

The rook rifle — more properly called the 'rook and rabbit rifle' — was a uniquely British concept. It originated in the late 1880s, when Britain was already intensively farmed and densely populated by European and New World standards. Agricultural pests such as rooks, crows, hares and rabbits, had to be controlled, and circumstances called for an accurate rifle chambered for a short to medium range cartridge which would not endanger people in neighbouring farms and villages.

In response to this need there appeared a rash of what looked more like overgrown pistol than rifle cartridges, in calibres such as .255, .297/250 Rook, .300/295 Rook, 300 Sherwood, 360 No 5, .380 Long, etc. They were chambered mainly in rifles that were built on single shot top break or small Martini actions, though more than one prestigious English maker built double rifles in some of these calibres. Some were true custom rifles, others honest working guns, but all were light to handle and were accurate, and they fired bullets ranging from 56 to 125grs at modest velocities ranging between 1050 and 1400fps.

My interest in rook rifles was kindled by the loan of a single-barrel, side-lever, top-break — a genuine Holland & Holland, No. 185XX, chambered for the .295 Rook cartridge — also known as .300 Rook — and engraved '295 Semi Smooth Bore'.

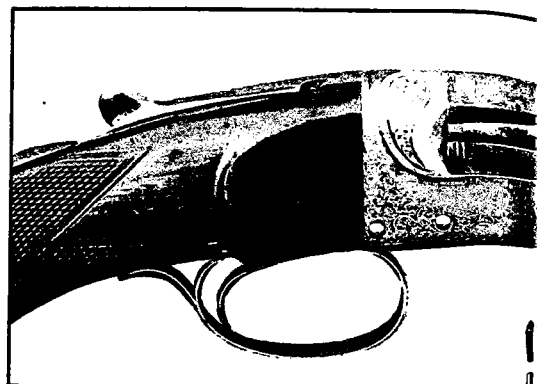
This rifle sports a 28" octagonal barrel with both rear and foresights drift-adjustable for windage only. Tipping the scale at 2.24 kg, almost half of the weight is provided by a barrel surprisingly lengthy for the calibre. The woodwork is particularly slim and light as befits a rifle of this genre. In addition to the barrel-mounted U-notch rearsight, there is an elevation-adjustable Lyman tang sight mounted immediately behind the hammer, presumably not an original attachment!

The Holland & Holland is loaded in the

same manner as a break-open shotgun (except that the lever to unlock the action is situated to the right of the action rather than on top of the tang) and the hammer must be manually cocked before each shot.

Ammunition in .295 Rook is not an off-the-shelf item in this day and age, and I was lucky to be donated ten rounds by the rifle's owner. These came in the original tin marked:

50 SOLID BRASS CENTREFIRE  
CARTRIDGES  
ELEY BROs Ld LONDON  
.295 — 10 — 80

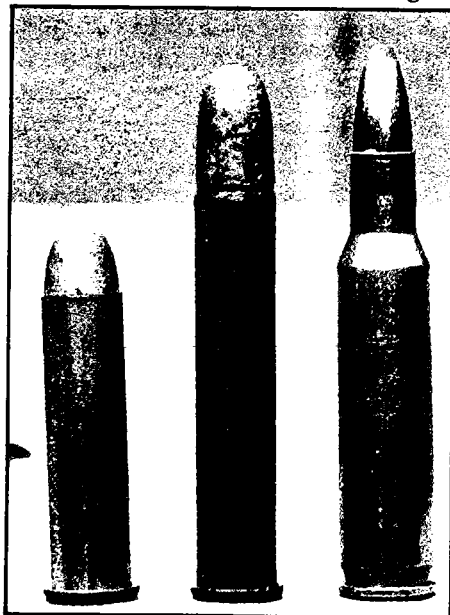


This is a single barrelled, hammerless top-lever rook rifle owned by George Gibbs of Bristol. It belongs to the Editor. An illustration in the Holland & Holland catalogue.

