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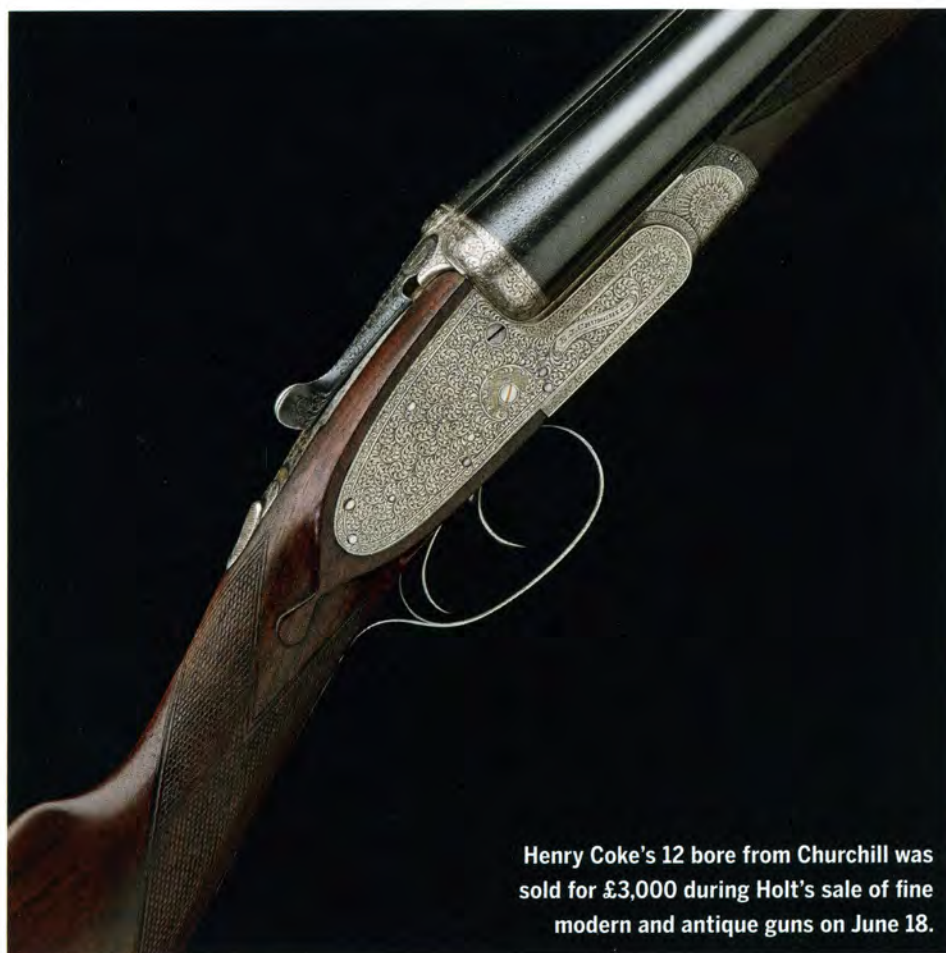


# So much more than wood and metal

Ever wondered if your shotgun has auction potential, or if a recent discovery has a hidden story? **Martin Puddifer** observed auctioneer Nick Holt during a valuation day in Oxfordshire that threw up some tempting numbers and a few fascinating tales.

**N**ick Holt has never been in a house more insane than this one at Aynhoe Park in his life, or if he has, he isn't going to tell me about it. I'm watching the 50-year-old auctioneer as he perches on a red leather chair bearing the Royal Cypher of Queen Elizabeth II, across from a gentleman and his wife who are soaking up all he has to tell them about the William Powell boxlock on the leather top desk between them, pausing only to write down its particulars with a fountain pen. A bar of molten sunlight splits the cluttered desk in two, a desk that contains myriad curiosities including three interpretations of the Eiffel Tower and a battered copy of *Alice in Wonderland*. A giant globe on the floor in front of Nick bears down on a fierce lion skin rug guarding a model of a racing car.

