



English Provincial Makers' Marks

New Thoughts on Gun Barrel Markings of 18th and 19th Century British Firearms

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Introduction

In this article we explore the subject of provincial makers' marks, i.e., those struck by gunmakers who were not members of the London Gunmakers Company. Despite numerous publications over the past 50 years covering the history of British firearms, little or no work has been done on provincial marks and the whole subject remains somewhat obscure. The fundamental question, of course, is whether these marks were struck merely to identify the maker of the piece or whether they also signified that the item had actually passed a proof test successfully.

Prior to the Gun Barrel Act of 1813, there were no national regulations governing the manufacture and proof of gun barrels throughout Britain as a whole. However, gunmaking in London had been regulated much earlier.

London

From the 16th century onwards, gunmakers in London usually belonged to one of two trade guilds or companies, the Armourers or the Blacksmiths. These companies competed, often acrimoniously, for influence and control over individual craftsmen in the city. After a period of increasing tension between the two early in the 17th century, a new organisation, the London Gunmakers Company, was established by Royal Charter in 1637. The company was empowered to oversee all gunmakers working in London and the surrounding area within 10 miles and to impose tight rules and regulations, including fines for non-compliance. Particular attention was given to quality control, specifically the proof testing of barrels, which were then to be stamped with the company's mark, a Crowned GP and V. It is arguable whether the major motivation for the introduction of these arrangements was to protect the public or to safeguard the London gunmakers' monopoly.

During this period, London had become renowned for producing high quality firearms. This reputation was enhanced by the influx of fine craftsmen from many areas of Europe. They had gravitated to London, often as a result of religious persecution, culminating in the revocation of the Edict of Nantes by Louis XIV in 1685, which discriminated against French Protestants. Consequently, London became established as a centre for highly skilled artisans in many crafts, including gunmakers, gold and silver smiths and watch and clock makers.

Provincial makers

Outside London, things were very different. While some provincial cities imposed controls on tradesmen (albeit not in Birmingham), these local regulations usually concerned training and trading. Overall, there was no control applied to quality and therefore it is extremely likely that sub-standard gun barrels were produced, either by accident or deliberately in an attempt to cut costs.

During the Civil War, between 1643 and 1646, Charles I and his court moved to Oxford, accompanied by his gunmaker, Jonadab Holloway. Prince Rupert, also at Oxford during this period, employed the services of the famous gunmaker Harman Barne, who later worked for the Prince at Bristol. The impact of these events may perhaps have helped to introduce highly skilled



gunmaking from London to the provinces. From the very few surviving examples of their work, it is clear that there were a few extremely talented gunmakers working in various parts of the British Isles from the second half of the 17th century onwards.

Of particular note are Richard Hewse of Wootton Bassett (active c1650s to c1670), William Upton, his son and grandson, of Oxford (active 1660s to 1710), Nicholas Paris Senior of Warwick, (active c1680 to 1716), and Henry Ellis of Doncaster, (active c1690 to 1722). The few surviving examples of their work are of outstanding quality, equal to anything produced in London, demonstrating the very high standards reached by these early provincial gunmakers.

However, it is significant that almost none of their guns bear any proof marks. Only two pieces, one by Ellis and one by Paris, have been found with London marks (see "English Provincial Gunmaking 1680-1720" by A. Darling 1973 & "Great British Gunmakers 1540-1740" by W.K.Neal & D.Back, Norwich 1984). This would suggest that, as a rule, provincial firearms of this period were not formally proved and marked as such.

By 1700, even though a few provincial gunmakers were capable of making fine firearms, it would seem that the gentry as a whole preferred London-made guns. However, there were notable exceptions such as Lord Leigh of Warwick who patronised Nicholas Paris, the Marquis of Rockingham (Henry Ellis) and later, William Palling of Brownhill (Thomas Richards of Birmingham).

Later on in the 18th century, it is probable that the strict control of quality and the proof marking of London-made guns by the London Gunmakers Company encouraged provincial makers to prove their own products and mark them as such. Although fashions often took some time to work through to the provinces, the fact that a gun bore proof marks indicated quality and reliability and this was what customers came to want and expect.

Two of the earliest private provincial marks found during this study are those of the gunmakers Richard Wilding and son of Shrewsbury, and that of Joseph Farmer of Birmingham. A single pistol signed R. Farmer dating to c1715 was also noted (Figures 1-3).



