

Do not try this at home!

With the benefit of hindsight, **Nick Horten** thinks he might have taken his sales pitch a bit too far when he accidentally fires off his punt-gun in his sitting room

More years ago than I care to remember, I purchased a seven-foot long, one-inch bore, eight-ounce load punt-gun weighing some 45lbs from a friend who had built it as an exercise in economy. For less than 100 quid, he had produced a muzzle-loading gun that functioned perfectly. Pretty it was not, but none of the duck it killed seemed unduly bothered by this.

Having used it successfully for a number of seasons, it was eventually replaced by a gun of larger bore size and more aesthetically pleasing lines. Frequently when one sells something, one never sees it again, but this particular gun has an albatross-like quality that has hung around my neck from the

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moment I parted with it, enabling me to keep track of it over the years as it moved up and down the coast. At some point, a wildfowling wag attached a small brass plate to the stock, engraved with the letters IPA, but I’ll come back to the meaning of that in a minute.

Relocating the gun’s whereabouts goes something like this. The phone rings and a novice punt-gunner introduces himself and says, “I’ve just bought a second-hand punt-gun from so and so. Is it true that...?”

Embarrassingly, I have to admit that what he has heard is indeed true, and my blood still runs cold when I recount the following

tale of my own monumental stupidity and carelessness.

The potential purchaser of the gun called at my home on a dark and rainy November evening. It would have been rude to try to show him the gun in a cold and poorly-lit shed, so I brought it into the lounge. My wife didn’t think much of this since, even when thoroughly scrubbed, the haunting fragrance of black powder still clings to a front-loading punt-gun long after it has been boiled out. With hindsight, had events taken a fractionally different turn, the wife, who shortly after this episode became the “ex”, might easily have become the “late”.

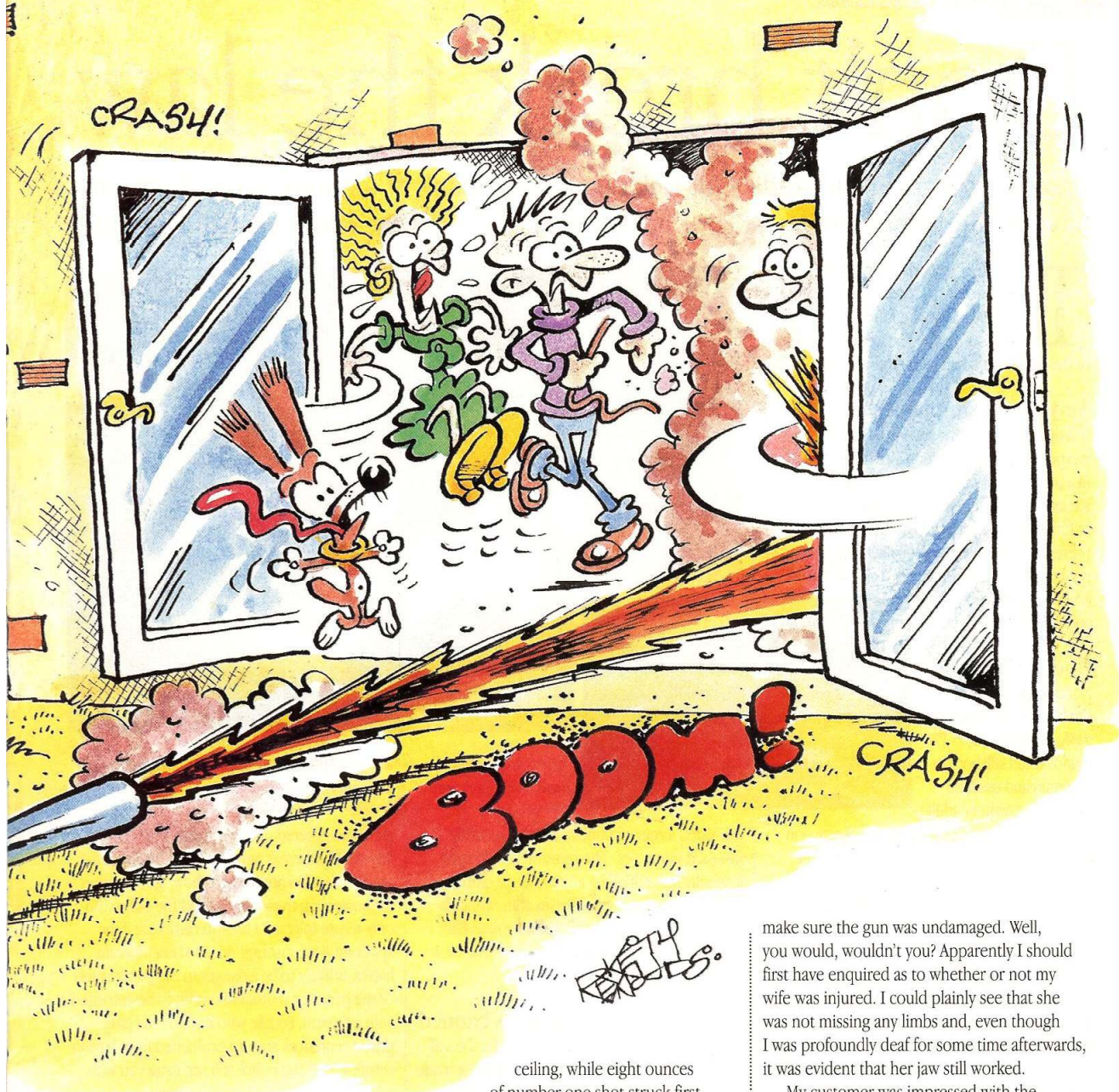
It is worth saying at this point that I was absolutely convinced that on a previous occasion I had fired off the gun, cleaned it and poured oil down the barrel prior to storing it. I even slid the ramrod down the bore and noted the position of the notched marks which indicated whether the gun was charged or empty. I recall now that I was distracted by my wife as I did this — perhaps what happened subsequently was really all her fault? No? Oh well, no harm in trying. I would have staked my life on it being empty. Nobody in their right mind would be so stupid as to bring a loaded punt-gun into the house. Would they?

