



Going, going, gun!

Whether you are a casual sportsman or avid collector, auctions are the perfect place to find a classic sporting gun.

Alex Flint discovers the secrets of successful bidding from sporting gun auctioneer Gavin Gardiner.

Shotguns are at the heart of our sport, as iconic as the preposterous cock pheasant or our windswept grouse moors. The finest and most sought-after guns are hand-made by craftsmen working for the likes of James Purdey & Sons, Holland & Holland and Boss & Co., but unless you have been lucky enough to inherit one of these 'best' guns, they remain out of reach for all but the most privileged sportsmen.

However, as well as being wonderful things to own and shoot with, the best guns, particularly those from London makers, are also a good investment. As well as becoming an heirloom ready to be passed down the generations, shotguns have a tendency to appreciate in value. They are classed as a 'wasting asset', meaning they are free from Capital Gains Tax. It is hardly surprising, therefore, that the last few years have seen a surge of interest in vintage shotgun ownership. This is perhaps best manifested in the increasing popularity and success of sporting gun auctions.

“Having gone into the auction with a good idea of maybe six or seven guns you want to buy, it is essential you allow your head to rule your heart.”



Gavin Gardiner is a keen shot and expert auctioneer with over 20 years of experience.

Several of the major auction houses run successful sporting gun departments, while specialists such as Holt's regularly see final hammer prices of over the £1,000,000 mark at their sales. Certainly these sales see some of the

finest sporting arms on the planet, many with famous owners or an unusual pedigree. Alongside these historical gems are a host of other great firearms selling for bargain prices, just waiting to be taken out and used in the sporting field.

Don't be afraid

These auctions are not necessarily the first port of call for a sportsman looking for a new gun. Renowned auctioneer Gavin Gardiner is convinced this is down to fear of the unknown: "I'm sure a lot of people are nervous of buying at an auction because they think if they sneeze or scratch their nose they'll end up bidding for something, but it really doesn't work like that."

If you are looking to add to your collection and want something out of the ordinary, then an auction really is the way to go, as Gavin explains: "The mass market tells us there is dwindling demand for classic side-by-side guns. Certainly in the field the over-under is far more common than ever, but if you want absolute quality and the best handling gun, then you want to have a side-by-side."

"English gunmakers were at the forefront of the development of the whole sport of driven game shooting, which was created and evolved in this country. We overtook the continental



Viewings before the sale offer a great opportunity to see the guns up close and get a feel for their handling characteristics.

All that glitters is not gold

WHEN MAKING a selection on a viewing day it is important not to be led astray by any magpie-like tendencies, warns Gavin: "In today's market engraving and the quality of wood can be a major factor in a person's decision to buy. The majority of people will find it difficult to judge the real quality of a gun, but they can spot pretty engraving and they can spot a nice piece of wood. But it's not necessarily always the case that the best guns will have the best engraving or the fanciest pieces of wood on them."

"The majority of classic English guns had relatively understated engraving and finishing. They will have fantastic quality fine rose and scroll engraving and a colour hardened finish which will have rubbed off to a patina. It might have taken 100 years to reach this point and will look fantastic, but that's not necessarily the gun a buyer from the last 10 years would consider a classic. Nowadays the trend is very much towards elaborate game scene engraving

with bold scrollwork and gold inlays, which to a Victorian gentleman would have been terribly flash and rather naff. They steered away from ostentatious shows of wealth and went for something much more subtle, where ultimately the gun was of tremendous quality but the benefits of quality craftsmanship weren't quite so obvious.

"A classic scenario is someone coming to me with a £2,000 budget and they will very often be falling into the trap of wanting a sidelock. There is an awful snobbery about sidelocks and boxlocks. Yes, the sidelock is at the top of the market but for £2,000 you will get a fantastic quality boxlock in stunning condition which will be an absolute joy to own."

"For the same price you will get a very mediocre quality sidelock in a pretty tired state. A lot of people unfortunately won't be looking for the important things: the quality of construction and the way a gun feels." ■

gunmakers by some distance in the mid-to late-Victorian era and really there was no looking back. There are Spanish and Italian gunmakers who make excellent guns today, but some of them are really only wonderful recreations of guns which were being built in this country 100 years ago. Although there's been huge advances in technology, nothing really has come along to knock the English makers off the top of the hill."

If you are tempted to buy at auction you will need to know what to look for.

"Quality and condition are really the two key factors. There is a lot of kit out there which might have had little money lavished on its care and maintenance. The appearance and feel of the gun should make this obvious," Gavin explains.

"You're looking for the degree of originality in terms of its specification and also how much of its original finish the gun retains. You want a nice crisp,

honest gun retaining a good degree of its original hardening colour and finish. All of the pins and screws should be sharp, the stock not re-polished or the chequering re-cut. Originality is the key. You shouldn't worry if the finish has been worn away on the trigger guard because it shows the gun has been used. A worn trigger guard with sharp and crisp engraving is far preferable to a gun with a trigger guard which has been quickly refurbished for sale.

