

IN THE GUNROOM

HOLLAND & HOLLAND DOUBLE ROOK RIFLE

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Rook and rabbit rifles, made in their thousands in the late 19th century, are very popular with collectors as they are in the obsolete class. In addition, they are very attractive due to their diminutive dimensions and the majority of them are of good quality.

In the muzzle-loading era they were known as “pea rifles” but were not popular due to the difficulty of loading a small bore bullet from the muzzle. The development of breech-loading allowed such small bore rifles to be a practical project and from the 1860s, they began to be manufactured in large numbers.

Holland & Holland began selling rook and rabbit rifles in the late 1860s and tended to make a speciality of them, to such an extent that all their adverts in the 1860s and 1870s were headed “Rook And Rabbit Shooting”. By the 1870s well over half of Holland’s production was rook rifles and they sold them in enormous quantities. e.g. in 1877 out of a total of 593 firearms sold, 371 were rook rifles.

These early rook rifles had either a central hammer on the cheaper examples, or a conventional sidelock. The cartridges available were the .360 no5 Rook and the .300 (.295) Rook. By far the majority of rook rifles were single-barrelled but very occasionally double-barrelled rifles were ordered and they are very rare indeed today.

Lot 710 in this sale offers a beauty of a double-barrelled Holland & Holland rook rifle no. 8530 dating from 1885. It is a very attractive tiny little double rifle in .300 (.295) Rook calibre, of very high quality and in lovely untouched condition. It looks exactly like its big brother Hollands that the firm became famous for, the large calibre double rifles for big game shooting in the Empire. But this is a tiny double rifle and it looks the part with its top lever, pistol grip and back action sidelocks. It would have been an expensive rifle in its day, just as difficult to construct as its bigger brothers. You don’t see many double rook rifles and it will create a great deal of interest in the sale.

Due to their speciality in rook and rabbit rifles, Holland & Holland introduced many improvements to them. In 1873 they developed “New Safety Cartridges” charged with hollow fronted bullets that did not glance, made especially for “Hollands celebrated Rabbit rifles”.

One of the problems associated with small bore black powder rifles was their tendency to foul up quickly with a consequent effect upon accuracy. The nature of rook and rabbit shooting meant that many shots might be fired with a progressive deterioration of accuracy. Henry Holland conducted many experiments and in the early 1880s Holland & Holland introduced what they termed “semi-smooth bore rifling”. Instead of using normal rifling, the barrel was scratch rifled and this meant the barrel did not clog up.

Hollands even introduced their own rook rifle cartridge around 1890, the .297/250 bore cartridge, a bottle necked variety that could be reloaded. They also patented a hammerless rook rifle in 1882 whereby the top lever cocked the rifle. Later in the 1890s they developed a boxlock ejector hammerless rook rifle. This was a top of the range rook rifle offered in two versions, The Ross at 10gns. and The Royal at 12gns.

The double rook rifle in lot 710 in this sale has the barrel engraved "Winners Of All The Field Rifle Trials London 1883". The Field newspaper, at the instigation of its editor Dr. Walsh, proposed a public trial of rifles in London in 1883 open to all makers. The trials took place in October 1883 and the results were spectacular, Hollands winning all ten classes from big game rifle to rook rifle. This success was a watershed in the history of Holland & Holland and it could be argued that before 1883 they were another gun firm, but after 1883 with the resultant publicity, they became known as world class gunmakers.

Rook and rabbit rifles, although bearing a great many "makers" names were not actually built by any of the makers as they were too specialised to build. They were all built in Birmingham and finished to various standards by the named maker themselves.

This lovely little double rook rifle no. 8530 was probably built by Scott's in Birmingham as were the majority of Hollands guns and rifles in this period as they had no factory of their own. However, due to the quality of the rifle it was finished by Hollands and engraved by them in their own style. It is of very good quality, every bit as good as their other double rifles and probably cost around £15 in 1885. You might have to pay a little bit more for it today as it is estimated at £1500 - £2000 but try and find another one as elegant as this and in such lovely condition.