

Nitro Big Game Rifles

By Paul Roberts

William Jackman Jeffery, born 1857, learnt his trade working for P. Webley in Birmingham. Around 1887, after a dispute with Mr Webley, he left to found his own firm titled W J Jeffery & Co. Although still a young man by gun-making standards, by 1888 he was running a flourishing establishment. His enthusiasm for the art of gun-making was superseded only by his desire to run a successful and profitable business which, by 1892, was offering over 1000 second-hand guns for sale.

WJJ (sic William Jackman Jeffery) did not focus solely on the top end of the market. He ensured that he stocked weapons to suit every pocket, with good quality, medium-priced shotguns and rifles for the middle range as well as cheaper second-hand weapons. In 1890 the British Empire was at its peak and WJJ had anticipated the demand for large-bore black powder rifles for the Indian and newly emerging African market. In hunting terms the Empire controlled vast territories containing some of the world's finest dangerous-game hunting areas - India, Burma, Canada, Australia and of course Eastern and Southern Africa. By 1897, one year

after J Rigby & Co had introduced their .450 3¹/₄ large bore cordite rifle, he realised that the days of big-bore black powder rifles were numbered and that there was a huge market for big game rifles. He then produced his .450/.400 3 inch nitro.

Unlike other makers of "best guns only", WJJ realised that the market for modern big game rifles in the medium price bracket was the largest untapped source of income available to an entrepreneurial gun maker. William's business methods were very advanced for the period. His main competitors were Rigby and Westley Richards and he realised that, in order to compete in this lucrative market, he would have to develop a significant network of outworkers. He sourced these amongst the Birmingham-based rifle makers - Saunders, Ellis, Webley, Tolley and Leonard Bros as well as Turners of Reading, John Wilkes and many others elsewhere in the UK. He obtained components at competitive prices wherever he could, for example Germany and Belgium, always ensuring that the products were of the best quality available, and he worked with lower profit margins but produced a large volume in order to achieve the profits he sought. By 1905 he was producing large quantities of medium-priced nitro calibre double rifles in both his own proprietary design as well as in various other available calibres.

William died in 1909 and was succeeded by his brother Charles. Around this time the number of double-barrel rifles marketed by W J Jeffery & Co made them probably the largest single producer in the UK. The weapons rapidly gained a worldwide reputation for their good handling, accurate shooting, excellent ballistic performance and value for money.

The company was very successful until after World War 2. The end of the war and the dissolution of much of the British Empire shortly afterwards meant that, as with J Rigby & Co, their orientation towards production of predominantly big game rifles resulted in a dramatic reduction in business. In the fifties Jeffery's was mainly involved in selling shotguns and bolt rifles in competition with a dozen other London gun-makers.