Specification is key

"You might find a gun in otherwise good condition with thin blacking on the barrels, but that's actually a good sign as it means the barrels probably haven't had anything done to them for 30 or 40 years. A gun which has just had its barrels re-blackened might have just had a load of work done on it too and could well be hiding a few problems.

"Provenance can certainly help as well, especially with guns by the major makers which are still around with us today. The likes of Purdey, Boss, Holland & Holland and Westley Richards kept meticulous records of the guns they built, so they can be easily contacted to see who the gun was built for and what the specification of the gun was when it was originally built. This is important, because if the barrels are mysteriously shorter now than when the gun was built, or the stock is shorter, it will affect the value.

"Specification is also hugely important. At the moment, for example, long barrels are very fashionable and anything with 30" barrels will sell for a premium over 28" barrels. But 15 years ago 28" was the length everyone

"The most popular calibre for guns being bought and sold at auction is 12 bore, accounting for what Gavin estimates to be 80 per cent of the second-hand market."

Running costs

JUST LIKE a classic car, a classic shotgun will require care and attention to keep it in good working order. However, just like the aforementioned automotive dream, they can also bring sporting pleasure.

Many buyers will be concerned at the potential for costly repairs with a classic shotgun, but Gavin sees no need for concern:

"Worrying about reliability

is all relative to the amount of money you're spending. Unfortunately, while the cost of a new gun has risen dramatically, so has the cost of quality repairs. Because the classic English gun is hand-built they need a tremendous amount of skill for proper maintenance, and quality costs money.

"But if the gun is in good condition and has been well

looked after, and you take advice and buy well, then the reality is you should get three generations of shooting out of it. In your own lifetime you may not need to spend anything on it at all.

"I don't believe these newer, more reasonably priced continental guns will have the same lifespan - they have the same technical specification, but there is a tremendous difference in the quality of materials and the quality of workmanship that went into making them." ■

"If you take the right advice and buy well, you should get three generations of shooting from a gun."



The saleroom will doubtless be busy, but you should not let this distract you.

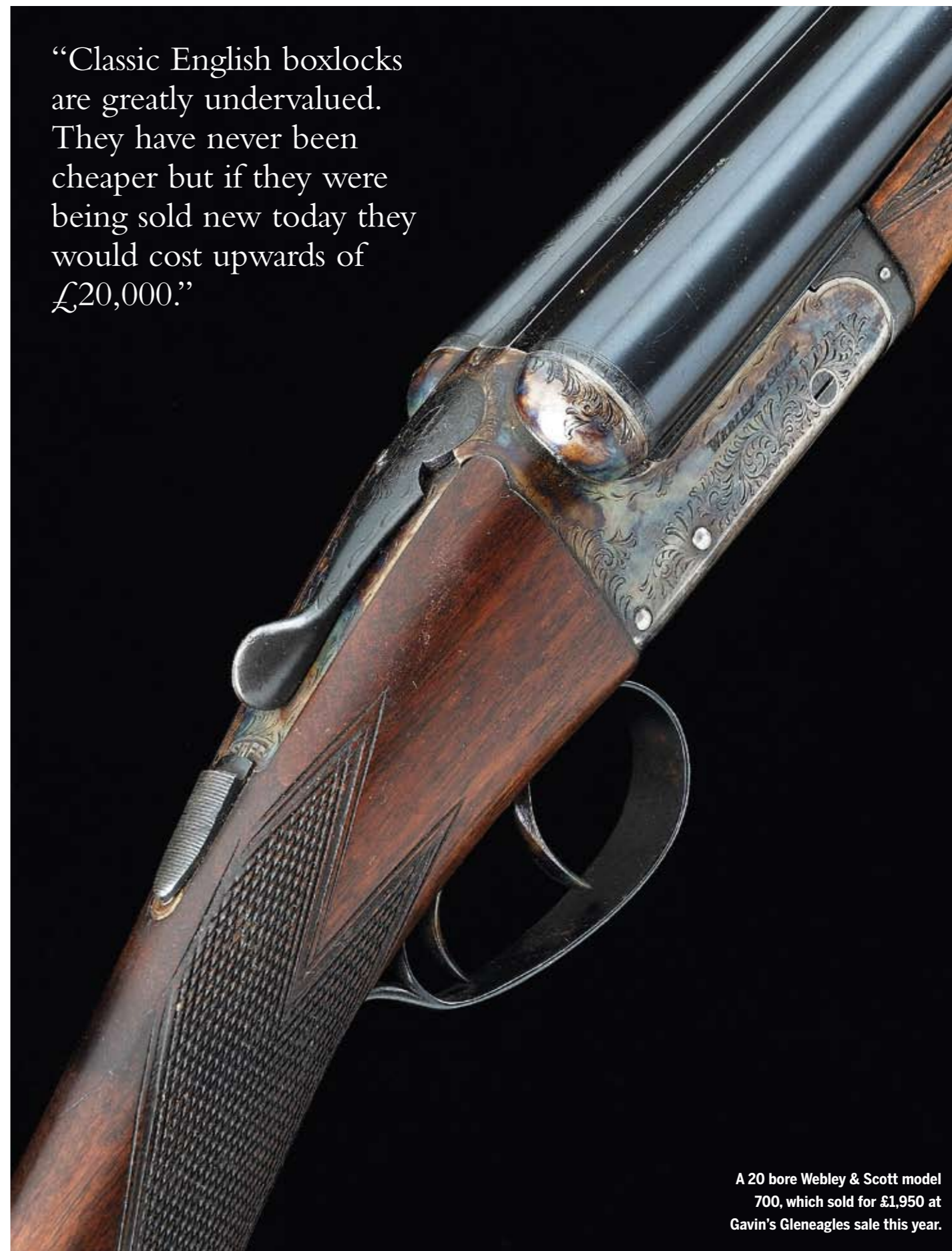
wanted and 30" was a bit old fashioned. Anything with short barrels are very hard to sell, but then the gun that bucks that trend is the classic 25" Churchill. If somebody does want an ultra-quick handling, lightweight, short-barreled gun, they want a Churchill because this famous gun occupies a particular niche in the market.

