



Big bores at Bisley

With larger calibres returning to the Bisley ranges, David Lacey takes a look at the history of their use

The early 20th century was a time of intense competition between gunmakers in England and on the continent to supply rifles to hunters travelling to Africa and Asia and to the game wardens and guides who worked there. At the top end of this trade was the so-called 'dangerous game' rifle, for use on species that would charge when threatened.

This competition produced a wide range of proprietary cartridges, with each rival maker seeking to outdo the others in terms of power and reliability. Each maker designed its own cartridge (in the days before computer aided design and accurate pressure testing) and marketed it aggressively. Many cartridges fell by the wayside, but others have stood the test of time: the .470 Nitro Express of Joseph Lang, the .505 of George Gibbs and W J Jeffery's .500 and his .600 Nitro Express are still in use today.

A successful cartridge needed to deliver enough energy, at close range, to stop an angry beast before it trampled or gored the hunter or tourist on safari. These cartridges are characterised by large cases designed to operate at low pressures while producing significant amounts of energy. The low pressures were important to ensure that the

empty cases could be extracted easily and because the heat of the African sun would inevitably result in higher pressures than would be found in England. The large cases also reflected the relatively poor energy density of the powders of that era.

Double rifles were popular because they provided a quick follow-up shot, and the redundancy of two separate locks and triggers – it was unlikely that both would fail at the same time! Bolt action rifles could be made more cheaply, and provided three or four shots before the need to reload. Both had their place on expeditions, with bolt-action rifles often used for day-to-day shooting and the larger double rifles used when things did not go according to plan.

Modern production techniques mean these rifles are much more accessible today. Famous makers such as Rigby & Co will build a best London gun in your choice of large calibres, featuring high-grade timber stocks and custom engraving. However, if your budget does not extend to that you can experience these cartridges in rifles from Heym, Krieghoff, CZ, Searcy and others.

Factory ammunition for the more obscure cartridges can be difficult to obtain, but Federal, Kynoch, Norma, RWS, Rigby and

Westley Richards all make ammunition in a variety of large-bore cartridges. Components are also available along with hand-loading data.

These rifles provide a tangible link to an earlier time, one of adventure and danger in strange lands. And with factory rifles now built in a range of cartridges, components for hand-loaded ammunition, and Bisley providing a venue for them to be used, the future for them has never been brighter. ■

The next big bore shoot day is planned for 17 August and is designed for rifles with a muzzle energy in excess of 7,000J. For more information please email Rick Wells at rick.wells@nra.org.uk.

Read more about big-bore rifles at Bisley in the SHRB Range Day feature on page 32.



.600 Nitro Express engraving (in progress) by Marcus Hunt