

# The .470 Nitro Express

*The people's  
choice for  
almost a  
century*



By Terry Wieland

Without question, the all-time most popular nitro express cartridge is the .470. More rifles have been chambered for it, by more gunmakers, than any other, and sales of .470 ammunition probably outnumber all the rest combined. A used .470 double rifle commands a premium of up to 20 per cent in price over lesser known cartridges.

Ballistically, the .470 NE deserves the accolades, because it is as good as any cartridge in its class. But, for the same reason, you have to ask why, because ballistically it is really no better than any other cartridge in its class.

The answer lies in the rather arcane structure of the English gun trade when the .470 was born.

The nitro express era, of large-bore, high-velocity bullets propelled by smokeless gunpowder, began in 1898, when John Rigby introduced the .450 Nitro Express. Because the .450 was a proprietary cartridge, with rifles and ammunition available only from Rigby, other gunmakers scrambled to introduce their own creations. In 1907, the British government banned .450-calibre rifles in India and the Sudan, where there was tribal unrest. Forced to come up with powerful new cartridges, most companies settled on a calibre around .475", and necked down the basic .500 Nitro Express case (either 3" or 3.1").

Westley Richards created the .476 (from the 3" case) and H&H came up with the 500/465. Joseph Lang, a respected London gunmaker since 1821, created the .470 by necking down the 3.1" case. The company then released it to the trade, to be chambered and sold by anyone who wished. In that generous gesture lies the secret of the .470's century of celebrity.

Having such a cartridge in the public domain was a Godsend for the dozens of small but high-quality gunmakers, and the hundreds of provincial gunsmiths who produced a few rifles a year, and did not have the resources to develop their own proprietary cartridge. Since the .470 was both excellent and available, they leapt upon it with cries of joy.

For the next 50 years, thousands of double rifles were shipped to points east, west, and south from the port of London. By far the

majority were boxlocks – working rifles – intended for professional hunters and game control officers. And by far the majority were chambered in .470 Nitro Express.

The cartridge's reputation was further enhanced when John Rigby decided not to create their own replacement for their groundbreaking .450 NE, but to adopt the .470 as their standard.

As one of the big three of English riflemaking (with H&H and Westley Richards), this endorsement gave the .470 tremendous cachet.

The American novelist and big-game hunter, Robert Ruark, used a .470 on his first safari in 1951, and wrote about it in *Horn of the Hunter*.

Through that book and his subsequent articles, Ruark became the godfather of the modern safari industry, and he made the .470 de rigueur for any well-heeled American going to Africa. This was the origin of the American enthusiasm for the .470 in the latter 20th century.

Since there were more .470s than any other calibre, it was only natural that ammunition

was much easier to come by. Even when Kynoch discontinued all the NE calibres after 1961, there were still supplies of .470 around.

When the double-rifle nadir of the 1970s and 80s had passed, and doubles were once again a hot item, ammunition was in great

demand. Several small ammunition makers began to produce it, including the A-Square Company and B.E.L.L.

Seeing a market, Federal Cartridge responded in the mid-90s with a line of factory .470 ammunition, loaded with premium game bullets.

Now, any American wanting to have a .470 built, could have it regulated with ammunition that was freely available.

The ballistic performance of the .470 is straightforward. It fires a 500-grain bullet at 2150 fps, giving muzzle energy of 5140 ft.lbs. This is the standard, set originally by Rigby's .450 NE, by which all dangerous-game cartridges are measured.

It is the performance delivered by the .458 Winchester, when properly handloaded (although not from the factory), and only in exceptional circumstances would an elephant hunter need more.

John "Pondoro" Taylor killed more than a hundred elephant with the .470, and he called it "A killer – a real killer – and a splendidly balanced cartridge in every way." Taylor's only reservation concerned the shape of the factory solid bullet, which was more tapered than he liked. It did, however, give great penetration.

Today, Woodleigh Bullets of Australia produce slugs that duplicate the shape of the original Kynoch bullets loaded in the .470 (and other nitro express cartridges), allowing owners of old rifles to match the ballistics of the loads for which their rifles are regulated.

Since Woodleigh Weld-Core bullets are among the very finest big-game bullets on the market, bar none, modern .470 shooters can have ammunition that is even better than the original. And, of course, we now have the new Kynoch ammunition from Kynamco, which comes factory loaded with the wonderful Woodleighs.

Life, if you own a .470 Nitro Express, is sweet – in many more ways than one.



The .470 Nitro Express shown actual size