# REVIVING THE ROOK RIFLE

By Nigel Utting

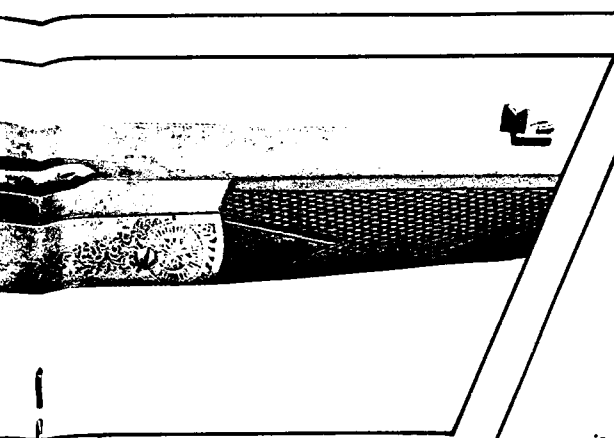
On the left is the .295 (300) Rook, in the centre the .300 Sherwood, and at right, for comparison purposes, the .222 Remington.



## British rook rifle cartridges.

Calibre	Bullet Wt. (gr)	Muzzle Velocity (fps)	Muzzle Energy (ft/lbs.)
.297/.250	56	1150	165
.255	65	1200	208
.295 (.300)	80	1100	215
.300 Sherwood	140	1400	610
.310 Cadet	120	1200	385
.360 No. 5 Rook	125	1050	310
.380 Long	124	1050	305

(Figures from Frank Barnes' *Cartridges of the World*).



r rifle in .295 calibre, built by  
or. At right is a page from an early

G  
LE

shooting schedule was of necessity going to be limited, and I opted to fire all ten rounds prone with the forward hand rested on a sandbag. The first outing with a totally unfamiliar cartridge/gun combination is always a stimulating experience, and this was no exception. Shooting took place on one of my club's regular Friday night outdoor sessions, in sunny and windless conditions — a real evening to savour.

With such a light load in a rifle, recoil was virtually absent. Stranger still was the lack of noise; with ear muffs, the loudest sounds were the hammer striking the firing pin followed by the 'whump' of the bullet on the target!

In the event, and despite the undoubtedly aged condition of the ammunition, nine of the ten shots fell within a 55mm group at 50 metres, with the 10th shot expanding the group to 100mm. It is worth noting that nine rounds were headstamped '295 ELEY', whilst the 10th round was stamped '300 Kynoch'. It is tempting to believe that this

accounts for the distinctive '9+1' group. Much to my surprise, three of the ten cases were badly split for as much as 50% of their length after firing.

Had more ammunition been to hand it would have been instructive to fire at ranges of 75 and 100 metres but, to date, this has not been possible. Ammunition for the .295/.300 is not uncommon at firearms auctions, but since my limit was ten rounds, each shot was savoured to the full!

The upper barrel flat is engraved "Holland & Holland, 98 New Bond St. London. Winners of all the 'FIELD' rifle trials." and behind this statement is an interesting little piece of history.

J.H. Walsh, editor of the prestigious

FIELD magazine from 1857, was the archetypal Victorian all-rounder, and in his time wrote books ranging from 'The Shot Gun and Sporting Rifle', 'The Dog in Health and Disease' and 'The Modern Sportman's Gun and Rifle' to a 'Manual of Domestic Economy' and 'Athletic and Manly Exercises'.

Following protracted and acrimonious correspondence in the columns of FIELD regarding the relative merits of breech-loading and muzzle-loading, General Thomas Charritie suggested that practical trials be held, the stake money of £50 to be lodged with the magazine. Walsh, with his characteristic energy and flair for

HOLLAND & HOLLAND LTD.  
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Better stock and finish

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Made in the following Bores:—'250, '295, and '360  
This well-known rifle has lately been improved in several details. The accuracy of shooting is guaranteed equal to the most expensive, and the sights cut and adjusted with the same care. The action is a simple and strong side lever, and the barrel takes off as in the more expensive weapons.

Side lever, snap, non-ejector, but with ordinary extractor, pistol hand stock.  
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Winners of all "The Field" Rifle Trials, London.

organisation, arranged the tests, which he intended would settle the dispute once and for all. (Although the outcome of these particular tests which were held in 1858 and 59 have no direct relevance to this article, it is interesting to note that in the shooting tests at least, muzzle-loaders won every time, if by the closest of margins!).

