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4 JUN 2019

Charge of the 'not quite' brigade

Robert Morgan looks at some explosive ideas from across the Channel that were ahead of their time but often impractical and more than a little dangerous

Regular readers of this column will recall last month that I talked about Lefauchaux and his pinfire cartridge. I mentioned in the article that it was an adaptation of the Pauly system.

Pauly was another gunsmith who was just too far ahead of his time and let down by the materials and manufacturing processes of the day. His invention of 1812 was the world's first central fire self-contained cartridge – the 'progenitor' of the ammunition we still use today.

Volatile

The cartridge Pauly invented outwardly looks very similar to a modern shotgun cartridge. However, the Pauly version has a sunken pocket centrally to the rear, which rather than having a separate primer or cap in it was filled with fulminate of mercury and varnished over. Fulminate was so volatile and unstable that the act of striking this pocket with a pin or hammer nose would ➤



This gun was groundbreaking in its day



To find Robert guns in this condition is rare indeed

The unusual breech-opening mechanism of the Robert gun



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cause the compound to explode, igniting the charge. The fundamental flaw of the design was that fulminate is extremely corrosive and the guns were quickly eroded and rusted. Consequently, many Pauly guns were converted to conventional percussion systems during their lifetime.

Another of Pauly's ideas, along with that of a Frenchman called Francois Prelat, was the needlefire cartridge. This actually predated the above idea and actually went on to become quite successful, as the only piece that corroded was the firing needle, which was replaceable. But more on the needlefire another day.

Variations

Others realised that Pauly, who was born in Switzerland but worked in France, was on to a good thing and tried to develop it further

leading to some interesting variations. One of the most bizarre and dare I say, dangerous designs was by another Frenchman (what was it with the French?) called Robert. A Parisian gunmaker of some renown and a contemporary of Pauly, Robert embraced Pauly's idea for a self-contained cartridge and 'improved' it by replacing the exposed fulminate central primer of the design with a flat extended folded copper 'tab' of fulminate that was mounted perpendicular to the cartridge base. Internal hammers in the gun mechanism of his design struck these tabs against anvils within the action and firing the charge.

Unfortunately for Robert, the design was not a great success as, like Pauly's, it was plagued with corrosion problems. More serious, however, was the ease of accidentally detonating the cartridges



This survivor shows little corrosion

when they were being transported in a bag or pocket. Many accidents were reported and unsurprisingly this soon transferred to correspondingly low volumes of sales.

Robert guns do survive as curios in collections in generally higher numbers than the Pauly examples as their mechanisms did not lend themselves readily to conversion.

Nevertheless, the Robert gun shown here is a rare survivor as very few remain that have not been badly corroded by the fulminate priming compound.

To obtain one in little-used condition is a find indeed. ■

“The cartridges could be accidentally detonated during carriage”