

IN THE GUNROOM

VOLLEY RIFLE

By Donald Dallas



It is a very vain inherent human characteristic in that we like to impress, to be a cut above, to do something different or to just stand out. If the date is 1800 and you are out shooting with a single or double gun, you would elicit little comment; a three or four barrelled gun, yes you will be noted, but a seven-barrelled gun that all goes off in one shot, well, you will be known the length and breadth of the land.

Seven-barrelled guns are known as volley rifles whereby the seven barrels are arranged in a circle and when the trigger is pulled, all seven discharge simultaneously to devastating effect. Such volley rifles were obviously difficult and expensive to construct and consequently very few were built. It is rare to encounter one today but amazingly, in this auction, there is not one but two, lot 405 a 60 bore flintlock example by Henry Nock c1800 and in lot 545, a 60 bore percussion rifle by Samuel Nock c1830.

Volley rifles are one of the pinnacles of the gunmakers craft as it was very difficult to solder and lay six barrels around a central seventh barrel and then fit an ignition system to cause all barrels to detonate at the same time.

The volley rifle was popularised by the well-known and flamboyant late 18th century sportsman, Lt Col. Thomas Thornton who was frustrated by the frequent misfires of his single flintlock gun. On one occasion he commented, "At eight good shots my gun missed fire five times, though I put in five different flints." Thornton thought he could solve this and go one better than anybody else. He had one of the leading makers of the day, Henry Nock, build him a seven-barrelled volley rifle so that at best all and at least some of the barrels would go off. Each barrel was loaded with three balls so when the rifle discharged, a whopping 21 balls in total would depart the muzzles at great vitesse. The recoil must have been fearsome and it is no wonder that they did not achieve widespread popularity. In addition, apart from their expense, they were very heavy but my goodness did the volley rifle receive much publicity.



Nock's Seven-barrelled Carbine.

Col. Thornton rose to prominence when he wrote *A Sporting Tour Through The Northern Parts Of England And Great Part Of The Highlands Of Scotland*. The book became a sporting classic and not only described his volley rifles, illustrated them as well. Since he was highly regarded as one of the greatest all round sportsmen of his day, the book was widely read and the volley rifle excited many. His seven-barrelled volley rifles caused a sensation and not content with these, he went on to have built 12 and even 14 barrelled guns built along similar lines.

Volley rifles were used for a variety of purposes. Many were built as goose guns as in the two examples in this auction. Sportsmen with flintlocks in the 18th century saw nothing unsporting about firing at sitting birds as shooting on the wing was difficult with the flash, smoke and delay of the flintlock. A large gaggle of geese in a field were an excellent target for the volley goose rifle and guaranteed success. They were also used against running deer as a single flintlock rifle was near useless for this purpose. The Royal Navy in addition found them an ideal weapon at close quarters to deter boarders and to provide withering fire against sailors on deck.