

The restoration of Irish Tom ~ The Worlds Largest Punt Gun

Irish Tom was a giant of the shooting world, sharing the company of actors and royalty before falling on hard times. Here Allan Owens tells how he restored the world's largest punt-gun

What weighs more than 300lbs and has a barrel 14ft 1in long? The largest punt-gun in the world, that's what. It's not so much of a punt-gun as a cannon Sir Francis Drake could have used to sink the Spanish Armada! It once fired 3lb 2oz of shot, propelled by 10oz (283g) of black powder.

Nicknamed "Irish Tom", the mighty gun was originally a muzzle-loader, the barrel manufactured by the Whitworth factory of Manchester, and the mounting and finishing done by W.W. Greener of Birmingham. It was made for a professional wildfowler, and was acquired in the 1930's by Stanley Duncan, founder of the Wildfowler's Association of Great Britain and Ireland (WAGBI), the predecessor of BASC.

Irish Tom's original owner told Duncan that he'd had "indifferent success" with the gun, claiming its best shot took 100 teal. But Duncan's enthusiasm for the monster was not diminished, and he built a specially reinforced punt to carry it. It was more than 24ft in length, with a beam of 4ft 6in.

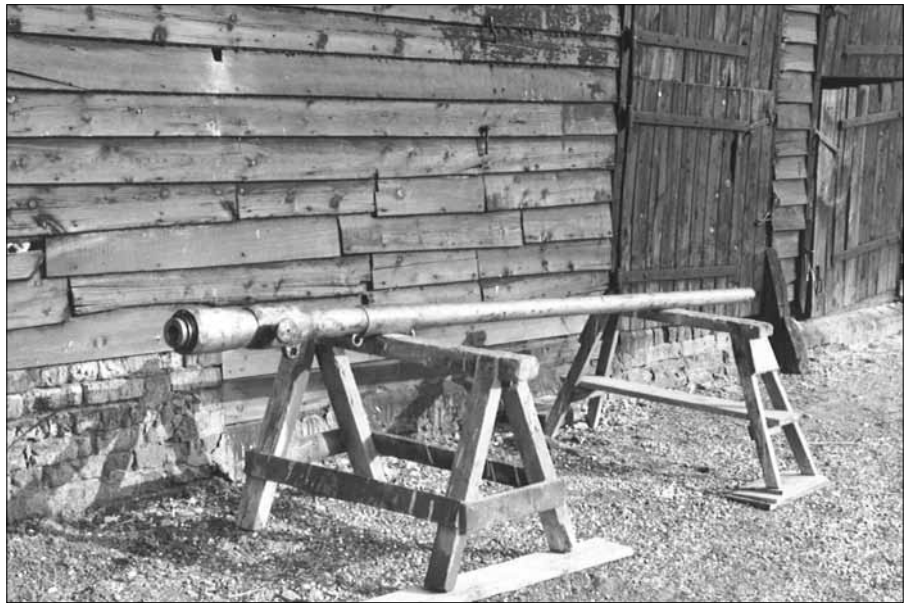
Duncan first used the gun and punt in 1936, and regularly called it into action until the outbreak of World War II, after which it was acquired by archetypal British character actor James Robertson-Justice, then in his late 30's. He was just embarking on his hugely successful stage and cinema career, which included Whisky Galore, Moby Dick, The Guns of Navarone, and the Doctor films. Robertson-Justice was also an expert falconer and a keen wildfowler.

There is no extensive record of how Irish Tom was used during the time it was in Robertson-Justice's possession, but one story – recounted by the retired director of a Long Sutton based agricultural engineering company – tells how the actor, accompanied by the Duke of Edinburgh, was wildfowling on The Wash during the early 1950's.

"They were towing the punt and gun behind Robertson-Justice's Rolls Royce", remembers my source, "and the gun was causing annoyance by tapping on the boot. To remedy this, the gun was taken into the workshop and had three inches cut off the muzzle".

In January 1981, almost six years after the death of Robertson-Justice, Irish Tom was discovered by Major John Rippingall in an Inverness boatyard. Sadly, the gun was much the worse for wear. The action and breech plug were missing and 34 inches had been sawn from the end of the barrel, allegedly to be used as the stern tube for a trawler.

Following Major Rippingall's return with the gun to his farm in



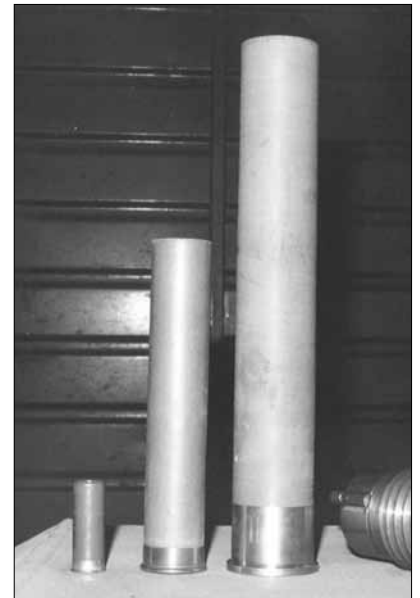
Irish Tom as found in an Inverness boat yard

Essex, he contacted me to enquire whether or not I might be able to restore Irish Tom to its former glory. I had previously made several punt-guns, including a double for a colleague of Major Rippingall. It was an exciting challenge, and one which I didn't hesitate to accept.

Initially, I had little information to work with, but then an old newspaper article – written by Stanley Duncan for The Illustrated Sporting and Dramatic News of 10 January, 1936 – was brought to my attention. This article gave the original dimensions of the gun and, most importantly, had a photograph of the missing action and cartridge alongside a 12-bore cartridge for comparison. Scaling everything from the known size of the 12-bore cartridge, I was able to produce a set of working drawings. In the meantime, Major Rippingall had contacted Holland & Holland and obtained photographs of a similar breech plug.

Manufacturing the action and breech plug presented no problems, until it came to the stock. Unable to obtain a seasoned piece of walnut thick enough for my purposes, I was forced to use elm. I also had to give the cartridge a plastic tube, rather than the original cardboard. This was to provide some durability, as it was likely to receive a lot of handling when fully restored and put on display.

To restore Irish Tom's barrel to its original length, an extension piece was made and shrunk over a shoulder four inches long. This was turned on the end of the barrel, the joint was filled with weld and filed flush. Guns of more than 1 3/4in bore had been banned by the 1954 Protection of Birds Act, so proofing was unnecessary, as Irish Tom can only ever be a show piece.



Top left: The replacement action and breech plug

Left: Cartridge inserted in breech plug

Above: Irish Tom cartridge alongside 1 1/2" Eley punt gun cartridge with 12 bore cartridge for comparison

Below: Irish Tom alongside Bland 20oz gun



Around the time that I completed the restoration, Major Rippingall took delivery of a new punt. So, before delivering Irish Tom to BASC headquarters, we decided to mount the gun on the punt, fire a blank and photograph the event for posterity. The punt was designed to mount a Bland 20oz gun. It was dwarfed by Irish Tom, but we eventually got it all rigged and the Major claimed the honour of pulling the lanyard.

The result was impressive to say the least. Now, Irish Tom can rest peacefully and fully intact on display at BASC headquarters at Marford Mill, where John Rippingall and myself delivered it on 27 April 1985.



Above: Breech end of barrel, action and cartridge

Below: Firing a blank cartridge

