



A Pair of Early Samuel Nock Detonating Pistols

by Brian Godwin



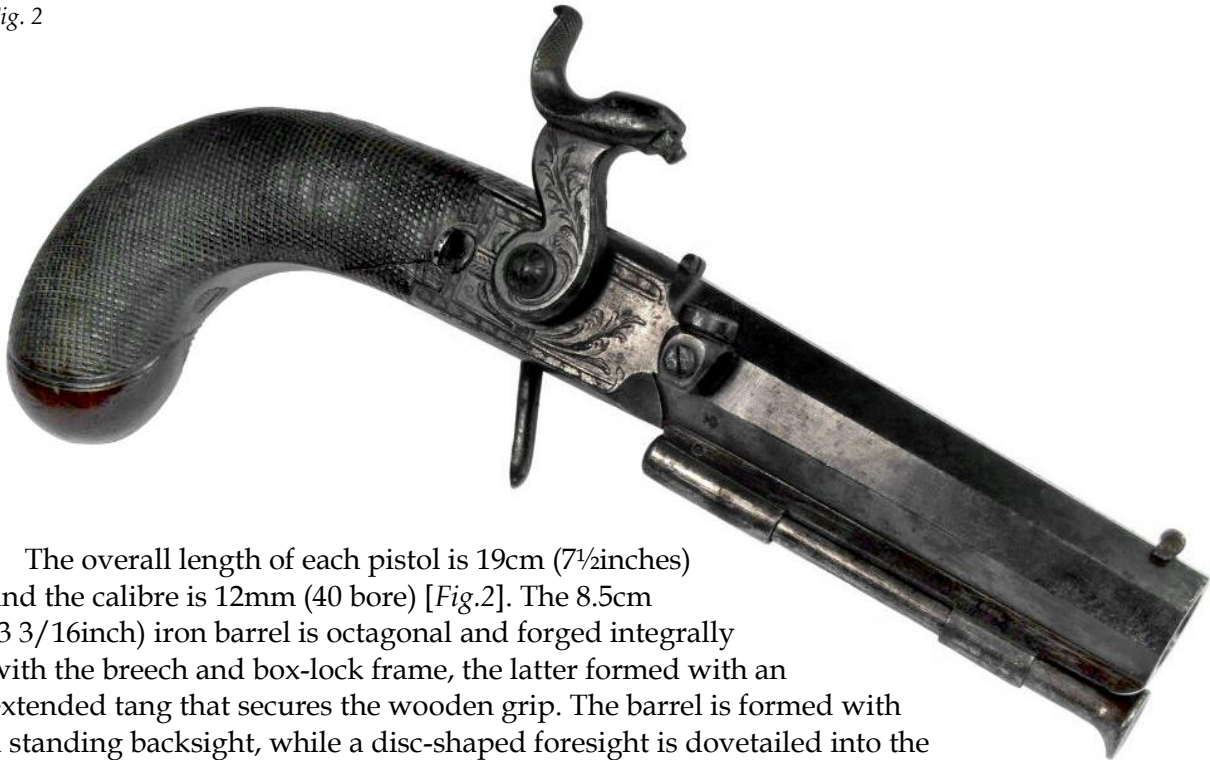
Fig. 1

The following notes document a previously unknown and very rare pair of early detonating pistols by Samuel Nock [Fig. 1]. The pistols are part of the collection at the Bath Royal Literary and Scientific Institution (B.R.L.S.I.). The BRLSI was founded in the city of Bath in 1824 with the aim of furthering "the advancement of literature, science and art" and received its Royal Charter in 1837. The Institution rapidly acquired a prestigious reputation, particularly in scientific circles and included amongst its members, pioneers who amassed collections of international importance. The fossil collection is particularly important, as are correspondences to an early member, Leonard Jenyns, from many eminent scientists of the day, including Charles Darwin and Joseph Hooker. It also houses a good collection of antiquarian books, archaeology, ethnology, natural history, mineralogy and a small collection of arms and armour.

The Institution was revived in 1993 after activities were suspended in 1940, and work began to restore the collections and its purpose. After activities at the Institution were suspended in 1940 due to the World War 2 the Institution was revived in 1993, and work began to restore the collections and its purpose. The re-cataloguing, sorting and re-organising of the Institution's huge collection of artefacts is ongoing. Like the majority of objects in the collection, the arms and armour suffered from years of neglect, but fortunately the subject pistols have escaped relatively unscathed. The record of how the pistols came to be in the collection is lost, so it is not known just when they were acquired, their state of preservation at that time, or whether they were perhaps part of a cased set. The latter is a likely possibility, as such an unusual pair of pistols would have certainly have been sold cased.



