

Shooting Japanese matchlock pistols

by Leo Laden

Matchlocks were the first firearms that used a mechanical system to apply fire to the main charge of gunpowder. This was achieved by using a pivoted arm or 'serpentine' that held a source of fire, such as a smouldering piece of cotton or hemp, called a 'slow match' or 'match cord', which was gently lowered into a pan full of very fine priming powder. When this ignited, a flash passed through a hole (touch hole or vent), setting off the main charge and thus, expelling a lead ball in the general direction of the target.

Matchlocks became widely used in Europe and parts of Asia and Africa in the 15th to 16th centuries and were introduced to Japan in the 1540s by Portuguese traders. The Japanese liked what they saw and quickly set up workshops to make copies of these amazing new inventions.

Most of the matchlocks made were longarms, full-stocked smoothbore muskets without any suggestion of shoulder stocks, relying on a curved cheek-held semi-pistol grip or, as they are now affectionately known, 'hockey sticks'. Small versions of pistols were also made devoid of pistol grips, as we know them, with the pistols instead being



Two modern replica Japanese matchlock pistols circa 1650.

virtually straight and very difficult to aim.

The situation remained unchanged for several hundred years and while guns in Europe evolved through the muzzleloading flintlock, percussion and then breechloading eras, in Japan, noth-

ing changed until the introduction of European breechloading cartridge rifles in the middle of the 19th century.

It must be remembered that matchlocks were essentially close-range smoothbore combat weapons and the fact that we use them with such good results as target arms is in itself quite remarkable.

To load the Japanese matchlock pistol:

1. Light the match cord and place the glowing end in a safety container. A weighted empty softdrink can does very nicely.
2. Put the vent pick in the touch hole.
3. Pour a measured charge of gunpowder down the barrel. Smoothbore pistols need a large powder charge to perform efficiently. I use 40 grains of 4F in my .45-calibre matchlock pistol.
4. Place a lubricated linen patch on the muzzle and place a correct-size lead ball in the centre.
5. Ram the ball into the push using a short starter and then push it home using a longer ramrod.



The gear needed to shoot a matchlock pistol consisting of a measured charge of 4F gunpowder (fatter tube), a quantity of very fine priming powder (thinner tube), lined patch and lead round balls, a touch hole or vent pick, a short starter and ramrod, a quantity of match cord and matches.



6. Remove the vent pick, open the pan cover and pour a small amount of very fine priming powder into the pan and close the cover. Blow off any excess powder.
7. Pull the serpentine back into the cocked position and gently place the glowing match cord into the jaws or tube holder, making sure that about 0.5" of glowing cord protrudes beyond the end of the serpentine. The match can be anchored using small slivers of wood or a transverse spike fitting through a conveniently placed hole. Without this, the blast from the touch hole can blow the cord away or end up inside your shirt collar!
8. Open the pan cover, raise the pistol, aim it and gently squeeze the trigger. The glowing end of the match will gently descend into the priming powder, which will ignite with a flash and set off the main charge.
9. In most cases, this is what happens and the ignition time is instant - as fast as a centre-fire rifle.



Although writers of history frequently comment on the faults of matchlocks, in my experience, they work really well and are probably more reliable than flintlocks. Stories about the match going out, the wind blowing the priming away, the rain, mist and damp spoiling the priming powder are all quite true and while this might have been the case in England and Europe, in Western Australia's sunny, dry climate, matchlocks thrive.

Sometimes, the glowing match descends and nothing happens - this is a misfire. There is no need to panic, but it is essential that you keep the pistol pointing safely uprange for at least 60 seconds. I have had delays of up to 20 seconds and although this is quite uncommon, it can happen. The riming might flash, but fail to ignite the main charge - a flash in the pan - but, in most cases, the pistol fires as expected. Should this happen,



Pushing the ball down into the breech end with a ramrod.

Using the short starter to ram home the lead ball sitting on the lubricated patch.



Placing the vent pick in the touch hole.



Pouring the measured gunpowder charge into the barrel.

you should wait for at least 60 seconds, with the pistol again pointing safely uprange. Then, you should remove the match cord, re-prime the pan and try again.

It is, of course, important that the glowing match makes contact with the priming powder gently, as a hard 'thump' would probably stub the end out and that is why most Japanese matchlock pistols have a very weak mainspring. These are usually a long 'U'-shaped externally mounted brass spring or an internal very gentle steel coil spring.

The main disadvantage of matchlocks was that they could not be carried ready for instant use. While later muzzleloaders had what is called a 'half-cock' or safety position in their locks and firing sequence, this is not the case with matchlocks. Any muzzleloading firearm in the half-cock position just needs the hammer pulled right back

into the full-cock position and then it can be fired immediately. With a matchlock, even though it might be loaded and primed, the match has to be taken out of its container or holder and if it is still glowing, it should be fixed into the serpentine's jaws prior to shooting. A quick shot is therefore impossible, but that is just the way things were.

Most matchlock shooters make their own match cord. I have found that venetian blind cotton cord is just the right size for my pistol and this is soaked in a very weak solution of potassium nitrate (salt-

Glowing the match cord in place with the pan cover open. Note there is no priming powder in the pan, as a safety precaution when doing close-up photography.

petre). A teaspoonful of crystals in 1-litre of water works beautifully and reference books that mention using a saturated solution of potassium nitrate are just plain wrong. Indeed, too much potassium nitrate in the cord would make it sparkle, with a chance that an errant spark could ignite the priming powder prematurely and waste a shot! ■



Filling the priming pan with very fine priming powder.

AT THE 2008 World Muzzleloading Championships, which were contested at the SSAA Monarto Range in South Australia in August, Japanese matchlock pistols were used in the Tanzutsu event. The competition is out of a possible 100 points and is a 25m Precision event at the International 50m Slow Fire target. As with all muzzleloading events, it is 13 shots with the top 10 to count. There is no pre-match practice.

The medal winners from the 2008 Championships, along with the current world records, are:

Medals	Tanzutsu originals	Tanzutsu replicas
Gold	80 (Great Britain)	91 (Spain)
Silver	79 (Great Britain)	90 (France)
Bronze	73 (Great Britain)	90 (Germany)
World records	86 (Germany, 2006)	94 (Spain, 2004)

Competition Pistols

Make your mark with Browning

Browning pistols give you the confidence you need to join the winners circle.

The same care and attention that goes into the design and manufacture of Browning long arms is standard issue on our pistol range.

When the competition is fierce, you can rely on Browning pistols to help edge out the competition. From our famous Buckmark rimfire models through to the mighty Hi Power series, Browning design, reliability and workmanship means the pursuit of your target is never compromised.



Browning Pistols proudly distributed by Winchester Australia
Don't settle for second best contact your local Winchester Dealer or Winchester
W winchesteraustralia.com.au or E sales@olin.com.au. **Let Browning put you on target**

Winchester Australia, PO Box 776, Geelong Vic Australia 3220


WINCHESTER
AUSTRALIA
for the legend in you

WDDA_5615_RFA