"I could be presented with a Purdey in wonderful condition built in 1935 with short barrels, and though it is still a wonderful gun its value could be impacted by as much as 40 per cent compared to a similar gun with 30" barrels, purely due to the demands of the market. Similarly, Purdey produced a lot of pigeon guns and they had a good reputation. They were desperately unfashionable 20 years ago because everyone wanted lightweight, shorter-barreled and quick handling guns. Nowadays a 7½lbs classic Purdey pigeon gun with 2¾" chambers, 30" barrels and full and three quarter choke is a perfect high bird gun. Suddenly it sells at a 40 per cent premium over a standard Purdey as opposed to 40 per cent down on the same guns 20 years ago."

The most popular calibre for guns being bought and sold at auction is of course 12 bore, accounting for what Gavin estimates to be 80 per cent of the second-hand gun market. Smaller bore guns from the best makers, particularly pairs, are few and far between and command a significant premium over the rest of the market as a result. (See: 'Finding your niche').

While it is tempting to see an auction as a great chance of picking up an English sidelock at a bargain price, Gavin warns against emotional buying: ➤

"Classic English boxlocks are greatly undervalued. They have never been cheaper but if they were being sold new today they would cost upwards of £20,000."



A 20 bore Webley & Scott model 700, which sold for £1,950 at Gavin's Gleneagles sale this year.

“The most important thing for any potential auction buyer to do is get the sale catalogue and do your homework. All of the information on the guns is printed in the catalogue, all the technical specifications and, generally, a photograph as well. You can get a very good idea of the condition of the gun and the degree of originality the gun retains.

“No matter what you do to a gun, you can’t bring back the years. It’s a bit like cosmetic surgery; you can make a 70-year-old woman look like a 50-year-old at a glance, but it hasn’t taken 20 years off the clock.

“It’s important not to rush into anything. See what’s available on the market, subscribe to all the auctioneers’ catalogues and also see what is being advertised in the shooting press so you have an idea of what guns are available

and what they cost. This way, you’ll be coming to the auction with a good idea of what you want and what you should be looking for: the makers you like, features you want and probably the sort of price you should be looking to pay.

“You will be presented with a huge selection of guns, so take your time. Set aside a day to work your way through the sale and have a look at things. Don’t be afraid to handle the guns – by picking them up you might find you prefer the quality of one maker’s gun over another.

Take expert opinion

“It doesn’t cost you anything to come and view an auction. It’s like having a day out a museum except you can touch things and take them apart. Don’t be afraid to ask questions: the auction house specialists are there to help you,



One of a pair of Boss guns sold by Sotheby's in 1992 for £68,972. Today they could fetch £160,000.

so tell them what you’re looking for and take advice. I would love all our clients to ask questions because we have a wealth of knowledge available for them, and we want to steer them into making the best choice they can. Often our clients come along with a very narrow focus and can ignore some superb guns as a result.

“Having gone into the auction with a good idea of maybe six or seven guns you want to buy, it is essential you must let your head rule your heart. There is nothing more an auctioneer loves than when the heart rules the head and the buyer goes several bids beyond the limits they set. Set a maximum bid you are prepared to go to, and then stick with it.

