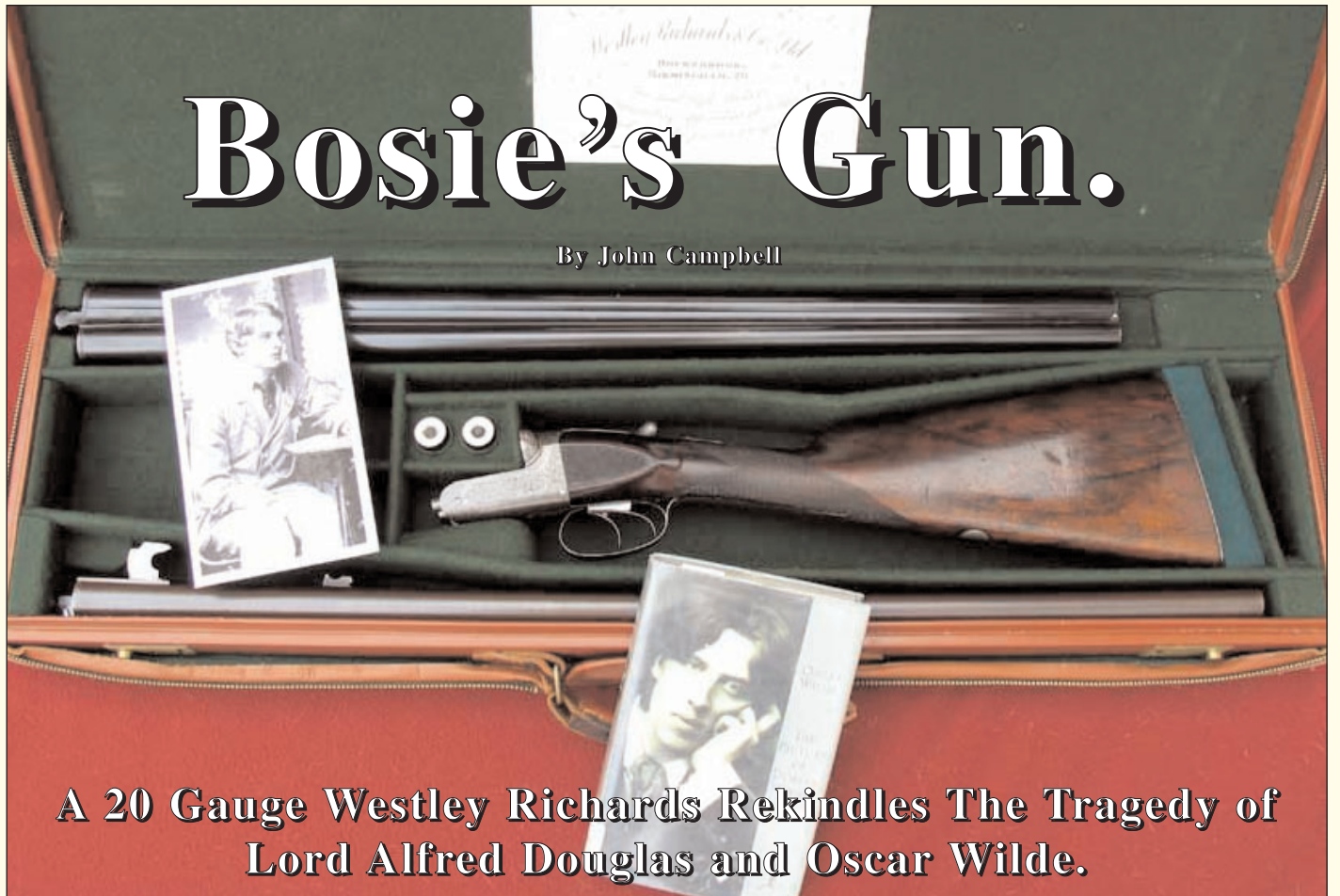


Bosie's Gun.

By John Campbell



A 20 Gauge Westley Richards Rekindles The Tragedy of Lord Alfred Douglas and Oscar Wilde.

When I left that gun show table back in 2004, I thought I was “merely” walking away with a beautiful Westley Richards 20 Ga. two-barrel set. In reality, it was a fascinating link to Victorian England, the foibles of British aristocracy and literary giant, Oscar Wilde.

But my glorious little Westley Richards would keep this secret from me for nearly a year. And, if it were not for the persistence of Westley Richards Chairman, Walter Clode, the gun’s provenance may well have remained buried forever amidst the firm’s yellowed records.