The gun lay on the floor with the dog sitting in front of the muzzle. My wife sat in an armchair slightly to the right of the dangerous end, while I went through my sales patter, which included putting a percussion cap on the nipple. For some reason, known only to itself, the dog got up and moved across the room, which was probably just as well. In my enthusiasm to demonstrate the strength of the lock, I cocked it and pulled the trigger lanyard.



There followed the dull pop of a damp percussion cap. That did my sales pitch no good at all, so I put on another and blithely tugged the lanyard again.

A number of things then happened simultaneously and in slow motion. I heard the cap crack and then — nothing. In such a confined space, the usual roar of the punt-gun was transmuted into a violent rise in air pressure which rendered all three of us temporarily deaf. The gun itself suddenly grew hot under my hand as it accelerated backwards across the



▲ A rather expensive lesson in gun safety

floor, smashed open the French windows and came to rest in the garden outside. The room was instantly filled with choking grey smoke — now it really did reek of black powder — and a concentrated dagger of brilliant orange flame shot six feet across the room as the wall-deflected muzzle blast raised my wife to her feet completely involuntarily.

The newspaper wadding had set fire to the curtains, which fluttered down from the

ceiling, while eight ounces of number one shot struck first the carpet, from which it removed a neat elongated triangular section, and then the skirting board, through which it punched a clean-edged, fist-sized hole. Then it penetrated two courses of brickwork and finally came to rest in the raised flower bed beyond. And all this from an empty gun.

For a moment we sat and looked at each other, too stunned to move. Galvanised into action by the fire now burning merrily in my lounge, I beat out the flaming curtains, and then in an error of judgement that was to cost me dear, I rushed into the garden to

make sure the gun was undamaged. Well, you would, wouldn't you? Apparently I should first have enquired as to whether or not my wife was injured. I could plainly see that she was not missing any limbs and, even though I was profoundly deaf for some time afterwards, it was evident that her jaw still worked.

My customer was impressed with the gun's penetrative qualities and reasoned that if it could shoot through a brick wall ducks shouldn't present too much of a challenge. He coughed up the cash on the spot.

Oh yes, IPA. You could never accuse me of being an armchair wildfowler, but I do appear to be the founder and, to the best of my knowledge, sole member of the Indoor Puntgunners' Association.

It just so happens that I have another, larger, muzzle-loading punt-gun for sale. Perhaps I could bring it round to your house for a demonstration? ■