

James Woodward – Early Examples of Best Guns from one of England’s Premier Gunmakers

By Dr John Newton

**Photography by John Newton; Guns Courtesy of Wayne Hurt,
Cotswood Gun Room**

When I consider the name of James Woodward & Sons in the context of English gunmaking a number of things come to mind, these include not only the stylistic features that are characteristic of the maker but the significant role played by the company in the evolution of the superposed shotgun; the T-shaped safety catch, umbrella arcaded fences, protruding cocking indicators, the elegant form of the gently swept capped Woodward pistol grip, the distinctive silhouette of the early ‘Automatic’ hammerless action, the development of the over and under shotgun and the eventual take over of the company by James Purdey & Sons in 1948 that ultimately ensured that this style of gun would become one of the all time great guns and one of only two real datum points against which all other such guns must stand comparison.

I think that I’m on safe ground if I were to say that the great majority of ‘students’ of English gunmaking are similarly familiar with these characteristics and the role played by the company in the development of the over and under. The same students are probably aware that the gunmaking business of James Woodward & Sons Ltd., travelled a similar path to many contemporaries; apprenticeship, partnership, change in business structure, going solo, building a reputation and a loyal client based based-on the quality of craftsmanship, a change in circumstances forced by events beyond the control of the individuals and eventual takeover by a another company with a stronger balance sheet. Unfortunately many of the details of this journey are quite sparse, so sparse in fact that they have foiled the attempts of at least one well known and widely published historian of gunmaking in his attempt to write a book on the subject. In addition to the absence of historical information on the founder, the family and their business activities, the relatively small number of guns produced by the company in comparison to their contemporaries, means that relatively few examples of the earlier guns from which we might learn something about the evolution of the

company's style and craftsmanship have survived. That being the case, it is universally recognised that guns bearing the Woodward name are almost without exception of only the best quality. In an attempt to add to the relatively small pool of knowledge concerning James Woodward & Sons I would like to share with the readers of Double Gun Journal two early examples from the collection of a friend, shooting companion and hammer gun enthusiast and collector. But first I will attempt to provide a synopsis of what has been recorded on the history of the company by drawing together the (sometimes occasionally contradictory) information available from the 'standard' works of reference so that we can consider the two examples here in their correct historical context.

The founder of the company James Woodward, was born in 1814 and in 1827 went to work for the London gunmaker Charles Moore. Moore was first recorded in business at 2 Regent Circus in 1821 moving to 34 Regent Street in 1823 and then to 77 St. James's Street in 1825 where he was located when James Woodward joined him, presumably as an apprentice. Noted as a maker of high quality duelling pistols, it would appear that Charles Moore was more than just a gunmaker since he is recorded as a 'furbisher' to both St. James's Palace and Hampton Court. Charles Moore appears to have kept himself abreast of contemporary developments in gunmaking making percussion pellet-lock guns based on the Westley Richards patent No. 4,611 of 1821. In the context of the evolution of the percussion principle the pellet-lock mechanism came after the Reverend Forsyth's 'scent bottle' fulminating lock but before the culmination of the principle in the form of the copper percussion cap. The pellet lock is I think self explanatory; it used percussion pellets made from a mixture of potassium chlorate, sulphur and charcoal bound together with a simple binding agent such as gum Arabic, which using a dispensing device were placed in the priming hole where when hit by the falling hammer would flash and set off the main charge. I suppose together with the tube lock which utilised a thin copper tube filled with fulminate compound, the pellet lock could be thought of as an 'also ran'. Such was Charles Moore's success as a gunmaker that he is also recorded at the Kensington gravel pits in 1834 which historians believe was the location of his shooting ground and from 1835 – 45 he had premises in Paris, from 1835 – 38 at Place Vendome and from 1840 – 45 at 25 Rue Tronchet.

