

The Relentless Rise of the Smaller Bores

Picture: Italian 28 bore O/U. The 28bore has seen by far the largest percentage increase in usage for game shooting.

No one can deny that smaller bore shotguns have made significant inroads into UK game shooting in the past few decades. This is not to say of course that they have never had an enduring presence, albeit a minor one, but that their use was always limited on the one hand to a hard core of experienced individuals using specially built guns and imported US ammunition.

On the other hand smaller bore guns tended to be used by ladies or boys relatively new to the sport, with in the main, relatively lightweight side by sides with the older traditional 2½ inch game loadings.

Traditional British smaller bore loads for 2½ inch (65mm) chambers:

16bore, 15/16oz (26.5gm) & 7/8oz (25gm),

20bore, 3/4oz (21.5gm) & 13/16oz (23gm)

28bore, 9/16oz (16gm),

.410 bore, 7/16oz (12.5gm)

The 16 and 20bores had a fairly consistent year on year following, with the 28 bore probably the most obscure small bore gun in the country, mainly because on paper at least, the 28 bore seemed to have little more to offer over the .410 bore.

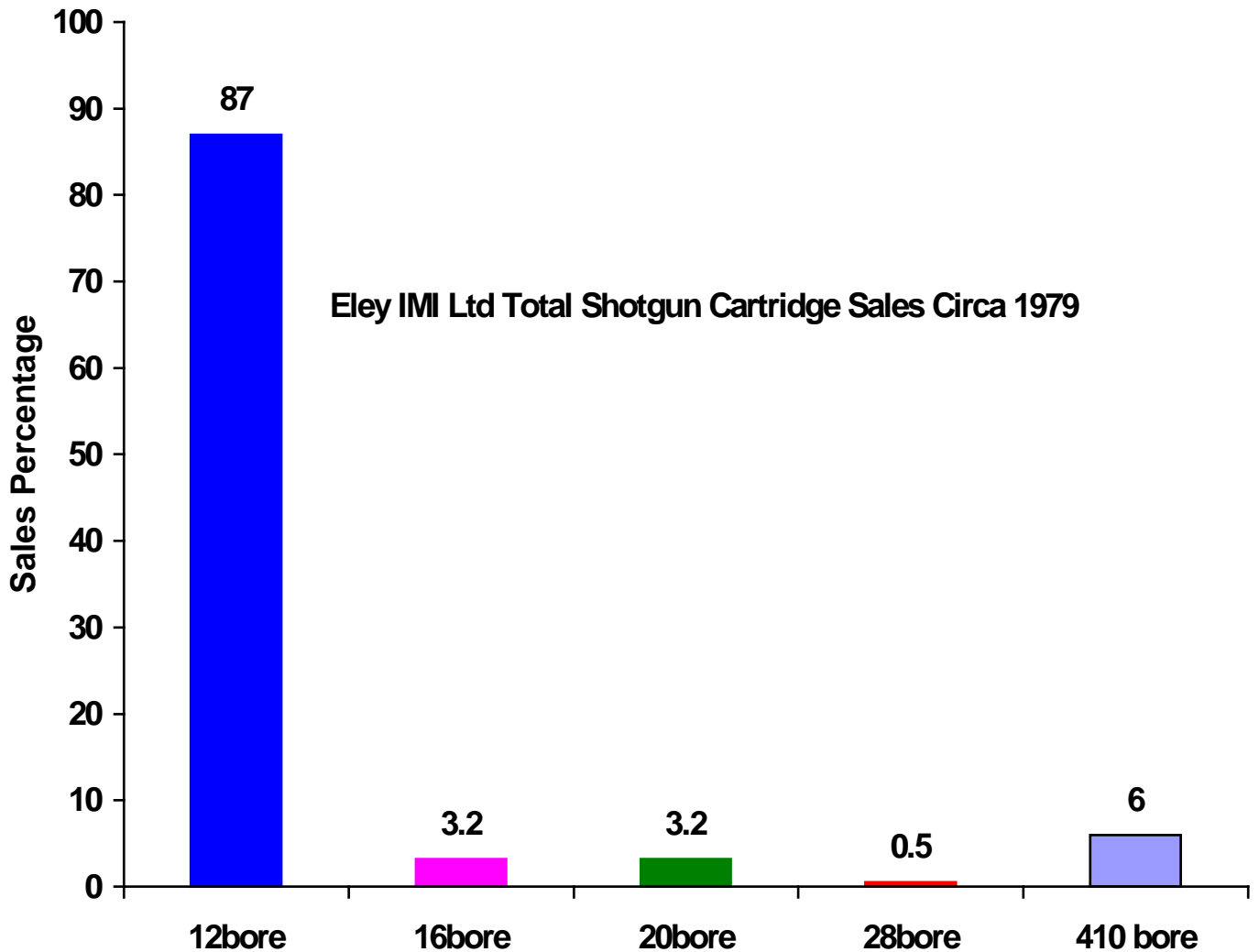
This was especially the case when the 9/16oz (16gm) loading of the British 28 bore cartridge was apparently eclipsed by the .410 3 inch extra long cartridge with its heavier 5/8oz (18gm) shot load.