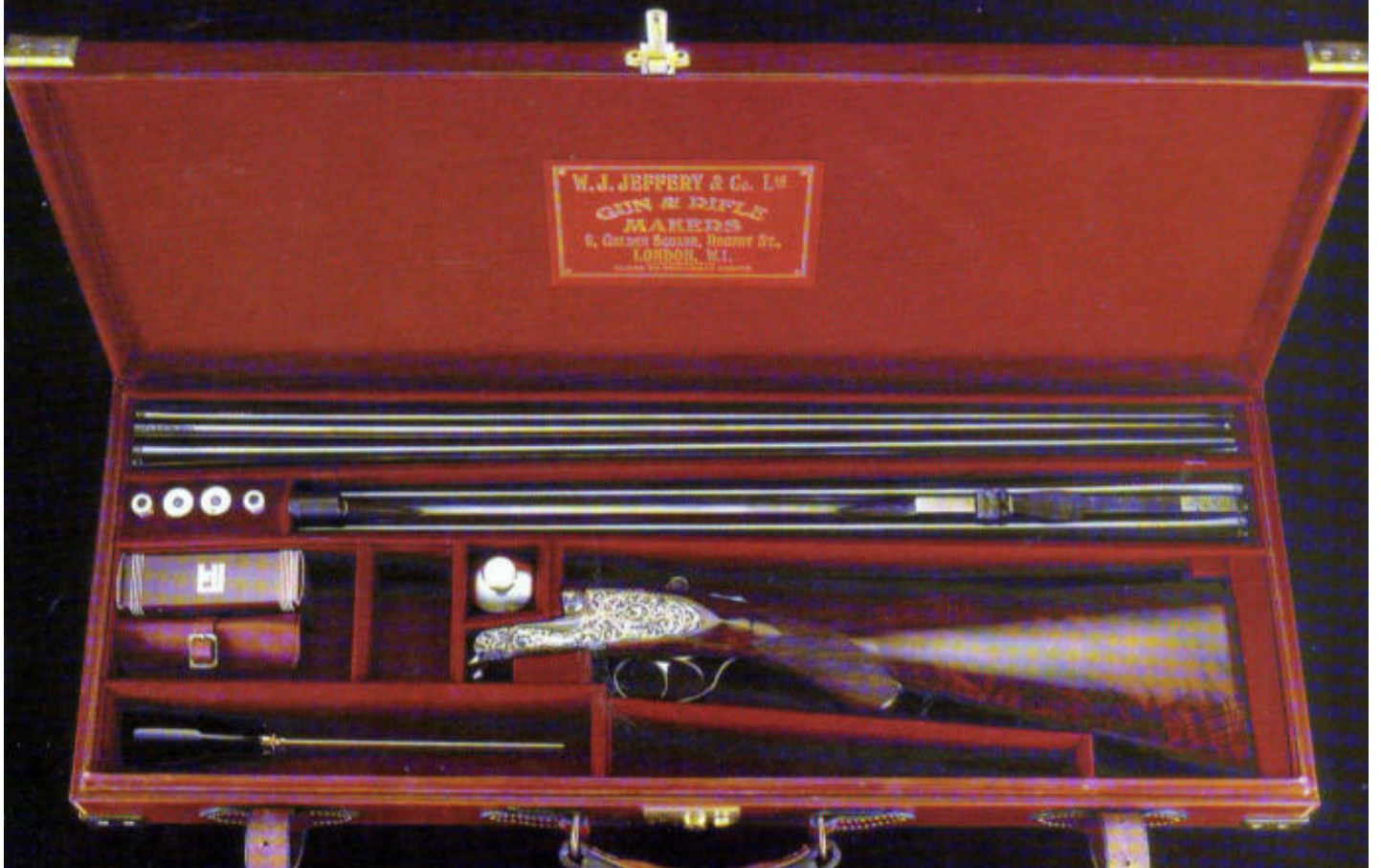
In 1956, the company was purchased by Malcolm Lyell who also owned the London-based Westley Richards Agency. However, shortly after this acquisition he was asked to become managing director and chief executive of Holland & Holland which had recently been purchased from the Holland family by a group of UK-based investors. As Holland & Holland was at that time probably Britain's largest gun-making company Malcolm, understandably, employed his immense talents to promote and develop that company. This resulted in WJ Jeffery being held as a subsidiary company which, as the years progressed, was utilised less and less by Holland's.

In 2000, W J Jeffery & Co passed into American ownership and is now being run by Paul Roberts, past owner of J Rigby & Co. It is based in Vauxhall, London where it is, once again, producing big game rifles in the traditional Jeffery manner. The general manager of the current W J Jeffery & Co, Piers Crump, worked at Holland & Holland for a ten-year period when that company owned the Jeffery name. He has made an in-depth study of its history and products and gained significant insight into how the old company operated. Regrettably, the original sales ledgers showing customer and weapon purchase details, were destroyed in the war, so part of his study has been based on the rather scant records that survived. He has, however, gathered further extensive knowledge on this subject during his 30 years working in the British gun trade. Below are some of his findings in regard to the Jeffery calibres produced over the years.

• **600 Nitro** First introduced with a 100 grain cordite load as early as 1900, the year the first 600 rifle appears in the records. It was a double barrel lever over guard hammer rifle weighing 15lbs. The records indicate that four different types of .600 nitro rifle were produced:

- Double barrel hammer lever over guard
- Single barrel snap under lever
- Single barrel falling block
- Double barrel snap under lever in both ejector and non-ejector







About 70 rifles were made, including a few regulated for 120 grain cordite load as opposed to the normal 100 grain load. When first introduced, the .600 nitro was the most powerful sporting rifle cartridge ever developed and remained so until the 1960's.

The first Jeffery sidelock ejector .600 ever made is currently in production at Jeffery's factory in London.

• **500 Jeffery Rimless Magnum** Much debate has ensued regarding the origin of this calibre. It seems obvious to us that, circa 1927, Jeffery & Co copied the German 12.7mm Schuler round, if not exactly, then very closely. Until the advent of the .460 Wetherby, the .500 Jeffery was considered the most powerful bolt-action sporting rifle cartridge. Between 1928, when the cartridge first appeared in their catalogue, and 1950, some forty rifles were produced. However, in recent years the calibre has enjoyed a significant revival. As well as the current Jeffery production, many other gun-makers are manufacturing rifles in this calibre. Excellent ammunition is made in both the UK and Germany, the current Woodleigh projectiles used today being far superior to the pre WW2 production bullets.

• **475 No.2 Jeffery** Rifles in this special Jeffery version with the 500 grain .489 calibre bullet

started appearing in Jeffery's production records as early as 1906 and by 1910 had largely replaced the .450 No.2.