Fig. 2



The overall length of each pistol is 19cm (7½inches) and the calibre is 12mm (40 bore) [Fig.2]. The 8.5cm (3 3/16inch) iron barrel is octagonal and forged integrally with the breech and box-lock frame, the latter formed with an extended tang that secures the wooden grip. The barrel is formed with a standing backsight, while a disc-shaped foresight is dovetailed into the muzzle. A rib is formed along the lower edge of the barrel which holds two ramrod pipes. Attached to this is a short iron ramrod which has a large button shaped head. The sides of the barrel are stamped with Birmingham view and proof marks.

Fig. 3



The rectangular box-like frame of the pistol has a removable sideplate and top plate that encloses the lock parts, the top plate being formed with a long tang that helps to hold the grip [Fig. 3]. This arrangement was common to most box-lock pistols and its design had been used since the early 18th century, and from the percussion period of the 1820s it produced a very streamlined pistol, easy to place in, and remove from, a coat pocket.



The percussion hammer is mounted on the right side of the frame, which has a folding “pop out” trigger. A small sliding safety bolt is mounted behind the hammer allowing it to be locked at half cock. Both the frame and hammer are engraved with fine leafy foliage, while on the top flat of the barrel is the signature, within scrolling banners, ‘*Samuel Nock, Regent Circus, Piccadilly, London*’. [Fig. 4] The bag-shaped walnut grip is finely chequered and is inset with a vacant silver diamond-shaped escutcheon.

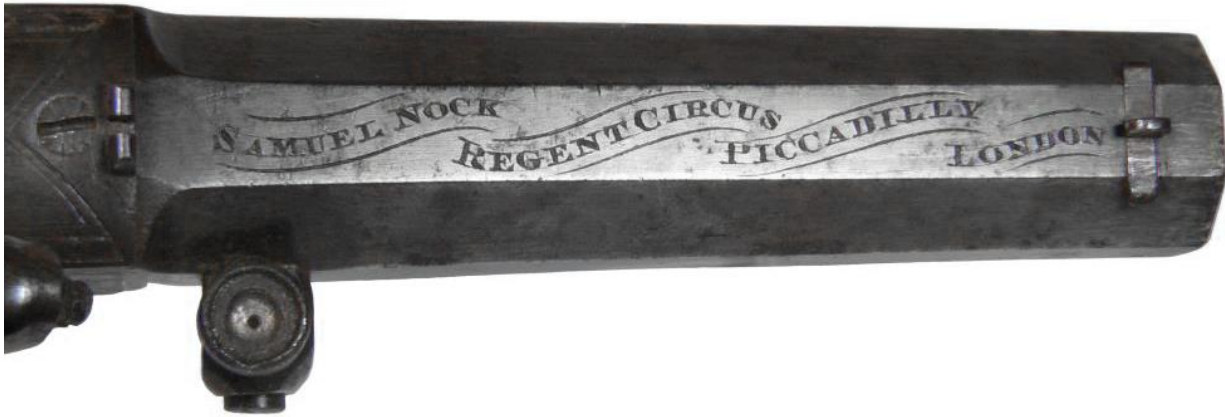


Fig. 4

The pistols are designed to be fired by an early form and variant of the percussion system, known by collectors today as a pellet-lock, which uses a round detonating wafer. The rear right side of the barrel has a bolster or plug-like projection, at the top of which is mounted an open circular dish-like receptacle just 7mm ($\frac{1}{4}$ inch) in diameter. Its inner part is formed with a further sunken dish, lined in platinum, and in the centre of this is a touch hole. A removable screw to the bolster allows the whole projection to be kept clean. [Fig. 5]



Fig. 5



A small square projection or peg is set into the nose of the percussion hammer. The end of the peg becomes round in shape and is the same diameter as the inner recess of the open pan. [Fig. 6]



Fig. 6

When a wafer-like disc containing the detonating pellet is placed into the dish or pan, the peg of the hammer hits the wafer resulting in an explosion and the ignition of the main charge. The detonating compound Potassium Chlorate is very corrosive and in an attempt to prevent damage, the inner surface of the circular pan, where the detonating disc is placed, has been lined with platinum. [Fig. 7]



Fig. 7



The detonating wafers produced at this time varied in form and composition, so it is not known exactly what the wafers for these pistols looked like, or how they were made, but a description of the wafer designed by London gunmaker, Collinson Hall in 1818, gives a strong clue. Hall's detonating wafers were made by sandwiching a hardened pellet of the detonating powder between two small round pieces of paper. The paper wafer was then sealed with wax or varnish in an attempt to make it waterproof. Two early wafer detonators are shown below [Figs. 8a-b].



