

WORCESTER NORTON SHOOTING CLUB

BLACK POWDER REVOLVER SHOOTING

Following the Dunblane tragedy the private ownership of handguns in the UK was banned, save for 3 exceptions as below and genuine (non firing) antiques:

LBR's (long barrel revolvers). These are cartridge firing revolvers in calibres ranging from .22 to .45ACP. They have, as the name suggests, extremely long barrels and, in addition, a permanently fixed arm brace extending rearwards from the grip. Very expensive to buy - over £600 new.

Section 7 handguns. These are historic firearms and may only be stored, and used, on specially licensed ranges. (WNSC is not licensed for these at present).

Black powder revolvers. Cap and ball (as they're commonly known) revolvers can be privately owned on FAC, kept at home, and used on any range where allowed by the range safety certificate.

Single shot muzzle loading pistols, either percussion or flintlock, are also allowed on FAC. However, these notes deal with cap and ball revolvers only as they're by far the most popular form of BP pistol shooting at Worcester Norton and elsewhere.

So, if you want to shoot handguns, be it just for fun or in competitions, a BP revolver is the logical choice. Be warned though, if you're the type who simply wants to shoot round after round down range quickly this isn't for you. Loading is slow and much more maintenance (cleaning) effort is required than for a cartridge firing gun.

On the other hand, if you want to expand your shooting horizons, enjoy a bit of tinkering and have some good fun shooting the guns of yesteryear BP may well be the way to go. The bonus is it doesn't cost a great deal either - pistols, powder and so on are relatively cheap compared to other forms of shooting.

The guns.

BP revolvers are, primarily, of the American Civil War era - the mid to late 1800's. Only the seriously rich would own and shoot an original from this period and most of the pistols you'll see used are reproductions. Most are made in Italy and, by and large, they're faithful copies of the originals, warts and all. The pistol pictured (owned by the author) is a Pietta Remington Texas. The calibre is .44, the cylinder holds 6 rounds and it has a 6" rifled barrel. One of these, new, is currently just £120. Second-hand price, for a gun like this, in good condition, is around £80. The Henry Krank advertisement in Gun Mart magazine is a good place to look for more information on prices for new BP handguns. Check the Guntrader web site for second-hans bargains.



Other makes are available of course, as are different finishes - plain blue (or black), stainless steel and so on. Whilst .44" is the most popular calibre many are available in .36" too and some in .45". As with everything, "you pays your money and takes your choice".

Equipment.

As well as the gun, and of course powder, wads, balls etc. there are some basic items that you **must** have for BP revolver shooting. The prices shown are approximate, for your guidance only.

Powder flask, from around £12. Pistol case, from around £10 in ABS. Nipple key, around £5. Safety glasses, around £4 for a set from a DIY store. Cleaning equipment - budget on around £10 to start.

Powder.

Black powder is an explosive and needs careful handling. No smoking is allowed on ranges where BP is in use. No ferrous metal 'tools' should be used when loading either, to avoid the chance of sparks. That's why powder flasks are made of brass. In addition there are special requirements related to the purchase and storage of BP. To buy and then transport it two licenses are required, both free at the moment but that will, inevitably, change. As far as storage is concerned, a wooden box to very specific dimensions has to be made or purchased.

Because of the hassle with licensing and special storage requirements more & more shooters are using black powder substitutes. For these there are no licenses required. Popular brands are Pyrodex and Triple Seven.

Apart from these considerations, "real" black powder leaves, when fired, large amounts of residue. This residue is both highly corrosive and sets into a hard 'crust' if it get the least bit damp. The substitutes also produce residue, but it's softer, less corrosive, there's less of it and it's MUCH easier to remove when cleaning the gun.

Loading routine.

The gun is loaded by setting it to half cock (so the cylinder is free to rotate) and then following this sequence for each of the 'chambers':-

Add powder charge, either from a flask or from a phial. Powder flasks dispense a set load of powder, specific to the calibre of your gun. Phials contain charges the shooter pre-weighed to his own requirements. Phials are used to ensure consistency in competition events and because at some ranges loading from flasks is forbidden. Powder flasks are regarded by some as explosion risks.

After adding the powder charge a felt wad is placed over it and lightly pressed into place. An old biro (plastic) is useful to ensure the wad stays square to the chamber.

Next comes, for some, a measured dose of filler. This is simply used to take up spare space and bring the ball (when finally added) as close to the mouth of the cylinder as possible. The idea is to minimise the jump between cylinder mouth and barrel throat. The author uses semolina as a filler and an empty 9mm brass case as a measure. Finally the ball is put in place. These come in various diameters and for a .44 revolver both .451 and .454 balls are common. The idea is that the ball is a very tight fit in the cylinder. When the cylinder, with ball resting in its mouth is rotated so that the chamber being worked on is lined up with the under barrel ramming lever and the lever is used to firmly seat the ball a fair pressure is required and a thin sliver of lead is shaved off the ball.

Once all six chambers have been loaded with powder, wad, filler (if used) and ball a small amount of grease is applied to the front (ball end) of each. This is to ensure that there is no possibility of a flash over, when shooting, leading to what's known as a chain fire.

To complete the loading routine a percussion cap is placed on each nipple and seated firmly in place. Most shooters crimp (lightly squeeze the open end) of their caps before fitting. This is to ensure they're held tightly in place and do not drop off when the gun recoils on firing.

Running costs.

As has already been said, the cost of a gun and basic essentials is modest in comparison to other shooting disciplines.

"Ammunition" isn't expensive either. A 1lb (7000 grains) tub of Triple Seven FFFG costs £24. 100 felt wads are £5. 100 lead balls are £6.50 and 100 percussion caps £3. Filler (semolina) isn't accounted for here - just "borrow" some from household supplies.

So, based on these figures and the 15 grain powder load used by yours truly the cost per 50 rounds comes out at under £10 - less than a box (50) of .38/.357mag centrefire ammunition. Remember too that you don't use vast quantities of ammunition when black powder shooting - it just isn't like that! In, say, a 1 hour shooting session you'd be unlikely to get through more than 30 rounds.

The downside.

Cleaning! Because of the corrosive nature of the residue left after firing proper cleaning of the gun, as soon as possible after use, is absolutely essential. Simply giving it a spray with WD40 and putting it away will not do. Cleaning involves removing the grips, removing the cylinder and removing the nipples. Then the whole lot (except the grips) needs to be thoroughly flushed with very hot (near boiling) water. Then dry it off, clean the inside of the barrel and the chambers in the cylinder with a brush and LIGHTLY oil everything. Replace the nipples, put the grips back on, wipe the whole thing over with a slightly oily rag and you can put it away until next time. This will do for those using the BP substitutes. If you use "real" black powder the hot water treatment may not suffice and you'll have to invest in some black powder solvent to shift the muck.

What next?

If you're keen to find out more come along and watch of the club competitions, held on the second Sunday of every month. Rifles shoot first, then the pistoleers (pistols at around 11:00). You can see for yourself a variety of guns in action and what kit the shooters use. Ask any questions of them you like - they'll be more than happy to help with information and advice. The web is a great source of information too - have a look at the club site. The links page will take you to the MLAGB pages and a US based site - lots of useful stuff on there.