Instead, I was ultimately lucky enough to discover that the gun I’d purchased had once been the coveted property of Lord Alfred Douglas, son of the Marquess of Queensberry, close friend of Oscar Wilde and

correspondent of George Bernard Shaw. Lord Alfred Douglas, or “Bosie” as he is often known, was also a Victorian poet, literary figure in his own right... and an avid bird hunter.

Eventually, it would be Bosie’s association with Oscar Wilde that would electrify both turn-of-the-century Britain and the world. But more of that later.

I had no portent of these things when I spotted this lithe English 20. Or, rather, it spotted me. The truth be known, this was not merely one of those guns that “talk to you.” Nothing that prosaic issued from this one. Instead, my svelte and highly engraved little beauty reached out, clutched me by the arm, and dared me to go home without her. The feeling was entirely electric. As if Joan Collins had smiled at me over a dry martini



This sleek 20 Ga. is one of the highest grades of boxlock offered by Westley Richards.

in the Hyde Park Hilton.

And like the vamp she was, this little Westley Richards seemed to have everything. It was one of the highest grade of boxlocks offered by this esteemed old firm. The engraving was beautiful. The fences were beaded. And the wood was spectacular. There was also a straight grip with double triggers to behold... with the front trigger articulated. I have never seen another Westley Richards with an articulated front trigger. And neither have I seen one with a steel buttplate... which this 20 had.

The only less-than-wow aspect of the gun was that it was built around one of Westley Richards' early single top bite actions. But I was familiar with this action, owned another like it, and knew that their strength was more than ample if properly adjusted. So, no demerits on that count.

As I mentioned before, this gun had two sets of barrels. One set was original to the gun, and were nitro-proofed 28" Damascus. The other set were nitro-proofed 26" fluid steel by William Ford. These were obviously added later. Chokes were perfectly staged between the two sets at 1/4 and 1/2 for

the short tubes and 1/2 and 3/4 for the 28" barrels. The only problem with the longer Damascus barrels was that at some point in the past, a thoughtless person had attempted to clean up the barrel surface with an acidic solution. This created a patch of bare metal about the size of a large postage stamp. Otherwise, the barrel brown was in very good original antique condition. An in-show fit up of the short tubes revealed a slight bit



One of the Westley's most intriguing features is an articulated front trigger.

13598

*dbl. BL 16g.
Old pair Rifle sold to Lord Douglas Probably 1889
H. Reas bored up to 20g. Finish fitted Aug/1933
Price 214.4. Mrs R. B. Pearce 6/27/38*

This is the gun's somewhat confusing entry in the Westley Richards record books. However, there is no doubt that No. 13598 was "sold to Lord Douglas, probably 1889."

of vertical looseness. It was enough to require prompt attention, but not enough to prevent some initial shooting.

Then there was the case. An original Westley Richards two-barrel, leather-covered, trunk case with matching canvas cover. And need I mention that this period case was in excellent condition... inside and out.

Then there was the price. It was not cheap, but the figure was considerably less than I would have expected such a kit to go for. What's more, I knew the dealer well. And I had purchased a number of good guns from him in the past. But I initially resisted the 20's siren call; at least for the balance of my tour through the show. Although this is my general policy, I knew as I strode briskly through the aisles that if I did not spot something better (fat chance!) I'd head straight back toward the Westley, see if it was still there, and strike some kind of deal.

