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Lark harvester

Robert Morgan reviews this bank gun from a bygone age, which wasn't acquired for shooting wildfowl, but actually for the commercial harvesting of larks

This month we are going to look at some proper heavy artillery from a bygone age. Most readers will recognise this as a punt gun, although strictly speaking this term is used to describe this type of arm when installed on a boat or "punt". Wheeled examples, such as this, are more correctly termed a "bank" gun, referring to its use on a river bank (not for robbing banks!)

Continental

This particular example is continental and was almost certainly produced in France or Belgium in around 1870. Unusual for a couple of reasons; firstly it is a bolt-action breech-loader and secondly it is a pinfire.

The pinfire system was hugely popular on the continent, far more so than in the UK



and pinfire guns continued to be made even up to World War Two, although the ignition system was to all intents and purposes obsolete by the late 1800s.

This gun is the largest calibre pinfire I have ever seen and takes a cartridge of 32mm calibre (roughly equivalent to the English "0"-bore) shown here with a 12-bore for comparison. Indeed, I was not aware that such behemoths existed until this beast was trundled into our yard at Holts.

Larks

On talking with the vendor of this piece, it transpires that it had actually remained in the same family for three generations but was not acquired for shooting wildfowl as one might expect and was actually purchased for the commercial harvesting



Not only was this gun a bolt-action breech-loader, it was also a pinfire



This special spinning lark lure has survived with the gun intact

“It was actually purchased for the commercial harvesting of larks”

of larks. Rarely seen on menus today, larks were a considered delicacy especially in France and Spain where they were often cooked and eaten whole, complete with bones as a light game dish, or were broiled or stewed and used as the fillings for pies.

The tongues apparently were particularly prized and used for making a fine pate similar to foie gras or more simply eaten as a fine hors d'oeuvres.

Special spinning “lark lures” or mirrored decoys were used to attract huge flocks of these small birds, and one of these lures has survived with gun intact, although apparently in use many would be set up.

Great skill had to be employed by the shooter; as one might imagine, the cost of the cartridges was not insignificant, time had to be taken to wait for the right shot. While all this might sound a little barbaric to us in modern times, the shooting of larks was by no means as effective as the netting method employed in certain parts of the world and certainly would not wipe the birds out wholesale, preserving many to continue the stock for subsequent years. ■