

Leading gunmaking historian **Donald Dallas** unveils the story behind a different famous name every month.



# William Evans

“Purdey took legal advice but nothing could be done because the term ‘William Evans (From Purdey’s)’ was quite true.”

In the 19th century, the gunmaker William Evans engraved “William Evans (From Purdey’s)” upon his guns, rifles and pistols, and used the phrase extensively on all his advertising literature. It rankled Purdey, as it felt Evans was using its esteemed name.

The company took legal advice, but nothing could be done as the term “William Evans (From Purdey’s)” was quite true. Talk about the pot calling the kettle black: when James Purdey established his business in 1814, his trade labels proclaimed, “J. Purdey, Gun Manufacturer, From J. Mantons”.

Using the name of a well-known, established gunmaker was common in the 19th century. Thomas Boss proclaimed on his labels, “Thomas

Boss, Many Years With The Late Joseph Manton” and later Frederick Beesley adopted the same style as Evans, stating “Beesley (From Purdey’s)”. By the early 20th century, William Evans was well established, so the wording was dropped.

## Mysterious beginnings

Very little is known about the early history of William Evans. He worked for James Purdey pre-1871, but he was certainly not a gunmaker because his name does not appear in the Purdey wage books of the period.

He worked in the Purdey shop on Oxford Street in some capacity for a short time and then went to work for Harris Holland in his shop at 98 New Bond Street, remaining there until 1883.

Evans obviously had good business acumen and in 1883 set up on his own at 95a Buckingham Palace Road. From the start he engraved upon his guns, “William Evans (From Purdey’s)” to imply that he had a close connection with the famous firm. It was an astute ploy and the new firm began to prosper.

Unlike Purdey, William Evans did not build the bulk of his guns. He bought them in from various Birmingham and London makers and engraved and finished them. He sold a wide variety of guns, rifles and pistols from the best quality to the cheapest. A best