However this view was flawed, because the much longer shot column of the .410 3inch cartridge together with the generally higher breech pressures that accompanied it, was a great destructor of the shot pellets located at the base of the charge. This made for inferior patterns with considerable clumps of compression-welded pellets.

The 28bore was in a very different league, as the 1/16oz reduction in payload was vastly compensated by the exemplary delivery of the pellets at the pattern plate. Those tiny minority of shots that used them, very quickly respected their extraordinary ability to throw patterns of the most consistent nature, seemingly out of all proportion to their quoted shot weight.

The situation pertaining to the general spread of shotgun ammunition consumption is perhaps the best indicator of the remarkable progress of the smaller bore gun, especially the 20bore.

For historical perspective, using the circa 1979 figures furnished by the then Eley (IMI) company, the sub 12bore cartridge sales were not exactly going to set the world alight!



16bore: 3.2% 20bore: 3.2% 28bore: 0.5% .410 bore: 6% (12bore: 87%)

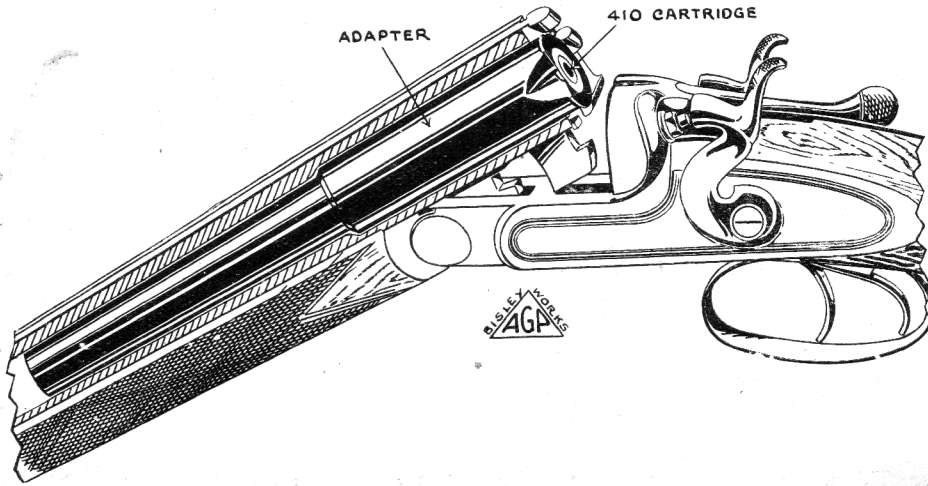
The total for the 12bore of course also includes cartridges for clay pigeon shooting, which is a factor that must be considered.

The relatively high numbers for the .410 bore might be surprising to some, being virtually double that of the 16 and 20bores combined, but it must be appreciated that there were relatively large numbers of these guns* in use but they were used almost exclusively for vermin control.

*.410 adapters were also popular for vermin shooting, whereby a relatively short length of .410 bore chambered barrel insert was machined to fit into a 12bore chamber and barrel.

So the .410 was a popular vermin tool, but for game shooting at least, the other sub 12bore guns were somewhat thin on the ground.

**PARKER'S
·410 CARTRIDGE ADAPTER FOR SHOT GUNS.**



As will be seen from the illustration the adapter consists of a single piece of barrel 6" in length, chambered for the .410 cartridge with a groove for extracting the case, and at the other end tapered for lightness.

It is chambered for the long (2½") cartridge, and excellent patterns are attainable at upwards of 15 yards. It weighs 7 ozs., and can be easily carried in the gun or alternatively in a side pocket, loaded ready to be slipped into the chamber.

For 12 gauge.	List No.	A.S.G. 1.	Price	7/6,	post	4d.
„ 16 „	„ „	A.S.G. 2.	„	10/-	„	4d.

