

“That Yankee rifle you can load



Pull a Henry rifle out of your gun case and you immediately become the centre of attention at your club.

Those who know what it is are full of admiration while those who don't are full of curiosity. Back in 1860 the originals must have commanded the same attention when introduced to men whose experience with long guns was mainly restricted to single shot muzzle loaders. Surviving examples of those nineteenth century Henrys are now mostly in large collections or museums, although they occasionally crop up in auctions, albeit at the price of a car! Fortunately, fans of the Henry rifle, among whose number I count myself, can own a modern centre fire reproduction courtesy of Uberti of Italy.

Birth of the Winchester

When the Volcanic Repeating Arms Company, brainchild of Horace Smith and Daniel Wesson, became insolvent in 1857, the assets of the company were sold to one of its major shareholders, shirtmaker Oliver F. Winchester. The manufacturing facility was moved to Connecticut and reborn as the New Haven Arms Company with Winchester at its head.

Derek Landers gets his hands on a variation of Uberti's recreation of the famed Henry rifle

Although the basic design of the Volcanic weapons was quite sound, its weakness was in the “rocket ball” ammunition, which was very low powered and suffered from ignition problems. Oliver Winchester's factory superintendent, Tyler Henry, was assigned the task of turning the Volcanic into a successful weapon and his attention turned to its weak link, the ammunition. Around this

time the self contained metallic cartridges were in their infancy and Henry came up with a .44 calibre version for use in a slightly modified Volcanic action. The barrel was increased from its present .41 calibre and the bolt was redesigned with a twin firing pin and spring steel extractor. He was granted a patent for his alterations on October 16th, 1860 and thus was born the first practical repeating rifle, although

still quite low powered by today's standards. Initial ammunition used a pointed, 216 grain bullet and twenty six grains of powder. Performance was improved later by decreasing the weight of the bullet to 200 grains. Production of the rifle began in 1861 and the following year the flat pointed bullet was introduced.

Henry's patent was assigned to Winchester without payment and neither did he receive any financial inducement for his invention. He chose instead to forego his \$1,500 a year salary in exchange for a contract to manufacture 5,000 rifles using the machinery of the New Haven Arms Company. Buying the materials and paying the workforce himself, he then sold the rifles back to the company and any profits were his. This proved to be sound judgement for over the five years that it took to complete the contract he received \$15,000, twice what he would have taken in wages over the same period. Both the rifle and the cartridge bore Henry's name, with the ammunition having an 'H' head stamp. Benjamin Tyler Henry died in New Haven, Connecticut on June 8th, 1898.



Rear ladder sight graduated to 800 yards



Brass butt plate and compartment for a sectional cleaning rod (not supplied)

Brass frame

A small number (less than 100 are known today) of early rifles

on Sunday and shoot all week”



had iron frames and butt plates but the majority of the 14,000 or so examples produced had the familiar 'brass' frame. In 1866 Nelson King received a patent for improvements to the loading arrangement of the Henry and the first rifle to bear the Winchester name, the Model 1866, was born.

There is some conjecture as to whether or not the Henry was commercially produced with a barrel length any other than the standard twenty four inches. In his book* on the subject, Les Quick refers to suggestions that some short barrelled (18" to 21") Henrys were produced as prototypes for military evaluation but his survey "revealed no evidence of company advertising of, or any historical references to, Henry carbines ever entering standard production". As we have seen with other reproductions of nineteenth century American firearms, some of today's variants are driven by the Italian designers' fancies or by market demands. The full length Uberti Henry rifle is certainly a heavy weapon and those Cowboy Action Shooting (CAS) competitors who favour the design but want something a little more suited to fast handling may well be drawn to this shorter barrel version, particularly as it will still hold the eight cartridges generally used in a stage. This

"The Uberti Henry carbine – technically maybe not historically correct, but still a good 'generic' shorter version of the Henry rifle – and possibly more suitable for CAS"

latter group of shooters are also doubtless responsible for this and other reproduction lever guns being made today in .45 Colt (the chambering for the subject rifle), a cartridge not used in nineteenth century rifles, but making a suitable match for the many revolvers used in this calibre today. Sadly this "two guns – one cartridge" permutation is no longer a factor for UK shooters, due to the handgun ban.