Figure 1 a & b – A sporting gun by Richard Wilding of Shrewsbury, c1715, the barrel stamped with the letter P within an oval together with a crowned W and crowned RW
(Dudmaston House: DUD/M/20 - National Trust)



Figure 2a & b - A holster pistol by Joseph Farmer of Birmingham, c1715-20, the barrel stamped with the letter P within a shield



Figures 3a & b - A pocket pistol by R. Farmer, c1715 the barrel stamped with the letter P within an oval





The style of the weapons bearing these marks indicates a date of around 1710 to 1720. Whether the marks were struck by the gunmakers themselves or at a private proof house, possibly in Birmingham, is uncertain. In the case of Wilding and Farmer, the form of the stamps suggests that these were their own individual marks. Again, it is impossible to tell whether the mark merely identified the maker or that it signified that the barrel had passed a specific proof test.

Further examples of early English provincial marks are recorded in Neal & Back's book "Great British Gunmakers 1540-1740". They include a pair of pistols stamped with oval marks, crowned P & V and a makers' mark, by Cornforth c1715, p.389 and a pair with similar marks by D. Newton c1715, pp.380-2. Several firearms by Thomas Richards dated between 1749 & 50 are shown in the companion volume "Great British Gunmakers 1740-1790", pp.119-120, bearing the crowned P & V and his own T.R mark.

As the 18th century progressed, private proof marks became more common. The usual marks are a crowned P and V contained within an oval (occasionally without the crown). Their similarity to the proof marks of the London Gunmakers Company suggests that this was an attempt to demonstrate that their barrels were properly constructed and proof tested and thus just as good as the London product. The London gunmakers objected most strongly to this practice and confiscated any examples found in the city and its environs as well as fining the people concerned. In 1717, the Gunmakers Company offered a 5 guinea reward in the London Gazette for information concerning the use of "false or counterfeit stamps in imitation of ye sd company's mark" ("Dictionary of London Gunmakers 1350-1850", H.L.Blackmore 1985, p.22).

Figure 4 - A pistol by J.Pendril, c1730,
the barrel stamped P & V within ovals



Figures 5a & b - A rifled turn-off pistol, c1740,
by William Hawkes, Oxford (active c1730- c1756).





Figures 6a & b - A pocket pistol by J. Warren, c1740-50



Figures 7a & b - A pocket pistol by Samuel Newton, Nottingham, c1750



Figure 8 - From a sporting gun by Edward Newton, c1750, the barrel stamped with a single crowned P and the makers mark EN



Figure 9 – A pistol by S. Bowdler, c1750, the barrel stamped P & V within ovals and makers mark SB

Birmingham

Birmingham was certainly the largest arms making centre outside London, having developed as an industrial town during the 16th century with gunmaking beginning in the late 17th century. Customers included the Board of Ordnance from the 1670s and the Royal African Company. By 1707, Birmingham's population of 15,000 inhabitants included some 400 gun and gunlock makers (and their families). This figure did not include barrel makers and the makers of gun components known as "small-work makers". Interestingly, only 6% of these 400 makers were recorded by Bailey & Nie in their 1978 comprehensive study, "English Gunmakers". The vast majority of gunmakers from this period therefore remain lost to history, probably because they either could not write or else were reluctant to leave written records.

The crowned P & V proof marks are generally referred to by collectors and dealers today as "Birmingham private proofs"; this is almost certainly due to the fact that many known Birmingham pieces are found with these marks. Some provincial makers used very similar marks, suggesting that they might either have sent their own barrels to Birmingham for proof or else bought Birmingham made barrels. This became more common after about 1760 and certainly by 1800 all manner of firearms could be ordered from a Birmingham gunmaker, complete with whatever signature was required. Examples of these early marks and the Birmingham makers on whose firearms they appear are shown in Figures 10 – 15 below.