A purple jacket won by Liam Gallagher for a photo shoot held in the house's Gothic lavatory hangs in front of a bookcase spanning one side of the room. Next door, a glitter ball from Studio 54 waits for the next party to start. Kate Moss was here recently and left her mark on a polar bear in the hallway. There's a giraffe in the orangery and countless other stuffed birds, pieces of futuristic furniture and bizarre trinkets dotted all over this 17th century pile, which has been home to art collector James Perkins and his family since the mid 2000s. They combine to make Willy Wonka's chocolate factory look as visually seductive as a burnt



Henry Coke's 12 bore from Churchill was sold for £3,000 during Holt's sale of fine modern and antique guns on June 18.

mattress outside a redundant factory. Despite so many things to catch the eye, however, Nick, one of the most colourful characters in the gun trade, has business to attend to.

## Why are you here?

There are three main motivating factors to have your shotgun, rifle, taxidermy or accessory valued at a Holt's valuation day: probate, insurance, and of course potential sale at auction. From the visitor's point of

view, the valuation day experience mirrors much of what you would expect during a trip to the Antiques Roadshow. You book an appointment, try to temper your expectations, bring your item along, have it valued, and if it's of a sound enough quality and it is your wish, you will be asked if you want to put it forward for auction. But there is still so much more to it than that. The process is part theatre and part education in gunmaking history. Whomever the client, Nick's



forensic knowledge and passion for fine modern and sporting guns means he is able to tell you things about, say, your gun, the gunmaker and even the craftsman who worked on it that might never have occurred to you in the past. This can be crucial, as details of who, what and when attached to the item have a huge bearing on its value.

Anyone with high expectations based solely on the fact they have found a best London name in a house clearance or been gifted an old Birmingham name with Damascus barrels (I am guilty of the former) should know that the former Bonhams



**Auctioneer Nick Holt's knowledge and passion for gunmaking make for an enthralling lesson on the subject.**

man is neither a labels snob nor in the business of picking numbers out of the air. An item's value will depend heavily on its age, its overall condition and, in the case of a shotgun, the cast on the stock, width of the barrels, current trends, who it was originally made for and the amount of action it has seen during its lifetime. Estimates are fiercely conservative too – “if the lower estimate is £400 then it's possible that's what it will go for,” Nick advises one client. “And only sell the shotgun if you really, really want to,” he tells another.

Nick uses some essential kit during his examination, including a bore micrometer (used to check the barrel's proof status), a wall-thickness gauge

(this determines the barrel wall thickness and identifies the thinnest point, which is used as a reference to establish wear and tear), a loupe (to examine the action and woodwork for cracks or fractures) and good old fashioned gun oil and cloth.

So what of provenance? Henry Francis Coke (he pronounces it “Cook”), a descendent of the 2nd Earl of Leicester, came to Aynhoe with a 1938 self-opening sidelock ejector from Churchills. A loss of balance while shooting in Leicestershire last season convinced him that his days with the 12 bore in hand were over, and with the absence of a male heir to pass the shotgun down to he decided to turn to his former employer (Henry was briefly agent for Holt's just after it was established in 1993) to value it and attempt to sell it on his behalf. Nick, who now has 46 agents worldwide, didn't disappoint, giving the shotgun a thorough 50-minute examination, and, after all parties agreed on its condition (very sound) and value (between £3,000-£5,000) it was put forward for Holt's sale of fine modern and antique guns on June 18.

### Every lot tells a story

When poring over images of Damascus barrels and acanthus scroll engraving in auction catalogues it's easy to forget there is a story behind every lot, as Henry explained to the enthralled auctioneer and journalist in attendance. His relationship with his Churchill is more than personal for several reasons, not least because both man and shotgun came into the world in 1938, have shot guinea fowl and francolin together during Henry's seven-year stint in South Africa and tackled challenging sport all across Norfolk.

Henry's introduction to game shooting came in the late 1940s via his strict Victorian father, a veteran of the Boer War and Great War, who became Henry's father at the tender age of 62 and who was extremely particular about etiquette – Henry was only allowed to carry an unloaded ▶

## Selling a sidelock through a Holt's valuation day

*One Shooting Gazette contributor shares his thoughts on selling shotguns via Holt's.*

“I started shooting with a folding .410, but eventually graduated to a 12 bore over-under in 1976. After some success I arrogantly assumed what worked in the vertical would work in the horizontal, and in 2002, purchased a tidy if unremarkable Cogswell & Harrison sidelock ejector side-by-side 12 bore, built in 1919. Assumptions are dangerous and after some seasons of disappointment it went into the gun cabinet, only to re-emerge when I decided to try selling it at auction.