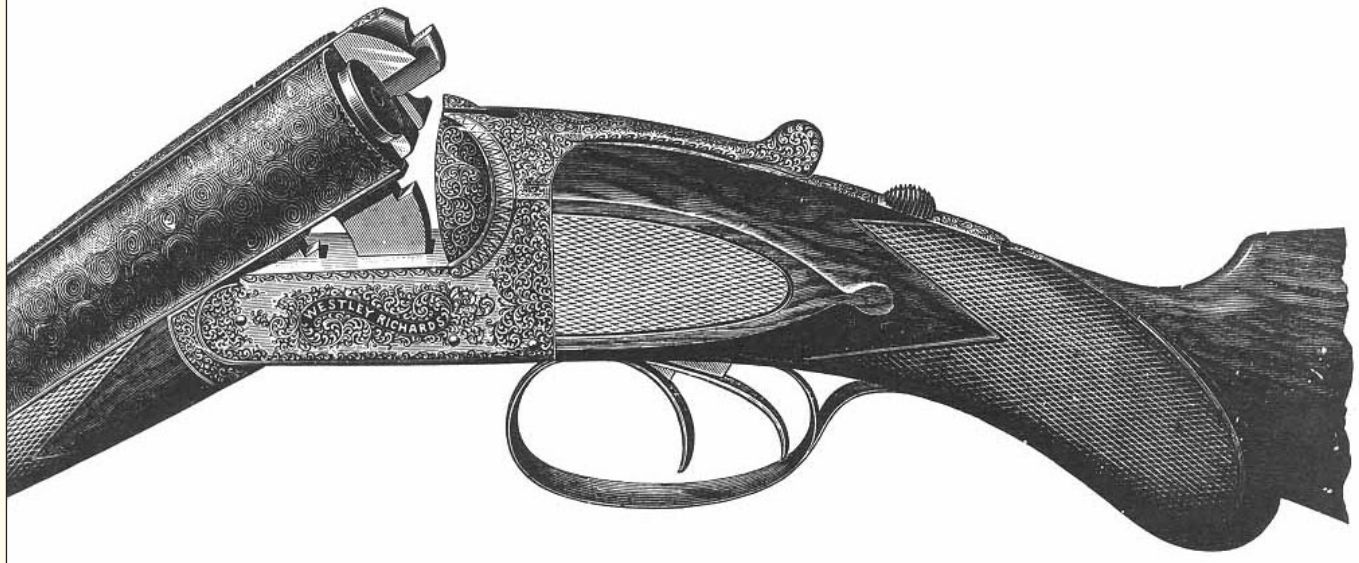
Frankly, I felt a huge surge of relief and anticipation as I scanned the last table in the last row. Nothing I'd seen could compare to the 20 Ga. Westley Richards. And nothing could stop me from walking straight back to that dealer's table. When I arrived, another interested party had just finished giving the gun a once-over. Then he stepped down a bit to look at another shotgun. I silently thanked fate, and immediately stepped in to the Westley's space.

Once I picked up the little 20, I never put it down until the dealer and I arrived at a mutually acceptable price. Then I carefully put it back in its case, locked the lid, zippered the canvas cover closed, and asked him to hold it behind the table for about 15 minutes. He did. I returned with the money. And a few minutes later, I walked out with the distinct feeling that manna had truly descended upon me that day. At the moment, I had no idea of exactly how much favor luck had granted me. That came almost a year later.

The root of it all was the quality of the gun. Everything about this 20 Ga. Westley Richards was first-cabin. This fostered the thought that such a shotgun would not be a commoner's weapon. My library references and Westley Richards on-line serial number resource showed gun No. 13598 to have been



Another unusual feature of Bosie's gun is a steel buttplate. Engraved, of course.



Other than a straight grip, Bosie's 20 Ga. matches this Westley Richards illustration.

made in 1882, and probably priced new at about £55, plus the case and kit. I decided that if any gun's history was worth checking into, it was this one's. Thus, I applied for an Authentication Certificate from Westley Richards records. This costs \$50.

The results of this search were both disappointing and frustrating. First off, I was informed that Westley Richards record books listed this gun as a 16 Ga., not a 20, and that I should re-check the gauge and serial number. I had no doubt that the gun was a 20... it was stamped as such. And the serial number was indeed 13598 on the trigger guard's tang. I then suggested that the information may have been mis-entered or somehow transposed with another gun's number either above or below. Westley Richards' archivist responded that this did not seem to be the case... but that she would consult with Westley Richards Chairman, Mr. Walter Clode, on the matter once he returned from a trip to India.

At this point I fairly well gave up on the issue. The records seemed to deny my gun's pedigree and there was nothing I could

do about it. And for months, I fairly well managed to put the issue out of my mind... until I pulled a large white envelope out of the mailbox. Inside was a short note from Mr. Walter Clode regarding my Westley Richards 20 Ga.:

"It is hard to make out what went on. It can never have been a 16G. The number must have been used later for a rifle. The barrels were then bored out to 20G 3". Very confusing.

Yours Faithfully,
WA Clode"

Included with this document was a photocopy of the appropriate page from the Westley Richards record books. It was the one that carried the description of my gun, No. 13598. And there, amidst the other "very confusing" information, was the cryptic disclosure "...sold to Lord Alfred, probably 1889."

This was fascinating. My 20 Ga. had once been the property of an English Lord. But at that juncture, I had no idea of who the devil "Lord Douglas" was. I resolved to find out. • **Part II in the next DGClassics.**