A word of caution: .475 No.2 Jeffery ammunition available from Kynanco UK must not be used in standard .475 No.2 rifles which are intended for the .483 diameter 480 grain bullets. This calibre proved to be a great success for the company as it was popular with Indian princes as well as African hunters. It was a large, low pressure case with a reinforced rim and Jeffery's was able to produce a great-handling 24 inch barrelled double rifle weighing only 11 lbs but with modest recoil. It was highly effective against the largest of dangerous game in Africa and Asia and Jefferys are again making rifles in this calibre, exactly as per the much sought-after original models.

Jefferys continued making a few DB rifles in this calibre right up to the end of their original production period. The famous French Big Game hunter, Chamault, owned a pair of .475 No.2s built in 1956. Before Jeffery's got a deluge of letters asking for whom their rifles were built, I would mention that no original owners are mentioned in the pre-World War 2 era. During the war most of the old sales ledgers were either destroyed by enemy action or lost; only the numbers books survived, and these only give



specifications, referring to the lost ledgers for further information on the original owners, shipping dates, etc. We do know, however, that many rifles were sold to notable big game hunters such as Powell Cotton, H H Jodhpur and Jim Corbett etc. as Jeffery rifles are mentioned in their memoirs.

• **450 No.2 Jeffery** Both double-barrelled and falling-block rifles were made in this calibre introduced by Jeffery's in 1903. This 3½ inch powerful low-pressure cartridge proved to be a winner for the company. Unfortunately it lost popularity when a ban on .450 cal was introduced in India. A few DB rifles in this calibre appear in the records until circa 1914.

• **450/400 3 inch Jeffery** This cartridge proved the most popular big game cartridge used in India between 1898 and 1950. Immediately after the introduction of the .450 3¼ nitro cartridge by John Rigby, WJJ designed a completely new cartridge case. It was specifically designed for the new nitro cordite load introduced in 1897 and contained 50 grains of cordite load. This was followed immediately in 1898 with the full 55 grain load. The calibre proved suitable for all big game including elephant but it was as a tiger rifle that it enjoyed greatest prominence. Jeffery made rifles in this calibre in many formats - falling blocks, ejector and non-ejector boxlocks, top levers and even a few snap-under lever doubles as well as in best sidelock format. This model was

particularly popular with the Maharajahs and wealthy British sportsmen. Excellent ammunition with superior bullets is again available for this calibre from both Kynamco and Wolfgang Romey in Germany.

• **404 Jeffery** This great British classic was introduced by WJJ in 1905 and, until the advent of .416 Rigby and .425 Westley Richard, held centre stage as the top African bolt rifle cartridge. Still popular today with the excellent ammo available, weapons in this calibre have been made by custom and large-production rifle-makers worldwide, including Ruger.

• **333 Jeffery rimless & flanged** First introduced in 1908. Until they studied the records, the current WJ Jeffery owners were unaware of the vast number of rifles produced in this calibre, both double and bolt action. The last one produced appeared in the records in the early 1950s. The calibre fired a 250 grain bullet at 2500 fps and, when introduced, was one of the most effective medium-bore calibres available. Based on the .404 case, in rimless it could be used in standard Mauser 98 length actions. Jeffery produced bolt rifles in this calibre in both standard and magnum length actions, the majority being of standard 98 length. This calibre was somewhat overshadowed by the arrival of the .375 H & H magnum. Ammunition supply became a problem and its popularity waned after World War 2. The ammunition is, however, now

being produced again by Kynamco and it is hoped that some of the old rifles, and perhaps a few new ones, will re-appear in the hunting field.

There were other Big Game cartridges designed by Jeffery such as the .333/.280, in which at least a dozen rifles were made, and the .303 rimless magnum, but they never achieved any great degree of universal popularity.

In addition to the Jeffery proprietary calibres mentioned, they also made rifles in all the popular standard calibres. Many doubles were made in .470, quite a few in .500 and several in .577. In medium bores Jeffery made a large quantity (300 at least) bolt rifles in .375 H & H magnum. Currently the most popular bolt-rifle calibres that Jeffery's is making are .416 Rigby, .500 Jeffery, .375 H & H and .404 in about that order.

With regards to double-barrel rifles, the current production divides into four equally popular calibres. .500 nitro, 9.3 x 74R, .470 and .475 Nno.2

Although Jeffery's made thousands of shotguns it was their timely entry into the production of nitro big game rifles that was the secret of their success in the early part of the 20th century.

The new incumbents intend to work along similar lines, targeting the same hunting market with good quality medium-priced rifles.

Chart and ballistic information by Piers Crump