Of greater interest to us, however, are the rifle trials held at Putney in the first week of October 1883. The aim was to investigate the accuracy and trajectory of express rifles over distances up to 150 yards. Six manufacturers — Adams, Bland, Holland, Jeffreys, Tranter and Watson — entered rifles in five separate classes.

Class I: rook rifles.

Class II: double Express rifles up to .400.

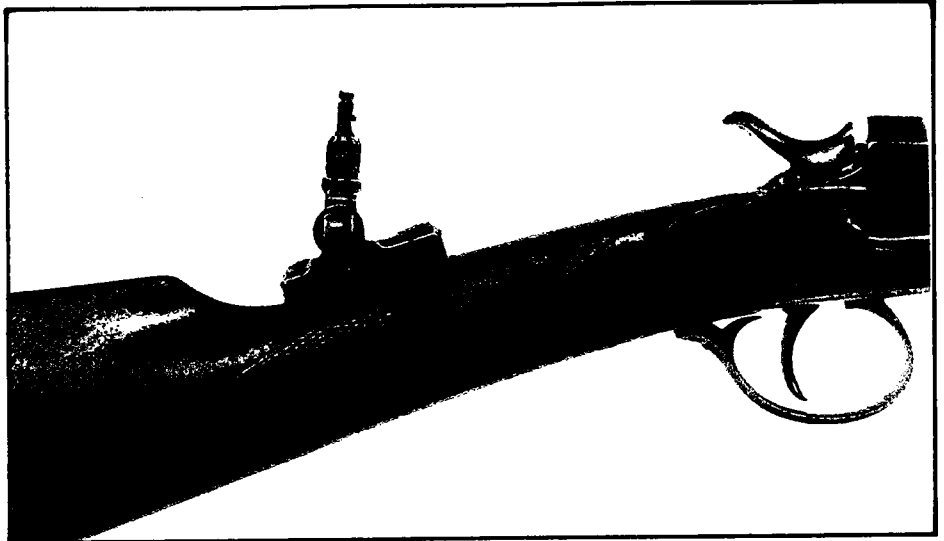
Class III: double Express rifles from .400 to .450.

Class IV: double Express rifles from .450 to .500.

Class V: double Express rifles from .500 to .577 under 12lbs.

Further tests took place at Nunhead for double 12-, 8- and 4-bore rifles. At the close of testing, Holland & Holland had made a clean sweep, with victory in every class. The 20-shot, 50-yard group achieved with their .295 (1 1/5" x 1 1/5") is reproduced here.

Greener's book 'The Gun and Its Development' comments that: (in the light of the trials) "the gun trade and



Right hand view of the .295 H&H rook rifle used by the author, showing checkered straight grip, and hammer in rebounded position. The Lyman tang sight was presumably fitted after the rifle was purchased.

*public are now puzzled afresh as to what constitutes a rook rifle — Bland shot..a strong-shooting (.380-bore) rifle quite sufficient to drop roe or fallow deer — Holland used a .295 miniature match rifle..fitted with a platinum-edged, Vernier-marked, orthoptic back-sight and..fore-sight with wind-guage attachment — this was practically a gallery rifle..not such a weapon as ordinarily designated a rook rifle".*

From Greener's tone he obviously sides with

those who felt that Holland's entry, although of a type allowed, was more a target than a sporting gun. Holland & Holland were not reticent about their success, and their success in the trials did no harm to sales figures. In the light of my own, admittedly limited, firing of the .295, I can only add my own endorsement!

Anyone with a serious interest in the .295 might like to consider handloading, as .295 brass is hardly an off-the-shelf item, another case would have to be pressed into service.

Initially, the new H&R .32 Magnum looked like a possibility; they compare as follows:

Case:	.295 Rook	H&R .32 Magnum
Bullet dia.	.300"	.312"
Rim dia.	.369"	.375"
Base dia.	.319"	.337"
Neck dia.	.317"	.337"
Case length	1.17"	1.075"

The H&R Magnum would provide a slightly short case, and a degree of sizing down would be required, but this is not a major problem; nor is lathing off six thou from the rim. Frank Barnes lists both powder charges (blackpowder, 4198, and Unique) and a suitable bullet mould (Lyman No. 311245), though whether the latter is still available I do not know.

