

IN THE FIELD

MARCH 2024

By Sir Johnny Scott Bt.

BOGARDUS GLASS TARGET BALLS

Clay pigeon shooting memorabilia is becoming increasingly rare and collectible, with examples appearing from time to time at Holt's Fine Modern and Antique Firearms auctions. Their March sale has two Lots, numbers 306 and 7 of three sets of Victorian glass ball targets of "Bogardus" type, all circa 1890, with diamond shaped "string netting" design over the surface area, which caused the ball to break when hit and stopped shot ricocheting. The balls had a glass neck and were filled with powder, confetti, or feathers to simulate a bird when hit.

Glass target balls evolved from live pigeon shooting which started to become popular in Britain in the Georgian era of the late 1800's. Initially, pigeons were secured under old top hats and one of the first clubs, the Old Hats Club, was established behind a pub on Ealing Common. As shotgun manufacturing improved, popularity of the sport grew and old hats were replaced by purpose built wooden "traps", with a sliding lid attached to a string and on the command of "pull", the "trapper" yanked the string, releasing the "bird", as clays are still called. Holts auctioned two incredibly rare historic live pigeon traps in their July 2023 sale which sold for three times the top estimate. Throughout the 19th century, live pigeon shooting developed into a hugely competitive sport on which enormous sums of money were wagered on the outcome, whilst providing an opportunity for gunmakers and later, cartridge manufacturers, to demonstrate their wares.

Captive live pigeon shooting was immensely popular in America, but there were obvious limitations and attempts had been made at inventing inanimate targets of one sort or another for some decades on both sides of the Atlantic - Lord Huntingfield is reputed to have practiced on potatoes lobbed to him over the kitchen garden wall before the first ever driven partridge shoot, held in 1845 at his seat, Heveningham Hall, in Suffolk. Feather filled glass target balls had been around since 1866 in America and in Britain since 1875, fired by a gadget like a large catapult, but it was Capt. A H Bogardus, an internationally renowned American marksman, Great Plains safari guide and competition live pigeon shot, who commercialised them. In 1877 he took out patents on the Bogardus glass target ball and Bogardus trap, mounted on a wooden base with a large coil spring throwing arm capable of propelling a ball sixty feet in the air in a long, curving arc - Holts auctioned one example last year with an estimate of £200 - £300, which sold for £1100.

The Bogardus glass target balls and trap became all the rage and Bogardus, who claimed to be the "Champion Living Shot of the World," was the consummate showman. Touring America to demonstrate his target balls and trap, opening a shooting gallery in Chicago and for three years in the 1880's,



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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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was the star shooting attraction in Buffalo Bill's Wild West Show, until he fell out with William Cody and was replaced by Annie Oakley. Bogardus glass target balls were hand blown in a mould and manufactured in America by, among others, Hagerty Bros of New York and Whitall, Tatum and Co. of New Jersey, but five of the balls for sale in the Holt's March auction have "N.B GLASS WORKS PERTH" in raised moulded letters round the circumference, indicating that these were made in Scotland by the North British glass works in Perth.

I imagine shooting glass balls filled with feather, powder, or confetti, must have been quite entertaining, but they dropped like a stone once they reached the apex of their arc and scarcely imitated the flight of a real bird. In 1880, George Ligowski, an American from Cincinnati, Ohio, invented the precursor to the modern clay that we know today, after watching children skimming clamshells across water. He recognised the sustained flight of the inverted shells, and their gradual fall would be improved if replicated in circular form and started experimenting with clay discs baked in a kiln.

These proved to be too hard for shot to break, or even tell if they had been hit, but eventually he struck on a successful mixture of baked limestone and bitumen. He is also credited with inventing the first successful trap machine for propelling his clays and as they gained popularity, many others produced trap machines, including Cogswell and Harrison, who developed the Swiftsure Trap in 1887. Eley were quick to manufacture clay pigeons to Ligowski's design and even early examples are now attracting value; in July 2023, Holt's auctioned a collection of eleven, including three rare Eley's and three variant examples of Ligowski's.

Ligowski's invention rang the death knell for the glass target ball, but Bogardus continued performing feats of marksmanship and trick shooting with his balls in theatres and circuses across America, in Paris and London, eventually dying in 1913. A H Bogardus has an important place in the pantheon of shooting: As public criticism mounted towards live pigeon shooting, he was instrumental in leading the change towards mechanical substitutes.



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