“Having paid £1,500 and set that as my reserve, my first choice of auction house had two attempts to attract a buyer with no success so it went back in the cabinet. Prompted in 2014 by a Holt's advertisement for valuation days, and as one was very local, I decided to have another go. Enter senior valuer Roland Elworthy who assessed the gun's provenance and technical specification, suggested a reserve of £1,600 and in less than 30 minutes, the deal was done.

“I got a formal receipt, told the constabulary what I was about, approved the catalogue entry prepared by Holt's and awaited results, more in hope than anticipation. Cometh the day, cometh the buyers and my good but sparingly used sidelock went for £2,200. Buyer happy, auctioneer happy, vendor happy and a cheque arrived within 21 days, less the seller's premium. Totally professional and totally successful and reputation is all.”



.410 during his first few seasons in the field to prove he was safe. During one early lesson, Henry's father told his son that he "couldn't shoot" after missing an outstretched copy of *The Times* (and later his hat) at point blank range.

Henry, a former Scots Guardsman, bought the Churchill in his early twenties while working in London. After reading *Game Shooting* by Robert Churchill, and with financial assistance from his mother and funds raised from the sale of an action from a shot-through Holland & Holland, Henry paid a visit to William Evans and bought the 25" barrelled Churchill for £250. "It was a wonderful gun," Henry explained fondly when we met again a few weeks after the valuation day. "I got so used to it. I didn't want to go to the valuation day initially. I remember picking it up the last time just before it was sent away, with all of those memories in my hand I had to have a moment alone. If I'd have sold it privately I'd have been worried that the new owner wouldn't appreciate the history - the money is irrelevant to me. To part with something that's been so much a part of your life, from your youth until your seventies, it was like a divorce!"

### An auction farewell

Henry was apprehensive when he attended the auction on June 18. Lot 1410 was eventually sold for its lower estimate of £3,000, and while I sensed it was a quietly emotional experience for him to officially say farewell to one of his most prized possessions it's not the end of his interest in its wellbeing.

"I'd love to meet the new owner," he smiled. "It would be great if it were someone with excellent shooting manners who'll appreciate the shotgun and truly believe in the Churchill philosophy." 🦋

*Holt's is a member of the Society of Fine Art Auctioneers And Valuers. For more information, visit [holtsauctioneers.com](http://holtsauctioneers.com). Aynhoe Park will be available to shoot parties during the forthcoming season. For more information, visit [aynhoe.com](http://aynhoe.com)*

## A word of advice from Nick Holt

*Four priceless tips to bear in mind before attending a valuation day.*

**1** Make sure you have your licence with you when in possession of a firearm.

**2** Be able to provide as much known history of the gun in question - whilst the makers may be able to supply basic information regarding the date of manufacture and original specifications and for whom the gun was made, being able to add a little colour to the description of the gun in terms of where it has been, who has used it etc. makes the gun more attractive to potential buyers.

**3** Bring the gun as it is, the barrels should be cleaned internally perhaps, but leave everything else as is - especially with regard to antique guns. It is far more attractive commercially to have original finish and patination (even a spot of rusting) because it demonstrates the 'honest' nature of the gun. If the valuer feels the gun would benefit from any cleaning or tweaking before sale he will suggest it at the point of valuation. This applies to gun cases too - a cleaned and

vacuumed case diminishes the feeling of originality and age, which is something that attracts buyers of vintage firearms.

**4** Be open to accept the valuer's advice. The auctioneers do nothing but sell guns on a year in year out basis and know the current market influences and fluctuations. If a gun is consigned for sale, they will be working hard on your behalf and it is in their very best interest to achieve the maximum result for you. They will pitch the estimate at the level they know will guarantee the best final result. Don't fall into the trap of looking at new prices. Just like cars, there is little correlation between new and second hand prices.



The truly unique Grade I listed Aynhoe Park dates back to the 17th century.