Luckily I did not have to resort to altering .32 H&R Magnum brass, as I heard that a local company — NDFS — were making both dies and brass for the .295 (NDFS, of North Street, Braunton, Devon, make dies and cases for a good many obsolete calibres. Regrettably they are prevented by law from exporting them to South Africa). A phone call brought forth the following items: 30 lathe-turned .295 brass cases, a three-die reloading kit, a swaging die for .300 calibre round-nosed bullets, and a die for reducing jacketed .308 (.32 ACP) bullets to .300". The only item missing was a shellholder, but I soon found that a Lee No 4, made for the .32 S&W Long, fitted perfectly.

When modern blackpowder is fed into a vintage case there is rarely sufficient room for a full charge. By way of illustration, my .44-40 and .44 Russian cases will take only 30gr and 18gr of powder respectively, as opposed to the 40gr and 23gr of the original loads, without excessive compression of the charge. Most unusually, there is ample room for the full 10gr of blackpowder in these modern .295 cases, with the powder under the barest compression by the seated bullet.

The .295 Rook uses a genuine .300" bullet — hence the alternative name of .300 Rook — and the matter of suitable bullets seemed to be solved by sizing down existing 70gr .308" bullets (originally destined for .32ACP) to .300".

Passing commercial 70gr .308" lead bullets through NDFS's simple press-mounted (non-lubricating) 7/8" x 14 .300" sizing die resulted in bullets of .301" diameter — the offending .001" is a result of the natural elasticity of lead bullets 'springing back' after sizing. I also treated .308" 70gr jacketed bullets in the same manner and ended up with jacketed bullets of .3015" — obviously jacketed bullets have more 'spring'.

Having primed the first case and expanded its mouth, I added the factory load of 10gr blackpowder and seated a .301" lead bullet to give an overall loaded length of 1.38". However, this loaded round would only enter the chamber of the rifle to approximately 2/3rds of its length. The problem was that the mouth of the loaded round at .321" was approximately .002 over-

#### A COMPARISON OF CASE DIMENSIONS

	Barnes' data	Original ELEY cases★ (fired)	Original KYNOCH cases+ (unfired)	NDFS cases★ (as bought)
Case length	1.17"	1.17"	1.174"	1.168"
Rim diameter	0.369"	0.371"	0.372"	0.369"
Base diameter	0.319"	0.323"	0.318"	0.3165"
Neck diameter	0.317"	0.3155"	0.319"	0.3165"
Loaded length	1.38"	—	1.44"	—
Case weight	—	42.3gr	45.8gr	75.6gr
Water capacity	—	18.3gr	17.7gr	15.4gr

★dimensions are the average of readings from 9 cases.

+dimensions are from the two KYNOCH cases available.

With dies and cases at hand, it was left to choose suitable powder, primers and bullets. Considering the diminutive size of the case and its charge, I elected to use small pistol, as opposed to small rifle, primers, Barnes lists charges for 4198, Unique and blackpowder — 4198 is an unknown quantity to me, but I had Unique and fine blackpowder in stock.

size. Gently running the first 1/8" of the loaded round into the sizing die — less decapping stem — reduced the case mouth diameter to .319" and allowed normal chambering.

Firing this first batch of handloads showed that these rounds were far more authoritative than genuine factory

Continued from page 35

(smokeless?) ammunition, producing a substantially louder report and striking lower than factory loads. Accuracy was in the '4 shots in 100 mm with one flier' class at 30 metres.

The first fired case was full-length resized whilst lightly coated with RCBS resizing lubricant. On trying to withdraw the case from the die, greater than normal resistance was encountered and the case rim sheared off without warning. Fortunately, NDFS resizing dies are manufactured with the decapping stem entering from the top of the die, and it was a matter of screwing the stem up and out, sliding a steel rod down into the stuck case and gently tapping it out of the die.

From the beginning I had suspected that NDFS's cases were of a softer brass than I am used to. Brass hardness is due to a number of factors: as a copper/zinc alloy, the relative proportions of these metals affect hardness; in addition, work-hardening of the metal also occurs during the stamping process — NDFS cases are lathe-cut as opposed to stamped and do not undergo the same work-hardening. All this is not to suggest that NDFS cases are insufficiently hard — just to point out that a little extra care in case handling is indicated. In particular, lubricate cases thoroughly — but not excessively — before resizing.