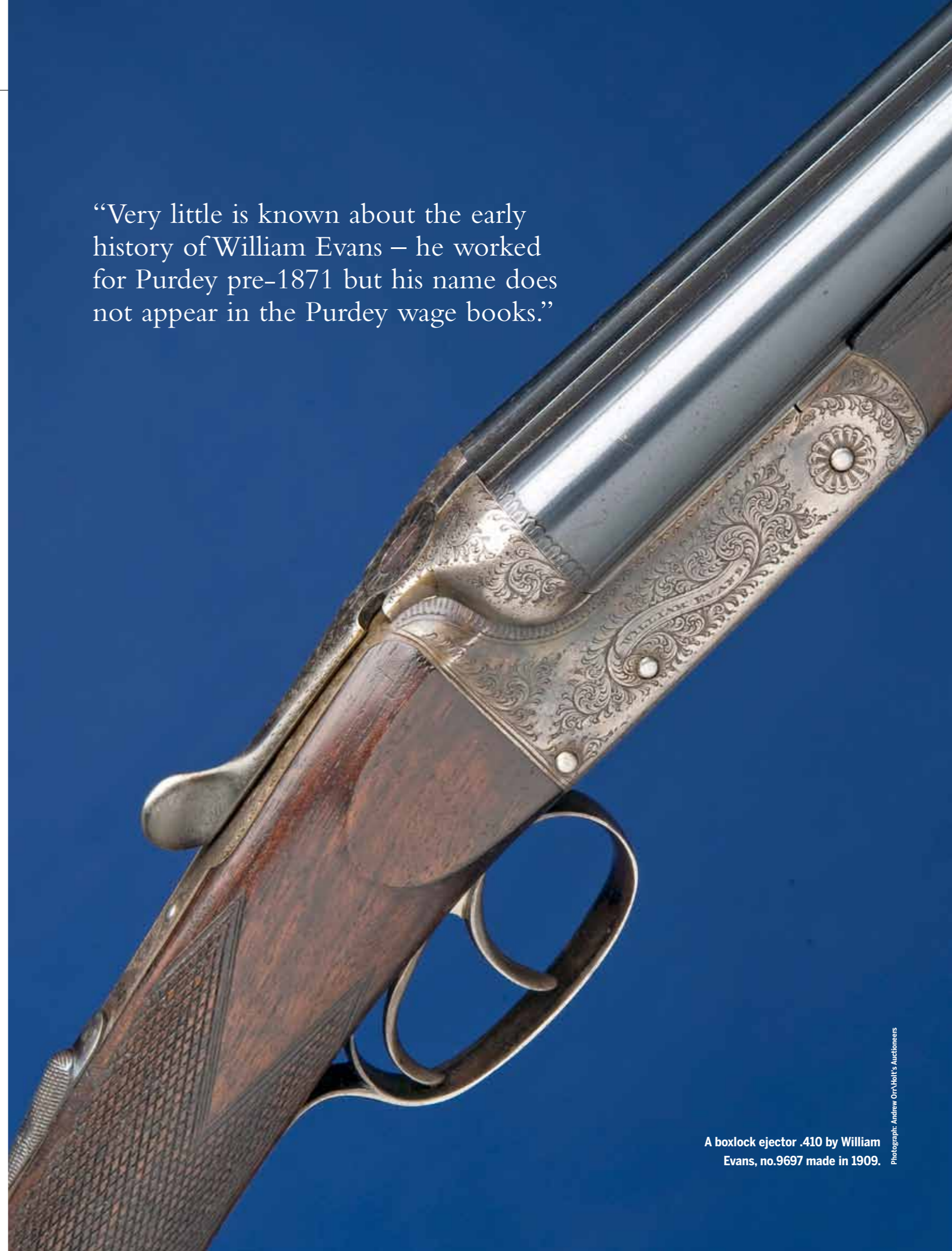
### A Collector's Gun

THE 1890 William Evans catalogue extolled the virtues of its .410 thus: “These handy little guns are made to shoot Eley’s .410 paper cartridge, containing 21 grains of powder and 150 grains of No. 8 shot, and will put 100 pellets in a 30-inch circle at 35 yards evenly distributed. They are suitable for ball and are largely used for target practice and for rook and rabbit shooting.”

The gun illustrated opposite is a superior double-barrelled boxlock ejector no. 9697, built in 1909 of the type that William Evans called

a “Collector’s Gun.” This little gun has 26in barrels engraved “William Evans, 63 Pall Mall, London SW”, and is of very high quality. It has fine acanthus scroll engraving with a treble grip action. The stock is longer than usual for a .410, being 14½in long (most .410s were built for boys or ladies). The gun is simply engraved “William Evans”, with the “From Purdey’s” no longer present. It must have been built for a wealthy client or his son, because it is rare to encounter .410s of this quality. ■

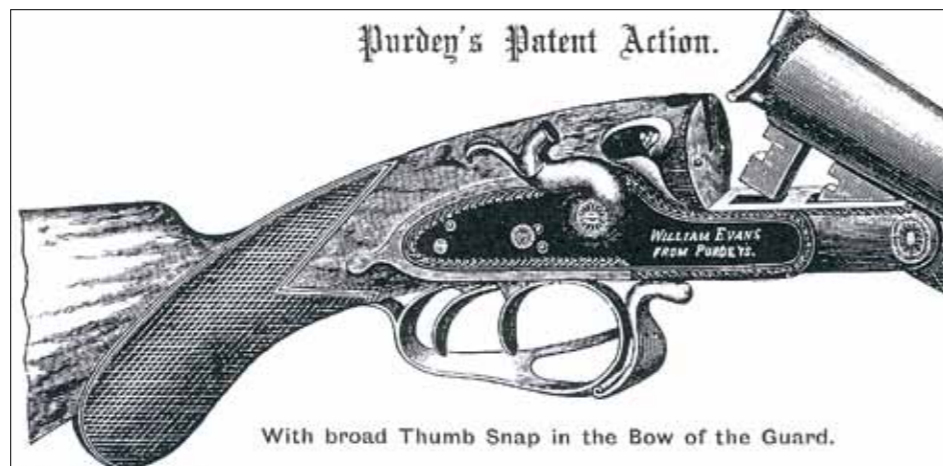
“Very little is known about the early history of William Evans – he worked for Purdey pre-1871 but his name does not appear in the Purdey wage books.”



A boxlock ejector .410 by William Evans, no.9697 made in 1909.

Photograph: Andrew Orr-Voit's Auctioneers

“Unlike others, Evans appeared to weather post-war dislocation quite well, partly because it specialised in second-hand guns.”



