderbuss. Blunderbuss were built in their hundreds of thousands from the 18th century right up until around 1830 and were the ideal weapon for self-defence.

Ask any layman about the blunderbuss and apart from the usual guff about being loaded with nails and the great spread from the barrel, they will also inform you that the blunderbuss was the prerogative of mail coach guards on mail coaches that traversed the main towns and cities of Great Britain in the 18th century.

This myth of the exclusivity of the mail coach blunderbuss is far from the truth as by far the majority of blunderbuss were bought by property owners, businesses, banks and the like to defend their possessions. Virtually every house of substance and business in the 18th century and just beyond had a loaded blunderbuss lurking in a cupboard or behind a counter to deter any individual misguided in his attempt at a transfer of wealth. This accounts for the many thousands of blunderbuss extant today. Yes, blunderbuss were carried on mail coaches as per the romantic ideal, but in comparison to the large numbers made, this accounts for only a small number of this bell mouthed belligerent.

As a self-defence weapon, the blunderbuss was the man. Short barrelled, easy to point and with that intimidatory bell mouth pointing straight at you, a reconsideration of your illicit intentions might be appropriate. And if the spring bayonet popped out at you just in front of your eyes, well... Blunderbuss were intentionally made with such gaping muzzles quite deliberately to menace and to give the weapon the reputation it quickly built up. Most blunderbuss barrels were made out of cast brass as it was far easier to cast brass in a bell mouthed design rather than make a conventional barrel out of twist metal which would have been very difficult.

If blunderbuss are quite common, then the double-barrel flintlock coaching carbine certainly is not; they are very rare beasts indeed and not very many come upon the market. Unlike the blunderbuss they were intended primarily for coach defence. A mail coach could be surrounded by ruffians yet a single barrel blunderbuss might not provide adequate defence. After it was

discharged, the delay in reloading could render the mail coach and its passengers defenceless, but if the guard carried a double-barrelled coaching carbine, this might just provide enough deterrent for the blaggards to reappraise their thieving.

Lot 412 in this sale offers a very fine and rare 20 bore double flintlock coaching carbine by Sykes of Oxford c1805. Some double coaching carbines have gently flaring barrels but this one has parallel 20 bore twist barrels, only 14" long. How lethal would this be at close range? The barrels were made slightly more substantial than sporting gun barrels as they were loaded with around ten large lead balls for maximum scatter and penetration. This Sykes carbine has a stirrup ramrod, quite necessary on a rattling and bucking coach to prevent the loss of the ramrod.

As if two barrels pointing at an assailant were not enough, this coaching carbine has a triangular spring bayonet mounted on the top rib. It is a short bayonet, but upon releasing the catch, it flicks forwards into the locked position. With the short 14" barrel, this coaching carbine is also a small pike, very malevolent and very intimidating.

But please don't be intimidated by it as it has an estimate of £3000 - £5000. For this price you can buy a very rare item that encapsulates Great Britain in a very different era with all the romance of the mail coach galloping from city to city. And yet for all its lethal intentions, this is a very handsome arm.



The Bath to Bristol mail coach c1784 showing the guard carrying a blunderbuss.



Lot 412