



# BOOM time

ST exclusively reports on the test-firing of the Royal Armouries' new 2-bore — the biggest ever sporting rifle. **Alastair Balmain**, no man of steel, steps up to the plate

**T**he word "bang" simply doesn't do justice to the effect this rifle has. But that's not surprising given that the London Proof House had to use a new proof mark stamp after testing this

behemoth. As well as the crown, the new mark has the number 2 stamped inside the diamond — that would be a 2 to denote 2-bore.

"When you pull the trigger, it's like presiding over your own personal earthquake," remarked Giles Whitome, when, with a degree of trepidation, I joined him last week at the West London Shooting School to test-fire a unique example of the gunmaker's art. If he meant to calm any nerves prior to pulling the trigger, it didn't work. Giles is a forensic firearms consultant, rifle collector, gunmaker and an occasional instigator of exotica such as this 26lb mammoth of a gun.

He was clearly giddy with anticipation.

Everything about this rifle is exaggerated — the enormous tree trunk sized fore-end, the thick-walled barrel, which could double as an acro prop, and the hefty falling-block action that wouldn't be out of place on a harpoon gun. It looks like a fabulous piece of make-believe, a gun designed not to take down an elephant, but a tyrannosaurus rex.

That it is a bit out of the ordinary is a given. This rifle was commissioned by the Royal Armouries (RA) for its own collection as an exhibition piece. In 1997, it felt there would be a certain attraction in marking the



One of a kind: the London Proof House used an entirely new stamp for the gun



turn of the millennium — in which the number 2 had a prominent role — with the creation of a piece of gunmaking history, a bespoke 2-bore blackpowder rifle. The fact that it has been made at all is fortunate, as Giles explained: “The RA only has a limited grant and I was lucky they asked me to make this. In the year they commissioned it, the RA also bought one of Henry VIII’s suits of armour for £1.8million, which could easily have put a stop to this project.”

The observant reader will do their maths and calculate that the year is now 2008, that the millennium has long passed and that the gun is still “in the white” and awaiting its engraving. “There were a number of snags along the way in the construction, and also a lot of experimentation,” said Giles, to explain

the delay, “not least the difficulty in finding a stock blank wide enough for the gun. It actually came from Asprey’s when they gave up making guns. They had several blanks to sell on which included this one. It is 2½in wide.”

You can’t hurry the creation of such a gun, and to complain that the deadline for its presentation has been stretched would be nit-picking. The RA is in the process of commissioning the engraving. Provisional proposals are for it to be decorated with images of the armouries’ buildings. Once engraved, it will be an exhibition piece, but what are the facts and figures behind the rifle?

First, the question of bore size. At the large end of the scale, bore sizing is rather erratic. For example, the calculated figure for a 4-bore is 1.052in, but the majority of shotguns in this calibre, though using cartridges stamped 4, were, in fact, bored at 0.935in. The same is true of the 2-bore rifle. A true 2-bore diameter would be 1.350in but this would need a barrel weight that would be almost impossible to carry or shoulder. Most 2-bore shotguns are 1.052in in diameter and during this rifle’s construction, it became necessary to standardise the chamber dimensions since at that stage there were no proof rules for the calibre. These are as follows: length of 4.5in, a width at mouth of 1.135in, a width at head of 1.180in and a width at rim of 1.280in. This means a big round whichever way you look at it. As Giles said, “It is the biggest sporting rifle in the world and has been acknowledged as such.”

When it comes to power, the standard load for a 4-bore blackpowder rifle is 14 drams of



▲ Does size matter? The 2-bore round and 2,500-grain bullet alongside a normal .22

Curtis & Harvey No6 powder, with an 1,880-grain lead bullet. This 2-bore uses a service load of 20 drams with a whopping 3,000-grain bullet. For testing purposes, however, smaller 2,500-grain bullets were, thankfully, being used, as well as a choice of loads of either 12, 16 or 20 dram. What does that do to the target? In big rifle terms, the “Taylor Knockout” (KO) value is what determines stopping power. A .600 firing a 900-grain slug at 1,950fps, achieves a KO value of 160. The 2-bore manages a KO value of 544 with the 2,500-grain slug, and almost 700 with the 3,000-grain slug.