Smooth operator

As I have come to expect with Uberti firearms, the fit and finish on this example are first class.

The woodwork has the standard high gloss red/brown finish (you either hate it or love it) and the blue/black on the barrel and magazine assembly is very deep. All edges are nice and sharp, and the parts fit together well. The receiver, butt plate, cartridge follower and front sight are plain brass with the rear sight – a ladder arrangement graduated to 800 yards - and all screws being black. The hammer and lever have a case-hardened finish.

Operation of the Henry is very smooth right out of the box and I know from experience that it gets even better with a little

use as any sharp edges on the brass cartridge lifter and interior of the brass frame soon smooth themselves out. The lightweight bolt and moderate strength spring also contribute to making this a fast operator. This light bolt, and the toggle-link internals shared with the Winchester 1866 and 1873 models, make this relatively weak action suitable for what we term toady as "pistol calibre" ammunition. Out of this trio only the 1873 is chambered for magnum calibres, the brass frames being deemed a little too frail.

Loading up

The first thing that the uninitiated will ask, seeing there is no loading gate on the side of the frame, is "How do you load it?" The barrel and magazine tube are made from one piece of steel apart from the five inches at the muzzle end which is a separate collar. Turning the rifle upside down you will notice a slot running the length of the magazine, inside which is a coil spring. A brass button at the breech end slides up this slot





The full length version of the Uberti Henry rifle

towards the muzzle, compressing the spring as you go. When you reach the collar swing the button to the left and the edge of the tube prevents it from returning to its rest position. It is here you may experience the sharp edges referred to earlier as the shoulder of the tube can very easily draw blood if it catches your thumb. A small file will round off the corner just enough to prevent this. At this point the ammunition is loaded into the tube; please do not hold the rifle in a vertical position and drop the cartridges in. Keep the tube just above the horizontal position and ease them in. When the required amount has been loaded turn the brass button back to line up with the slot and gently ease it down until it touches the first cartridge. The magazine spring is quite strong and allowing it to return under its own power has been known to detonate one or more cartridges in the magazine. It is imperative that you use a flat-nosed bullet in these tube magazine rifles, with the nose of the bullet larger than the primer and all primers seated fully home to minimise the chance of this occurrence.

Cartridge considerations

Pre-1997 single action shooters may still remember their favourite loads for the .45 Colt cartridge, while those new to this round will have to find their own preference, and many options can be found in the various reloading manuals supplied by the powder manufacturers.

For the purpose of this review I chose a mid-range combination of a 250-grain RNFP bullet propelled by 8.4

grains of Vihtavuori Tin Star powder, no slouch but with easily controllable recoil in this carbine. The very basic sight arrangement does not make for a tack driving weapon but CAS shooters will find this carbine is capable of doing the job and that 6-inch shorter barrel makes it that bit more manageable than its big brother. It will comfortably put every shot on to a six-inch paper plate at twenty five yards shooting against the clock.

Another point to remember with the Henry is that as you eject each empty case another cartridge enters the lifter and that little brass button is easing nearer to the breech. Make sure there is a gap between your fore finger and thumb where you hold the barrel so that the button can slide through. If you are using the longer barrel and only eight rounds, you can put an appropriate length of wood dowel in the magazine after the last cartridge – this stops the button from making contact with your hand. Just remember to count your shots as you do not want to rack that lever hard with the dowel in the lifter!

Shoot all day

The action on this rifle is very simple and there is really nothing to go wrong so if your ammunition is up to standard the Uberti will shoot all day without any problems. Should you be unfortunate enough to have an internal breakage after the guarantee expires then any repairs are an easy DIY job if you buy the parts. Check out the Henry Krank catalogue for the variations of the Uberti Henry that are available. **GM**



Collar shown in the loading position



Collar and its retainer removed from the barrel



Rounding off the left corner of the tube may save you some bloodshed

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATION

Make	Uberti
Model	Henry Carbine (Trapper)
Calibre	.45 Colt
Barrel length	18 1/4"
O/all length	37 3/4"
Weight	8 1/4lbs
Price	£978.00
Distributor	Henry Krank (0113 2569163) www.henrykrank.com
Recommended reading	The Story of Benjamin Tyler Henry and his Famed Repeating rifle ISBN 978-1-882824-33-5