Figures 10a & b – A pocket pistol by W. Heath, c1740-50, the barrel stamped with crowned P & V within ovals and makers mark EI





Figures 11a & b - A holster pistol by Thomas Richards, c1760, the barrel with a crowned P struck twice, and the makers mark TR



Figures 12a & b - A pistol by Thomas Lane, c1760



Figures 13a & b - A pocket pistol by Thomas Hadley, c1770, the barrel stamped P & V within ovals and makers mark IP





Figures 14a & b - A pocket pistol by Ketland & Co, c1780



Figures 15 - From a pistol by I. Pratt, c1770, the barrel stamped with crowned P & V within ovals and makers mark TK



As previously noted, many gunsmiths from Birmingham and other towns made use of the private proof service available at the Tower of London. These barrels were stamped with the crossed sceptre mark struck twice. This mark was formerly attributed (wrongly) to Ketland. A few provincial makers chose to have their guns proved by the London Gunmakers Company and marked as such: e.g. Thomas Pocock of Birmingham who died in 1756 (see Bonham's April 2011, Lot 431). This practice was comparatively rare, probably because the Tower proof house charged less.

Interestingly, the barrels of several guns signed by well-known London makers are stamped with the crowned P & V mark described above; for example on a fine sporting gun by John Harman c1730 (see "John Harman c1693- c1760", 18th Park Lane Arms Fair catalogue 2001); also on a silver mounted cannon barrelled pistol by Joseph Clarkson Jnr., c1765 (private collection) and the pistol illustrated in Figure 16 signed Turvey, London, c1775. No explanation for this anomaly has been found.

A fleur-de-lys mark together with a GP under a crown, stamped twice, has also been noted. This looks very like a London Gunmakers Company proof mark but no view mark is present. Whether this is a bona-fide London mark or yet another bogus Birmingham mark is unclear. Hugh Pollard illustrated this mark in his 1926 publication "The History of Firearms", where he calls it "a



distinctive barrel makers mark associated with many makers". This explanation of the mark has been repeated in various arms publications ever since.

Figures 16 - 22 below show some of the many variations of markings that have been found for period 1750 - 1820.

Figures 16a & b - A pistol by Turvey of London, c1775, the barrel stamped with crowned P & V within ovals and barrel makers mark TC under a crown



Figures 17a & b - A sporting gun by G.Farmer, c1770-8, the barrel stamped PRO-VED



Figures 19a & b - Variant marking - a pocket pistol by Watkins, Hereford, c1815-20, the barrel with a CP & crown mark struck twice, similar to the London Gunmakers mark, together with a single fleur de lys



Figures 20a & b - Variant marking - a pocket pistol by Edgson, Stamford, c1815-20, with similar markings to Figure 19





Figure 21 – From a blunderbuss by J. Moore, c1780, the barrel stamped with 2 ovals, a P above crossed sceptres & V above crossed sceptres, together with a single crossed sceptre and crown mark (East Riddlesden Hall: National Trust ERH/A/001)



Figure 22 – From a blunderbuss by Wise of Bristol, c1780 (Clevedon Court: National Trust CLE/A/2)



Birmingham Private Proof Houses

Large numbers of firearms of the mid to late 18th century by known Birmingham gunmakers were stamped with a variety of marks, which are clearly not London proof marks. This might suggest that some Birmingham gunmakers had facilities for proving their own firearms or alternatively had access to a central proof house in Birmingham. Previously published works have hinted at this possibility without presenting any evidence to back it up. For instance, an early document published in 1829, stated that; “Till the establishment of the Birmingham Proof House in 1813 every barrel maker proved the barrels he made in small proof houses attached to his manufactory.” (“Observations on the Manufacture of Firearms”, London 1829). This was repeated several times in publications over the next 180 years including important works such as the “History of the Birmingham Proof House” (Clive Harris 1947) and “The Galton’s of Birmingham: Quaker Gun Merchants and Bankers, 1702-1831” (Barbara Smith 1965).

If the Birmingham gunmakers really did have access to proof houses, where were they located and to whom did they belong? While it is probable that the leading makers such as Farmer, Galton, Richards (and possibly Ketland later on), had their own proof houses, there is, as yet, no firm documentary evidence. A recent publication by David Williams, “James Farmer and Samuel Galton, the Reality of Gun Making for the Board of Ordnance in the Mid-18th Century” (Royal Armouries Journal 2010) gives us a useful clue.

When Galton’s business suddenly expanded in the 1750s, due to the increased demand for arms during the Seven Years War, he invested heavily in new buildings. The following sequence of events is recorded in his accounts for the period 1759 to 1768:

- 1759 Builds workshops by Proof House
- 1765 Builds houses in Weaman Street in front of Proof House yard
- 1767 Builds 2 houses in Weaman Street
- 1768 Builds 2 houses behind Proof House yard

This would seem to confirm that at least one early proof house was in operation in Birmingham by the middle of the 18th century but whether it was open to all or belonged to a specific maker is unknown.