It might have been a bit cheeky, but engraving Purdey's Patent Action with “William Evans From Purdey's” was mightily clever in terms of branding. The picture is from an 1890 catalogue.

hammerless gun cost £47 in 1890, in comparison to a Purdey at £92. Evans sold hammer guns, .410s, air guns, pigeon guns, big bores, express rifles, rook and rabbit rifles and revolvers.

William Evans didn't stay at 95a Buckingham Palace Road for long, moving in 1885 to nearby 4 Holden Terrace, Buckingham Palace Road. It was close to Victoria Station, an area not known for its association with gunmakers, but the premises was

inexpensive. The firm must have done well as only three years later he moved to a more prestigious address, 4 Pall Mall Place, St. James's, in the heart of the territory of the West End gunmakers.

Evans' guns were well made and far cheaper than their West End rivals, and he soon built up an extensive clientele of army officers and landowners seeking good quality London-made guns at lower cost. His experience working with Purdey and Hollands paid off, and in an 1890 catalogue he listed scores of aristocratic and military clients to show how well esteemed his firm was. One C.G. Dalgety Esq., Lockerley Hall, Romsey, wrote: “The new pair of ejector guns are most satisfactory.”

### Post-war prosperity

The business continued to do well in the heady days before the First World War and in 1896 Evans moved into Pall Mall itself, to no. 63. Here, during the war, the business fitted up a number of sniper rifles for the Scots Guards. Evans remained at 63 Pall Mall until the Luftwaffe enforced an eviction. On February 23, 1944, a bomb exploded killing eight people in Pall Mall and seriously damaging the Evans building. It had to be evacuated but the records

### “William Evans (From Purdey's)”

ON August 22, 1885, a Mr. T. Shilston from Newton Abbot wrote to James Purdey & Sons.

“Sir, I have in my possession a gun, on it is engraved, ‘William Evans (From Purdey's)’. Would you kindly inform me what he was in your employ? I have reason to think he is not a practical man, but simply a shop man – if so he certainly ought not to make one of your name as he is likely to mislead the public.”

Unfortunately, Purdey's reply to this derogatory letter about William Evans does not survive. Shop man he may have been, but he was clearly very clever. How many other gun companies established in 1883 still have premises in St James's Street, once the home of a great many gunmakers? There is only one –

William Evans. The other is a newcomer. Evans' marketing strategy was simple and effective and today the association is still made. Most gunmakers used previous connections to give their business greater gravitas, but Evans went further and engraved “From Purdey's” on his guns. Even his 19th century catalogues proudly boasted, “Late with James Purdey & Sons – 12 years with Holland & Holland”. However, the success of the advertising was such that the association with Purdey was dropped in the early 20th century.

William Evans certainly started a trend. Just look at all the Purdey and Holland trained gunmakers today who adopt the same strategy in their advertising! ■

### Evans' live pigeon gun

BY THE beginning of the 20th century, live pigeon shooting had gone well out of fashion in Britain. It was eventually outlawed by the Captive Birds Act 1921, but the practice continued to be popular in Europe and the US.

Even though the sport fell out of favour in Britain, a considerable number of live pigeon guns were built for export well after the 1921 Act. Competitors knew of the quality of British pigeon guns and in a sport driven by gambling and high prize money, reliability was essential.