Figs 8a-b

Collinson Hall 1817



Westley Richards 1821
Patent No.4611

Explosive powders such *fulminate of mercury* had been known since the early 17th century, although it was not until 1799 that Alexander Forsyth began a serious attempt to use the powder to fire a gun. Forsyth's successful detonating gun lock of 1805 which used a small grain powder composed of potassium chlorate, sulphur and charcoal, was quickly patented by him in 1807. This protected Forsyth from the risk of anyone else producing the same type of lock, for the next fifteen years. As a consequence, it forced other gunmakers to produce their own variation of the detonating gun lock, in an attempt to get around Forsyth's Patent. From 1807 onwards numerous variations, that would not infringe Forsyth's patent of the detonating lock, were produced. These locks used a variety of ignition methods to fire the gun. Loose powder, shaped primers, patches and wafers, copper tubes and other devices were all tried, until the disposable copper percussion cap was finally adopted in the 1820s. At a time of increased demand for the new ignition system, Samuel Nock was just one of many gunmakers who tried to produce their own design of detonating gun. While he did patent a design for a flintlock pan in 1816, no records have been found to show that he ever patented a design for detonating firearms.

Samuel Nock was the nephew of the celebrated London gunmaker Henry Nock (fl.1770 – 1804). Samuel was apprenticed to his uncle in 1791 and he opened a shop at 180 Fleet Street in 1806. In 1823 Samuel moved his business to the more upmarket and fashionable Regent Circus where he remained until his death in 1852. From the numerous examples of his work that still survive today, it can be seen that he produced very high quality firearms. His appointment to the position of gunmaker to George III, George IV, William IV and Queen Victoria bear witness to his fame and eminent standing during that period. [Fig. 9]

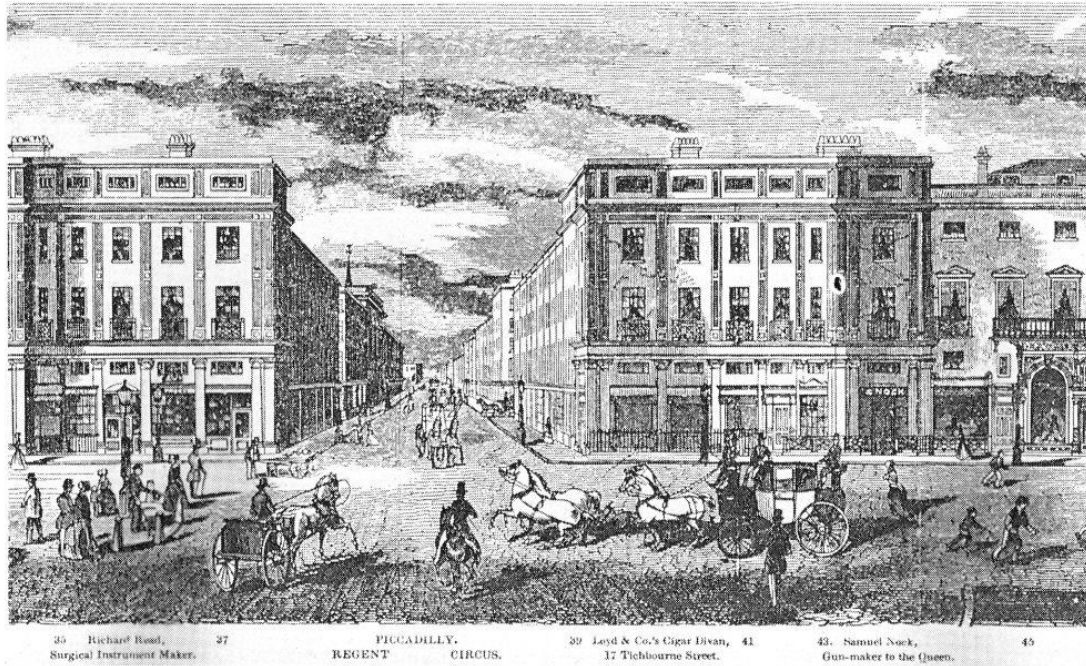


Fig. 9 Samuel Nocks shop in Piccadilly

During the course of research for this article, it was noted that the subject pistols are stamped with Birmingham proof marks. [Fig. 10] Initially this would seem strange, as one would expect a top quality London gunmaker such as Samuel Nock to have all his firearms proved at the London Proof House. Many pistols with the name *Nock, London* engraved on them bearing Birmingham



proof marks have been found and most are considered to be counterfeit, a conclusion often confirmed by the inferior quality and workmanship. Samuel Nock was well aware that his name, and more commonly the name of his uncle Henry Nock, were being usurped in this manner, so the Trade Labels of his cased guns bear the following statement; "A number of Guns & Pistols having been made of a very inferior description marked Henry Nock or H. Nock: none are genuine but what have Samuel Nock, engraved thereon".

Fig. 10



The pistols that form the subject of this article are considered to be among the earliest percussion guns that Samuel Nock made and probably date close to 1823, when he first set up his shop in Regent Circus, although a few other early percussion firearms by Nock are also known to exist. The subject pistols are probably unique and appear to be the only known surviving examples of this particular form of detonating firearm.

More weapons from the BRLSIs collection can be seen on their Website:

<http://www.brlsi.org/museum-collections/online-museum>

Acknowledgements

The BRLSI and curator Matt Williams; John Evans and the late Jim Gooding for Figures 8a-b