Scotland & Ireland

Given the lack of examples known to the authors, nothing can be said about proof marks or proof houses in Scotland. The situation in Ireland is similar but several types of mark, including a crowned V and P, and sometimes a harp, have been recorded. [Fig.22] A letter from John Rigby of Dublin to his son in 1815 mentions a visit to the "View Room" (D.H.L.Back, "Messrs Rigby 1760-1869", Norwich 1992, p.21). The authors can add nothing further at this stage but hope that other researchers may be encouraged to explore this specialised area of firearms history.



Figures 22a & b – An Irish duelling pistol by Samuel Wallace of Dublin, c1780, the barrel stamped with crowned P & V within ovals

After 1813

Following the opening of the Proof House by the Birmingham Proof Company in August 1813 (Gun Barrel Act of 1813), the proving of firearms in England was put on a firm legislative footing. Thereafter, no barrel could be used in the making of any small arm in the United Kingdom "unless it should have been duly proved at the Proof House of the London Gunmakers Company or at the Proof House to be established under this Act or some Proof House belonging to His Majesty or other Proof House established as a Proof House by Law". Subsequent Acts of 1815 and 1855 established uniformity of working by the London and Birmingham authorities in all matters of proof, penalties, etc. The Gun Barrel Acts of 1868, 1950 and 1978 further defined the rules and regulations that remain in place today.

Conclusions

The earliest provincial gunmakers do not appear to have proved their guns or if they did, then they did not mark them as such. The marking of gun barrels by provincial gunmakers appears to start around 1710, but there is no evidence to confirm whether these barrels were actually tested or merely stamped with a mark to suggest that they had been proved.

It seems likely that the trend towards proof marking in the provinces was spurred on by the prestige of the London trade, reinforced by the guarantee of quality provided by the Gunmakers Company's proof regulations. Consequently, makers in Birmingham and the provinces felt obliged to follow suit, in order to compete on grounds of quality as well as price.

Whether or not provincial gunmakers actually undertook systematic proving of their barrels to a certain standard and then stamped their own proof marks is uncertain. The examples illustrated of Wilding and Farmers work suggests that this might have been the case but there is no documentary evidence to support this theory.

During the second half of the 18th century, some provincial gunmakers sent their barrels to London for private proof at the Tower Proof House. An alternative was to purchase barrels proved by the Gunmakers Company but this practice seems, on the evidence to date, to have been very rare.



By 1750, more and more provincially-made guns were stamped with proof marks but whether these are the marks of a private Birmingham proof house, or whether they were struck by individual gunmakers or indeed, whether the barrels stamped were actually proof tested, remains unclear. It seems fairly certain that there was at least one private proof house in Birmingham by 1759 but who owned it and whether it was available to other gunmakers is, as yet, unknown.

What is clear is that matters are not as straightforward as we were once led to believe. While the Gunmakers Company controlled the trade in London, they had no jurisdiction over the rest of the country and a variety of local arrangements prevailed until the overarching legislation of 1813 and 1815.

In these three short articles, *The Crossed Sceptres & Crown Mark* [RPL001], *Why The Tombstone?* [PRL002], and *English Provincial Makers' Marks* [RPL003], we have discussed and illustrated the barrel markings found on provincially made British firearms. We have attempted to summarise the present state of knowledge and have drawn a few inferences. Clearly there is much more work to be undertaken. We hope that our efforts may encourage others to investigate the subject further, thereby adding to the history of British gunmaking.

Sources

Sources consulted included "English Gunmaking" (D.W.Bailey & D.Nie 1978), "English Provincial Gunmaking 1680-1720" (A. Darling 1973), "Great British Gunmakers 1740-1790 (W.K.Neal & D.Back 1975), "Great British Gunmakers 1540-1740" (as before 1984), "Early Firearms of Great Britain & Ireland" (S.Grancsay 1971), "Dictionary of London Gunmakers 1350-1850" (H.L.Blackmore 1985), "Messrs Rigby 1760-1869 (D.H.L Back 1992), "Observations on the Manufacture of Firearms", London 1829, "History of the Birmingham Proof House" (Clive Harris 1947), "The Galton's of Birmingham: Quaker Gun Merchants and Bankers, 1702-1831" (Barbara Smith 1965).

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