One point to note is that the post-firing residue left behind by blackpowder forms a not insignificant coating on the inside of the .295 case. If this is allowed to build up indefinitely, the case's capacity will gradually be reduced. For this reason I not only soak my fired cases overnight in detergent, but also pass a swab through each case to remove the softened fouling before reloading.

The second batch of handloads was due to be split between blackpowder (9.5gr this time) and 4.5gr Unique (a reduction of approximately 10% over Barnes' quoted charge of 5.0gr) with both lead and jacketed bullets.

As before, the cartridges loaded with lead bullets were marginally oversize and required minor sizing down before they would enter the rifle's chamber.

Cartridges loaded with jacketed bullets, however, were 0.324" diameter at the mouth i.e. 0.005" oversize, and attempting to gently reduce this diameter closer to 0.317" proved impossible. The jacketed bullets refused to be sized down and the loaded cases crumpled in the press. At this point, I scratched the idea of loading jacketed rounds — no particular loss, since the .295 was originally loaded with only lead bullets anyway.

Although the H&H .295 rifle is soundly

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HOLLAND &  
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*Special Non-Fouling*  
**Rook and Rabbit**  
**Rifles**

*Trial before the Editor of*  
*"The Field."*

**Holland's New .250-Bore Hammerless Rook Rifle.**

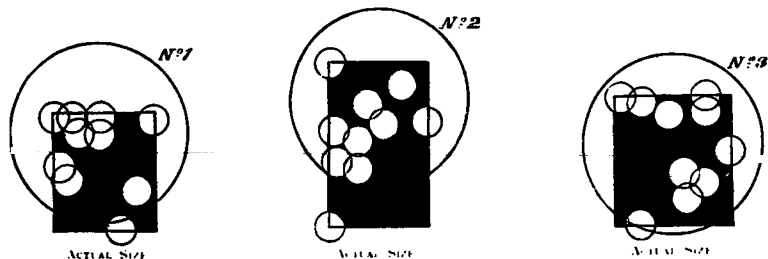
To meet the wishes of a number of sportsmen who considered that a rifle between the .22 and the .243 was required, Messrs Holland have introduced a .250 which from a recent trial we have witnessed, seems to us to combine all that is needed in a perfect rook and rabbit rifle.

The shooting made was remarkable, beating all previous records published in "The Field".

Before a shot was fired, the card targets, with 14 in. bull's eye, which were used throughout the trial, were signed by us, and then aimed at the end of the 50 yards' range.

Fifty shots were fired consecutively at the targets, then thirty at random to test the loading, thirty more at targets, and ten at tin boxes, making a total of 120 shots, without the barrel being wiped out. A piece of clean tow was then passed once through the barrel, which cleaned it perfectly, and showed no more fouling than was found upon a similar piece passed through the barrel after one shot had been fired.

AUTHENTICATED DIAGRAMS.



NOTE. We do not guarantee the accuracy of our Rifles unless our special cartridges are used.

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and Highest Award Vienna 1910.

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constructed with plenty of metal in the chamber area and was made (I believe) in 1915 (i.e. well into the smokeless powder era) I was slightly nervous about the Unique load. In the event all was well and the 4.5gr Unique load gave no problems; cases extracted with ease and the load felt equal in 'authority' to the 9.5gr blackpowder load which I fired immediately afterwards — indeed the blackpowder load struck the target with a spectacular 'whump!' not generated by the smokeless load.

Best accuracy for the smokeless load was 5 shots into 55mm at 30 metres (best 3 shots into 30mm, with the blackpowder load putting 3 shots into 25mm at the same distance. This increase in accuracy with the

blackpowder load shows that fine tuning of a load — in this case a reduction of 0.5gr — is well worth the effort.

Having spent many a Saturday morning hunting (a rather grand description) the elusive bunny with a .22 here in the UK, I am only too aware of the dangers presented to others by the shot which ricochets or misses the backstop and travels over neighbouring fields. It seems regrettable that with the demise of the rook rifle, we have lost a fun ideally suited to the destruction of pests, more than sufficiently accurate for the job in hand, and presenting less danger to others than modern high velocity .22lrs. Come back .295, we need you!