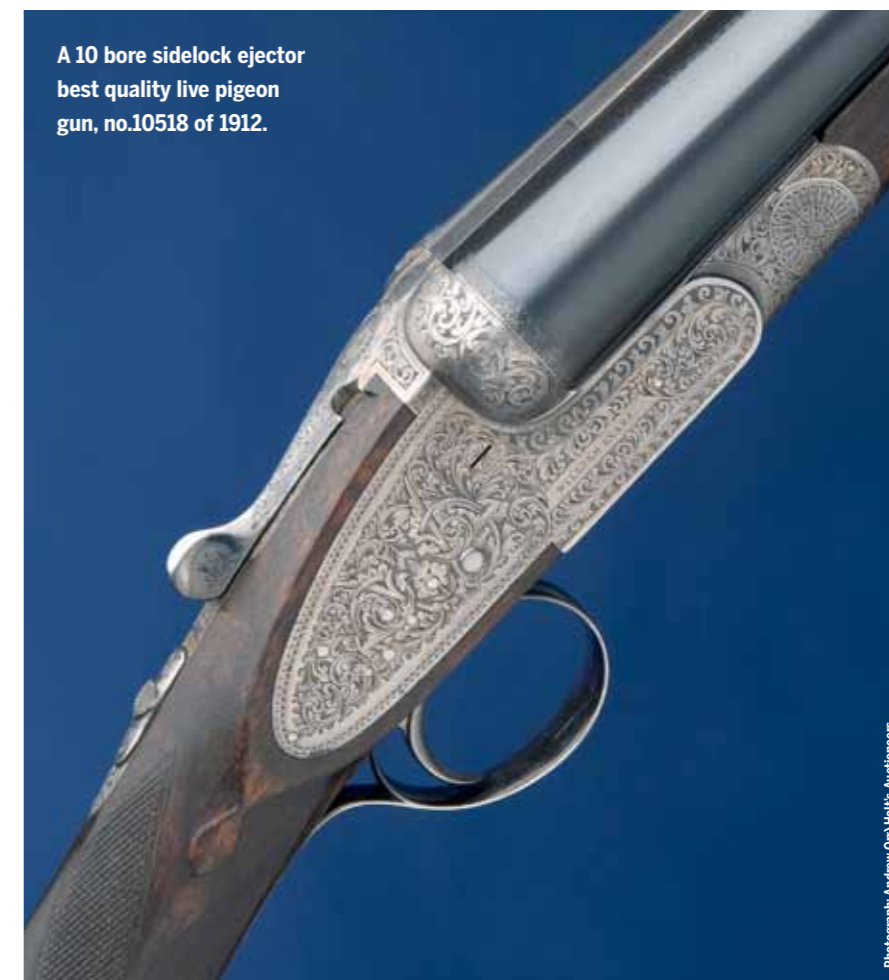
The gun pictured on the right is a 10 bore (2 $\frac{7}{8}$ -inch) sidelock ejector no. 10518, constructed in 1912. It is of the very highest quality. The

**“The gun weighs in at 8lbs 2oz – a William Evans gun at its very best.”**

30-inch barrels have a raised matt rib and are engraved with the words “William Evans, Maker to HRH The Duke Of Connaught, 63 Pall Mall, St James's, London”. Both barrels are bored extra full choke.

A treble grip helps lock the action and a non-selective single trigger is fitted. The lockplates and action are carved with acanthus scrollwork and foliage. This live pigeon gun weighs in at 8lbs 2oz and is an example of an William Evans creation at its very best. ■

A 10 bore sidelock ejector best quality live pigeon gun, no.10518 of 1912.



Photograph: Andrew Orr-Vall's Auctioneers

were not destroyed. The company re-located to 67a St. James's Street, the address of the firm today.

Unlike other gunmakers, William Evans appeared to weather the inter-war economic slump and post-war dislocation quite well. One reason was that it didn't concentrate on the very best guns, demand for which was severely curtailed after the Second World War. Instead it specialised in second-hand guns and rifles, something that other companies felt was beneath them. However, the second-hand market flourished as many war widows sold off their husband's guns.

Until the 1980s, William Evans was managed by three generations of the Dolden family. In the 1980s it was taken over by Lord Ramsey.

Today the business of William Evans thrives at 67a St. James's Street selling all manner of shotguns, rifles and accessories. Its best sidelock ejector retails at £42,000 plus VAT and it has recently introduced two new models, the Pall Mall side-by-side at £15,000 and the St James's, an O/U at £10,000. In addition it stocks an extensive array of second hand guns and rifles. 🦅

[www.williamevans.com](http://www.williamevans.com)

“Today the business of William Evans thrives at 67a St. James's Street, London, selling all manner of shotguns, rifles and accessories”

## Timeline

Pre-1871: William Evans works for James Purdey	1871-1883: Works for Holland & Holland	1883: Sets up business at 95a Buckingham Palace Rd	1885: Firm moves to 4 Holden Terrace, London	1888: Relocates to 4 Pall Mall Place, London	1896: Moves to 63 Pall Mall	1944: Firm is bombed out during The Blitz	1944: Relocates to 67a St James's Street	1945: Thrives through sale of second-hand guns	1980s: Firm taken over by Lord Ramsey
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