A James Woodward gunmaker is recorded at 26 Berwick Street Pimlico as is a George Woodward 'apprentice gunmaker' in 1841. The assumption being that this was a residential address and that George was a relative, possibly a younger brother. James became Charles Moore's head finisher and was taken into partnership around 1843 – 44 when the business relocated to 64 St. James's Street and changed name to Moore & Woodward. There is no record of when Charles Moore left the business but included in the small arms section at the 1851 Exhibition, London, is exhibit No. 230 a '*fowling piece with detached waterproof lock*' the inventor of which was James Woodward of 64 St. James's Street. Perhaps using the existence of exhibit No. 230 at the 1851 Exhibition as evidence, most sources state that 1851 as the change of style to James Woodward. We know for certain that in 1872 James takes his sons James and Charles into partnership and the names changes to James Woodward & Sons.

In the same year the first of only a handful of Woodward patents is granted. Patent No. 267 was granted to James Woodward, the son, and John Emme on the 27th January 1872 for a three bite bolting mechanism for breach loading guns incorporating a single bite cut into the rear of two barrel lumps and a forward lump having two projections fitted to either side which the locking bolt slides over. All we know of John Emme is that he was listed as a gunmaker resident at 29 Crown Street Soho from 1872 – 75 and was presumably employed by Woodward. Next in chronological order we have provisional patent No. 117 and granted patent No. 600 of 1876 both in the names of James Woodward, the son, and Thomas Southgate. These patents protect the design of a self-cocking mechanism operated by an under lever that was first used (and incidentally licensed to other makers) on hammerguns but which also saw wider use on hammerless guns and which became the mechanism used for what became the Woodward 'Automatic' and occasionally the 'Automaton'. The last patent No. 2813 was granted in 1883 to James Woodward and Fredrick Beesley and is a variation on the use of the mainspring as a lever to cock the tumbler which effectively inverts the arrangement of the spring and cam found in Beesley's 1880 patent No. 31 which became the Purdey self-opening action.

The exact date when James the founder died isn't recorded but of the two sons we know that Charles died sometime during 1895 and James passed away on 7th July 1900. The company was then run by another Charles, a nephew of James, in

partnership with William Evershed the previous business manager. In 1937 the business relocated to 29 Bury Street where it remained until the business was acquired by James Purdey & Sons in 1948 except for a brief period during the Second World War when it suffered bomb damage and the company temporarily relocated to Grant & Lang's premises at 7 Bury Street until repairs were completed.

The first Woodward gun we have to consider here is a very early example, a 16-bore pinfire hammer gun serial No. 2,898. This graceful example is fitted with 30 inch Damascus barrels with what appear to be dovetail lumps and the rib is engraved in a bold fluid script "*James Woodward 64 St. James's Street London*". The back action sidelocks are simply engraved "*J Woodward London*" in addition to some finely executed scroll.



'James Woodward 64 St. James's Street London' engraved in a bold fluid script
on the rib of 16-bore pinfire gun No. 2,898

According to Donald Dallas in '*Purdey Gun & Rifle Manufacturer – The Definitive History*' the surviving Woodward Dimension books held by James Purdey & Sons, only list the dates a particular gun was sold and as such the dates can vary and some guns are found beyond these sales dates. The problem of inconsistent record keeping is further compounded by the fact that not all sales were recorded which is the case of gun No. 2,898. The records begin with gun No. 2,000 but no details are given until No. 2,886 which was sold on 27th January 1876, which was according to Dallas, was

some time after the gun was completed. Then there are a succession of gaps punctuated by individual guns all of which appear to be sales of guns completed some time earlier; No. 2,935 sold 20th July 1874, No. 3,058 sold 27th July 1870, No. 3,235 sold 6th August 1875, No. 3,270 sold 29th May 1874. There then follow sporadic entries until No. 3,380 sold 18th November 1875 at which point the Dimension book is complete. Nigel Brown in '*London Gunmakers*' tells us that No. 3,268 is dated 1874 and No. 3,182 bears the Woodward name and probably dates from 1873. So it would appear that we have one of the first dozen guns produced by James Woodward under his own name.



