

The History of Air Guns

Air guns represent the oldest pneumatic technology, having existed since the 15th century. At that time, they had compelling advantages over the primitive firearms of the day. For example, air guns could be fired in wet weather and rain (unlike matchlock muskets) and with greater speed than muzzle-loading guns. Moreover, they were quieter than a firearm of similar caliber, had no muzzle flash, and were completely smokeless, thus not disclosing the shooter's position. Black powder muskets of the 18th and 19th century produced huge volumes of dense smoke when fired, a disadvantage compared to air rifles.

At the time, air guns posed a serious alternative to powder weapons. Although much more expensive, they were generally far superior. Air reservoirs had evolved with increasing technology, thereby improving the charge capacity while minimizing any possibility of bursting. Similarly, improvements in valve designs began to create well-sealed chambers.

During this period, France, Austria and other nations had special sniper detachments using air rifles. The Austrian 1780 model was named *Windbüchse* (literally "wind rifle" in German). The gun was developed in 1778 or 1779^[1] by the Tyrolese watchmaker, mechanic and gunsmith Bartholomäus Girandoni (1744-1799) and is sometimes referred to as the Girandoni Air Rifle or Girandoni air gun in literature (the name is also spelled "Girandony" or "Giradoni")^[2] or "Girardoni".^[3] The *Windbüchse* was about 4 ft (1.2 m) long and weighed 10 pounds (4.5 kg), which was about the same size and mass as a conventional musket. The air reservoir was a removable, club-shaped butt. The *Windbüchse* carried twenty .51 in (13 mm) lead balls in a tubular magazine. A skilled shooter could fire off one magazine in about thirty seconds, which was a fearsome rate of fire compared to a muzzle loader. A shot from this air gun could penetrate a one-inch wooden board at a hundred paces, an effect roughly equal to that of a modern 9 mm or .45 caliber pistol.

Around 1820, the Japanese inventor Kunitomo Ikkansai developed various manufacturing methods for guns, and also created an air gun based on the study of Western knowledge ("rangaku") acquired from the Dutch in Dejima.

Air guns appear throughout other periods of history. The celebrated expedition headed by Lewis and Clark (1804) reportedly carried a .42 in (10 mm) reservoir air gun, believed to be produced by Girandoni. It held 22 round balls in a tubular magazine mounted on the side of the barrel. The butt stock served as the air reservoir and had a working pressure of 800 PSI. The rifle was said to be capable of 22 aimed shots in one minute.

During the 1890s, air rifles were used in Birmingham, England, for competitive target shooting. Matches were held in public houses, which sponsored shooting teams. Prizes, such as a leg of mutton for the winning team, were paid for by the losing team. The sport became so popular that just after the turn of the 19th century, a National Air Rifle Association was created. During this time over 4000 air rifle clubs and associations existed across Britain, many of them in Birmingham. During this time, the air gun was associated with poaching because it could deliver a shot without a significant report.

In some countries, air guns are still classified as firearms, and as such it may be illegal to discharge them in residential areas. Air guns can be highly accurate and are used in target shooting events at the Olympic Games, governed by the International Shooting Sport Federation (ISSF).

Bibliography

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