To counter the somewhat bleak earlier sales figures for the smaller bores, Eley Hawk Ltd (the descendent of Eley IMI) have kindly supplied their respective figures for 2009 cartridge sales as percentages.

Apparently the percentage split between the clay pigeon and game loads for the 2009 season 12bore figures is approximately 70/30 in favour of the clay

pigeon loads.

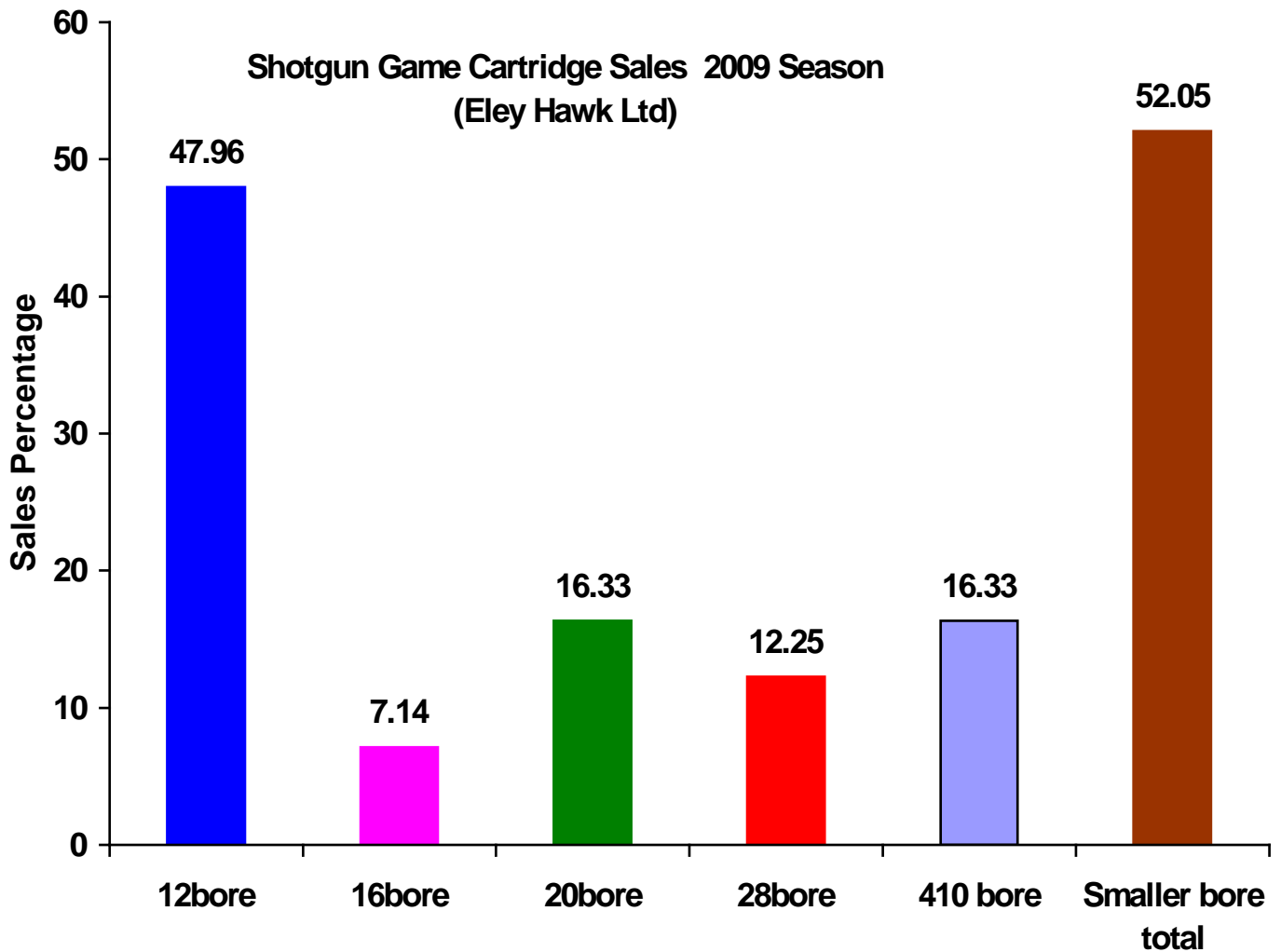
*This overall 12bore figure then drops from 74.5% to 23.5%, when corrected to include only the 12bore game cartridges; a very different set of data.