The elegant hammers of gun No. 2, 898 are perfectly proportioned to size of the action

Like many early pinfire guns the inert action is of the French pattern with a single lump brazed in a V slot between the breech end of the barrels (hence my earlier reference to a dovetail arrangement), the forward part bearing on a hinge pin at the knuckle of the action and the rear part having a single bite which is locked by a



single bolt operated by a forward facing lever that lies under the forend when closed. The forend wood is chequered all over, has a horn tip and is fixed in position by a cross bolt. The stock measures $14\frac{3}{8}$ inches to the centre over a steel butt plate which is inlet at the heel and carries some delicate scroll engraving around the two engraved screw that hold it in place.



The long top tang is engraved with a finely executed bold acanthus scroll which is repeated on the forward facing under lever. As we would expect the action flats are stamped with London proof marks and overall the gun weighs 6 pounds 6 ounces.

So, whilst this is undoubtedly a very early example it is also perhaps a rather late pinfire which to my mind just further adds to its rather special qualities as perhaps one of the earliest surviving Woodward guns. Lots of questions spring to mind regarding the origins of No. 2,898. Was it started during the 1860's when pinfires were in the ascendant, perhaps even during the later days of Moore & Woodward and then finished later by Woodward in the period after his going solo but before being joined by his sons to form James Woodward & Sons in 1872?



Was it finished at the request of a dyed-in-the-wool traditionalist who had no, or at least very little, confidence in the 'new' centrefire cartridges? Perhaps we will never know for certain but this doesn't overly concern me since the quality of style and workmanship evident in this early example clearly define the standard from which

firm built on and improved as they travelled the evolutionary path through the centre fire period and into the hammerless era.



The next example for review is a bar action 12-bore hammer ejector gun, serial No. 4,149. Even before I became acquainted with the owner of this gun and was exposed to his infectious enthusiasm for hammer guns, I owned and used a hammer gun and enjoyed every occasion when I took it a field. None-the-less I'm still sometimes surprised when shooting with my friend that after he takes a shot and opens whichever gun he is using and out fly the empty shells. I've spent enough time studying the evolution of the centre fire gun to know full well that the invention and development of the ejector mechanism sits astride both the hammer and hammerless periods, but to find fully effective ejector mechanisms on a hammer gun still fills me with the utmost admiration for the makers of such guns.



Gun No. 4,149 is fitted with 28 inch steel barrels the rib being engraved '*James Woodward & Sons 64 St. James's Street, London Made of Sir Joseph Whitworth's Fluid Pressed Steel*'. The underside of the barrels carry the '*J.W & S*' maker's mark and the inscription '*WHITWORTH STEEL*'. At the breech end of the barrels there is a small hidden third bite and at the muzzle the rib carries a small brass bead. Choking is approximately cylinder and quarter choke. The action has a rounded bar and finely carved fences and the sculpted hammers fall below the line of sight when cocked. The fine walnut stock is 14¹/₂ inches to the centre over a chequered horn butt plate held in place by two screws whose heads are covered in engraving as finely executed as the crisp scroll which covers the action, trigger guard and the top tang. All the engraving remains very crisp and the absence of wear on the trigger guard and the underside of the action suggest that it hasn't had much use, or at least had a succession of owners who were inclined toward caution rather than excess when shooting. The hand of the stock is very slender which only enhances the feel of the gun when held in the hands. The splinter forend is held in place by an Anson pushrod fastener.



The caveats regarding the accuracy of the early gun numbers notwithstanding, reference to the serial numbers in '*Purdey Gun & Rifle Manufacturer – The Definitive History*' dates this gun as probably being completed during 1886 (No.s 4,118 –

4,173). James Purdey & Sons are usually credited as being the first London gunmaker to use Sir Joseph Whitworth's fluid pressed steel for barrels and advertised the option to have steel barrels, at an additional cost of £2. 10s per gun in their 1885 catalogue. So if gun No. 4,149 dates from 1886 and the barrels are original (and there is no visible evidence to suggest otherwise) we know that at least one of Purdey's contemporary competitors also very quickly adopted the new improved barrel material.









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