There is a reason why harpoon guns were

Big boys’ toy: gun auctioneer Nick Holt tries out the 2-bore





mentioned earlier. While the lock is an adaptation of a 4-bore shotgun lock, the action is based on an Alexander Henry harpoon gun design in the RA's collection and is easily strong enough to take a load of 30 drams with a 3,000-grain bullet — should the shooter be sufficiently lax about the integrity of his collarbone. Indeed, at the proof house, loads of as much as 35 drams were used for proofing. "When it was proofed," said Giles, "the proofmaster and I attempted to enter the chamber 20 minutes after firing. Even with the extractor fans going full blast, we still couldn't see more than a foot in front of our faces."

### What's it like to fire?

A small group of nervous shooters headed out to the range, including gun auctioneer Nick Holt, feature film armourer Scott McIntyre (who has a professional eye for unusual firearms) and several inquisitive West London Shooting School instructors. "I'm just going to stick the red flag up, but I was wondering whether I should use the white one," joked West London's Tom Payne as the party arrived in front of the sand butt.

Though the test was for function rather than accuracy, Giles maintained the rifle is fit for its purpose — blue whale, woolly mammoth, mastodon. "When we did zeroing shots, I started with 16-dram loads and they were a bit high. The

20-dram loads shot 1½in high at 75 yards, because there's less barrel time with that load."

To get the group in the mood, Giles had brought a .470 with a similar falling-block action as an appetiser. Nick Holt took a shot. "It's a pussy cat," was the quick response. The confidence of the condemned? "It is impossible to exaggerate the stance you have to adopt," said Giles, as he handed the 2-bore to Nick. "You really have to lean in and keep the rifle solidly in your shoulder, otherwise you will be on your back." Nick aimed, and pulled the trigger.

What you notice most is the smoke. With a 12-dram load there was a mighty noise, impressive amounts of smoke, a huge kick and the sand down range exploded with a *whoomph*. The grin was expansive. "Well, you can feel it," said Nick, "and I'm fairly sure my teeth are still in."

It was time for Scott to take a shot. He upped the ante and chose a 16-dram load — a real man. The explosion was bigger, huge clouds of smoke wafted but his reaction was entirely nonchalant. "Yes, that'll be most effective," he commented drily. Not to be outdone, ST's photographer Paul Quagliana opted to fire a 16-dram load and came away laughing, possibly as a release of nervous tension.

Fast running out of excuses, it was time to step up to the mark. I shouldered the rifle, no mean feat in itself, and Giles cocked the action,

▲ L-r: Giles Whittome takes aim down the range with a load of 20 drams firing a 2,500-grain bullet. The exaggerated stance is not for show — note the power of the shot in the sand bank

taking up position behind me. I suspect this was more to catch the rifle rather than me. I leaned in, squeezed the butt as tightly into my shoulder as I could and, probably through an involuntary spasm of fear rather than a conscious decision, I pulled the trigger... and whack!

I wish I could detail the crispness of the trigger pull and the wonderful handling characteristics of the rifle, but I can't. All I can say is that it was certainly the largest cannon I have ever fired from my shoulder. The weight of the gun and a shoulder pad absorbed the recoil so it wasn't as terrifying an ordeal as I had feared. I would actually describe it as fun. Would I do it again? Happily, but at £50 a shot, I suspect the opportunity won't arise too soon.

That such a rifle should have been created in the first place seems sheer lunacy, but the shooting community should salute the fact that it has and celebrate it as a British-made product. And if anyone out there thinks bigger is better, Giles said, "There is a spare barrelled action available, and I'd really like to make another." ■

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West London's Mark Marshall, Tom Payne and Harry Fraser root around for fired slugs



Damaging to dinosaurs? The deformed bullet could be described as sizeable

To see film of the test firing, visit [www.shootingtimes.co.uk](http://www.shootingtimes.co.uk)