“If, out of your selection, there is one gun you want over and above the others then perhaps be prepared to go one or two bids beyond your limit, as you’ll be kicking yourself if a few years you still haven’t found a gun quite as good as the one you let go for the sake of £100. It is very easy to beat yourself up over not making that extra bid, but for all you know you might have ended up paying £1,800 for a gun you had told yourself was worth no more than £1,200 an hour ago.

“No matter what you do to a gun, you can’t bring back the years. A facelift might make a 70-year-old woman look 50 at a glance, but it hasn’t taken 20 years off the clock.”

“Equally, don’t be frightened of bidding. It really is terribly easy. The auctioneer will only engage with two people at once, and you should get his attention by raising your paddle which you will get when registering for the sale. After that a wave or a nod will do. Price increments are set at the discretion of the auctioneer, and they will generally be at around 10 per cent of the value.

Estimates are accurate

“The vast majority of lots will have a reserve, and this will be below the estimate published in the catalogue. It’s actually illegal to have a minimum selling price set above the estimate, so if in the catalogue a gun has an estimate of £300-£500 you will be able to buy it for £300.

It is rare for bidding on a lot to go well above its estimate, as with a manufactured object with a known

maker there are generally few problems with attribution. Guns are very easy to categorise and place into specific sectors of the marketplace, so you will generally find estimates to be pretty accurate.

“Buying the right gun is just the first step. Afterwards you should go to a shooting school, be measured and have the gun fitted. Poor shooting isn’t down to barrel length or the balance not being quite right, it’s because the gun doesn’t fit or something’s wrong with your technique. Go and take some lessons and get some advice on what you’re doing wrong.”

Gavin Gardiner runs three auctions of fine modern and vintage sporting guns in association with Sotheby's each year. His next sale will take place on December 15 in London. For information contact 01798 875300, email info@gavingardiner.com or visit www.gavingardiner.com.

Bag a bargain

“OVER THE last 30 years the market has become more focused on the famous names,” says Gavin. “Best sidelocks by the famous makers have seen the greatest increase in value because they are still being made today. To an extent used prices have a relationship with the cost of a new gun. As the cost of a new gun continues to rise, the cost of a used gun of a comparable quality, condition and specification continues to be drawn up with it. As the most sought-after guns, they present the best potential for investment.

“A classic gun from the inter-war period might make £15,000-£18,000 at auction and this might seem a lot of money for an old English gun. But when you consider a new gun costs £70,000 it suddenly seems a bit of a bargain.

“The prices we quote for boxlocks today are in the majority of instances exactly the same as 20 years ago.”

“Classic English boxlocks are greatly undervalued. They have never been cheaper: £1,500 gets you the pick of the market. You will get an absolutely best-quality, best finished, beautifully engraved gun retaining 80 per cent of its original hardening colour, most likely very little used. If these guns were being sold new today they would cost upwards of £20,000.

“The prices we quote for boxlocks today are in the majority of instances exactly the same as 20 years ago. The classic Webley 700, a hand-built Birmingham gun which ceased manufacture in 1979, was retailing at around £1,200 new, including VAT, which was a huge amount of money.

“At the same time, an AYA Number Four, their equivalent boxlock, was selling for about £250. Now the same gun costs the best part of £3,000. A really good used Webley 700 is today worth about £1,000, maybe £1,200. So it’s effectively worth now what it was worth new 30 years ago. Unfortunately, most people looking for a gun at that level will go for the Spanish gun.”

Finding your niche

THE MOST rare and popular guns will sell at a premium, whether in the auction house or with your local gun dealer. But according to Gavin there are certain guns from the best gunmakers which are guaranteed to make large sums: “If a buyer is specifically looking for an early best-quality single-trigger sidelock side-by-side shotgun, they will be looking for a Boss. They were the leaders of single-trigger technology 100 years ago. Theirs was by far and away the best produced in the London trade and it had a great reputation for reliability. You even see guns built by Purdey with the Boss single-trigger fitted to them because the client liked the handling and appearance of the Purdey but they wanted a single trigger mechanism that worked.

“There are other little niches in the market which are popular amongst speculators and where anyone selling their gun can make significant money. If you want a classic English over-under, for example, you will look out for a Boss or a Woodward, or the Woodward-designed guns Purdey built after the war.

“If a buyer is specifically looking for an early best-quality single-trigger sidelock side-by-side shotgun, they will be looking for a Boss.”

“There was also a huge swing towards smaller calibre guns in the 1980s which persists today. The popularity and cost of the 20 bore has been skewed somewhat by the fact there are, relatively speaking, a small number out there. Right up until the 1980s the 20 bore was seen as a calibre for ladies, boys or for older gentlemen. Relatively few ladies shot until recent years and few men would be willing to shell out for a pair of best London 20 bores for a boy who would soon grow out of them. Double gunning may well have been beyond those approaching the end of their sporting days too, and as a result there are few pairs out there from the best makers. They sell for a huge premium today as a result.”