

IN THE GUNROOM

MARTIN RIBLESS

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After the First World War, gunmakers were faced with a challenge if they were to continue to generate sales. The combination of the perfection of the hammerless ejector and the difficult economic times of the inter-war era meant that several firms had to offer little foibles of their own to make them stand out and raise interest to deliberately create demand. This was the rationale behind the Martin Ribless gun.

By the turn of the century, the hammerless ejector had reached the zenith if its development and any subsequent improvements would be small trifles, but during the harsh times of the inter-war period gunmakers sought out anything different to make their firm stand out and thereby attract sales. For example, firms like Churchill raised their profile with 25" barrels, Hollands and Boss with their self-opening mechanisms, along with a whole host of exciting brand names to try and create something that little bit different.

At the same time as this "tinkering" there was an increasing fashion for lightweight 12 bore guns. There was no question in these days of gentlemen of advancing years buying a 20 bore, the 12 bore was the man's gun and the 20 bore, well, let us be politically correct and say they were not for men. Barrels became shorter, lightweight guns were introduced and the weight of a 12 bore could be pared down to just over 6lbs. The 12 bore Two Inch gun was also introduced to bring the weight down even further to around 5 1/2lbs.

The firm of Alexander Martin was a large old established firm in based in Glasgow but with shops in Edinburgh, Aberdeen and Stirling. They even produced a gun named the "Age", an abbreviation of Aberdeen Glasgow and Edinburgh. Always keen with an eye to promote their business, they cottoned on to the idea between the wars of building a lightweight gun that was very different to boost sales, the Martin Ribless. The Martin Ribless was certainly different, attracted much attention and was soon in high demand.

A ribless gun is exactly that. The barrels do not have the usual top and bottom ribs soldered the length of the barrels, rather small spacers are fitted at regular intervals meaning the ribs can be dispensed with altogether. Alex Martin did not invent the ribless gun – they had been around since the late 19th century sometimes found on double rifles to help heat dissipation, but Martins were astute to realise their potential to the extent that Alex Martin and the Ribless Gun are synonymous.

The Martin Ribless gun certainly stood out from the crowd and because it was so unorthodox and distinctive, generated much comment. Major Gerald Burrard in *The Modern Shotgun* published in 1932 wrote, "*At first sight such guns look rather peculiar, but that is probably because one is not accustomed to their appearance*".

A Martin 12 bore ribless weighed around 6lbs. and a 16 bore around 5lbs. 10oz. In their sales literature they claimed the ribs on double barrels are entirely unnecessary. They stated that a gun was indeed better off without them because the hollow space between them invariably was a rust chamber without any possibility of the rust being removed. In this they were certainly

correct as one of the first tests we all undertake on old guns is to “ring” the barrels to see if the ribs are solid. They further went on to comment that a rib with rust will lift and the aid of a gunsmith would be necessary to relay the ribs and remove the rust.

By removing the ribs, about ¼ lb. in weight was saved and this was a bonus in the era of the lightweight gun enabling the weight of a 12 bore to be honed down to around 6lbs. Handling was better too with the weight being taken from the barrels making them lighter forward giving an easier swing. In addition, to create extra strength, the lumps were made part of the tubes and not brazed on as on most guns.

Alex Martin were certainly very successful with their ribless guns. Not a great many were built and they are all of good quality. They have a very loyal following and when one comes up for auction, it is an exciting and rare event. We are lucky in this auction that there is such a gun, lot 1753 a 12 bore Martin Ribless no. 6915 built around 1950 estimated at £1000 - £1500. You won't see another one for a while.