16bore: 3.5% 20bore: 8% 28bore: 6% .410 bore 8% *(12bore: 23.5%)

**To make more sense of this revised data it can be further represented as interrelated percentages, showing the correlation between each of the bores with game loadings; this is listed as follows:

16bore: 7.14% 20bore: 16.33% 28bore: 12.25% .410 bore 16.33%

**** (12bore: 47.96%)**



There may well be a few discrepancies with small numbers of 20bore clay pigeon loads, but generally speaking,

we can now see that less than half of all of the game loads produced in 2009 by Eley were 12bore cartridges.

Left: relatively small numbers of 20 bore clay target loads are loaded, but generally the 20, 28 and .410 Magnum bores have all enjoyed a boost in popularity for game shooting.

This is indeed a remarkable turn around from the status quo that had the 12bore as the undisputed ruler of the roost.

So smaller bore shotguns are now very popular indeed, being backed



up by their higher overall sales figures when compared to the 12bore. These figures are admittedly only from a single source, but generally smaller bore cartridge (and gun) sales are on the increase, both from UK manufacturers and imported brands.

The new smaller bore fraternity



Picture: (Greener 16 bore hammer gun with early 1970's Grand Prix cartridges) the 16bore soldiers on regardless of the whims of fashion.

The 16bore has marched on much as before, rather akin to a dyed in the wool sportsman that refuses to hang up his boots. There has been a relatively small increase in usage of around 9%, but this is mostly due to the natural wastage of existing guns being supplanted by limited numbers of newer types. Although some new (almost all of them heavier) loads have been furnished for the 16, it largely remains the 'poor man' in the ammunition choice field.

The 20bore as expected, has shown a large increase in usage of 250% over the 29year period, which would correlate exactly with what is seen in the coverts.

Still popular for vermin with the standard cartridge lengths, use of the .410 has also risen, although chiefly with the 3inch magnum version, being used for game shooting in limited numbers.

The really staggering numbers though are for the 28bore, with a 1200% increase!

All of these smaller bores (apart from the .410) have had considerable expansion of their cartridge ranges, producing a much wider choice for the individual shooter.

The general increases in smaller bore gun usage reflect this fact — none more so than with the 28bore. Once limited to 9/16oz (16gm) loads, the choice across the range of manufacturers is wide indeed, going from a light 14gm cartridge, all the way up to the very heavy 28gm loadings.

The 20bore loads have also increased their payloads to 30 and sometimes even 32grams in the 70mm case, but it is the general expansion of choice regarding shot sizes in the older more established 23 to 28gram loads, that have made it a mainstream candidate in the game field.

Smaller bore ammunition

Virtually all British smaller bore game loads are now loaded in fibre wad format, with most shoots firmly insisting that this is so. To be fair the photodegradable plastic wads do eventually degrade, but take their time whilst doing so.

The smaller bore gun has also responded to this demand for non-plastic wads, with most shot loads versions available apart from the very heaviest 28bore (25 to 28gm) and .410 bore (19 to 21gm) variants. This is mainly due to the limitations in strength of the available materials used for plastic cartridge cases.

So we have a greatly expanded range of smaller bore cartridges, mostly being available with fibre wads

And a vibrantly growing number of smaller bore guns in the shooting field.

But there is a very fundamental issue, one that is so important that if it is removed from the equation, it will surely kill off the vast majority of these smaller bore guns — Lead shot pellets.

Simply put, nothing else will do in these smaller bores, without serious deficiencies in pattern, penetrative power and in affordability.

The Non-Lead Options

16bore: as the vast majority of the older 16bore game guns only have 2.5 inch chambers, the only realistic possibilities are Bismuth or ITM .

20Bore: Only the 3inch magnum cartridges can be used with steel shot, but with strict range limitations due to the restricted pellet counts.

Bismuth or ITM appear to be the only game in town for the 20bore shooter with shorter than 3inch chambers.

28Bore: Only Bismuth or ITM could realistically be used. Reduced shot payloads would be a reality with Bismuth, being limited to a potential maximum of 16 to 21gm* in the 2,3/4inch case (*not currently loaded).

.410 Bore: 16grams of Bismuth in the 3inch magnum case appears to be the only choice.

So from the data supplied the 12bore game gun has been eclipsed by the collective masses of the smaller gauge guns.

The 20bore is assured of its place as a mainstream game gun, a remarkable situation in itself compared with 30 years ago, but snapping hard at its heels we have the meteoric rise of the 28bore!

The .410 magnum has a hard core following and has seen significant growth, but undeniably, the collective arrival of the smaller bore game gun is truly upon us!