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THE 1796 LIGHT CAVALRY SWORD

Part Two – Officers’ swords

Having examined the 1796 light cavalry troopers’ sword and its origins in Part 1 of this article, in this second part we look at officers’ versions and some of the variations that developed during its service life.

The general order of 31 March 1788 which introduced the first regulations and standardisation for British swords specified that henceforth officers were to carry the same pattern of sword as the men under their command. However, as would be expected, officers’ swords are generally found with various refinements and embellishments dictated by fashion, taste but probably more likely by the personal finances of the officer involved. Whilst the general style and dimensions of officers’ swords remains the same as the troopers’ version, the refinements which distinguish the officers’ sword can be found applied to every component of the sword from hilt fittings, grips, scabbards fittings but predominantly, with regard to the decoration of the blade.

In general, two differing types of blade decoration are encountered : that which we commonly call blue and gilt and that known as acid-etched decoration. Before examining the same, it is important to emphasise that not all officers’ swords have blade decoration. **Plate 1** illustrates what I would call an “economy” officer’s sword. The hilt, grip and scabbard have all of those refinements which distinguish it as an officer’s sword but the blade is perfectly plain and unadorned, save that it does have the maker’s name “Thos Gill’s Warranted Never to Fail” in script running along the length of blade.



Plate 1 – An officer’s sword with plain unadorned blade by “Thos. Gill’s Warranted Never To Fail”

Blue and gilt blade decoration on officers’ swords was very much in vogue from the 1780’s to around 1815, a period which encompasses most 1796 pattern swords, although it did not entirely die out until into the 1850’s. The decorative motifs were first engraved into the blade. Some, such as the GR cipher (of George III), Royal Arms, various stands of arms, military trophies and foliate patterns are commonly found on most officers’ swords and could therefore be considered as standard. The mounted light cavalryman

replete with tartleton helmet brandishing a sabre is another design commonly found. Other motifs could be unique to that particular sword, for example a regimental badge or designation, officer's initials or crest of arms. The blueing effect was achieved by a heat process and the gilding was applied in the form of an amalgam of gold and mercury which was then heated to burn off the mercury leaving the gold affixed to the blade. It was an extremely toxic process and a very hazardous occupation for those blade decorators undertaking it.

Plate 2 illustrates two officers' swords with blue and gilt blade decoration. The sword on the left retains almost 100% of its blueing and gilding and includes a crowned GR cipher, the 1801-16 Royal Arms, a foliate figure of 8 and the regimental badge of the 8th (King's Royal Irish) Light Dragoons. By contrast, the sword on the right retains very little of its original decoration particularly along the leading edges where service sharpening has removed all traces. This sword belonged to Lieutenant James Charles Chatterton of the 12th (Prince of Wales's) Light Dragoons and was carried throughout the Peninsular and at Quatre Bras and Waterloo. It is a good illustration of the fragility of the blue and gilt decoration.



Plate 2 – On the left a sword carried by an officer of the 8th Light Dragoons ; on the right, the sword of Lt. James Chatterton of the 12th Light Dragoons carried in the Peninsular and Waterloo campaigns.

The second principal method of blade decoration was acid-etching, sometimes called frost-etching. By this method, the designs and motifs were made in a thin wax template laid upon the blade which was then doused with acid. The wax protected the blade from the corrosive effects of the acid leaving the designs only etched into the blade. Minor details were then added by fine engraving. The result (in my view) was a far more sophisticated and certainly far more durable form of blade decoration. **Plate 3** illustrates three officers' swords with acid-etched blades. All three swords were carried by officers of the yeomanry cavalry. The sword on the left was made by James Woolley in Birmingham around 1796-99 and was carried by Lt. Joseph Hume of the Berwickshire Yeomanry Cavalry ; that in the centre is dated 1798 and was made in Birmingham by Henry Osborn. It was the sword of William Waddell of the Loyal Birmingham Light Horse Volunteers ; the sword on the right is also dated 1798 by "Thos Gill's Warranted Never to Fail" and was the sword of the Honourable John Dutton, lieutenant in the Gloucester Yeomanry Cavalry. **Plate 4** shows the blade etching in more detail.



Plate 3 – Trio of yeomanry officers' swords with acid etched blades.



Plate 4 – Blade details : left Gill, centre Osborn, right Woolley

Plate 5 illustrates the detail of the hilts of the three yeomanry swords in Plate 3 and provides a good example not only of the differing types of embellishments that could be made but also the differing styles and details adopted by the three manufacturers, Woolley, Osborn and Gill, who between them probably produced more 1796's than all other makers combined.



Plate 5 – Officer's hilts : left Woolley, centre Osborn, right Gill

Taking each component in turn:

Guard and knucklebow – All three swords employ what is termed as faceted knucklebow, the edges being chamfered such that there are three distinct faces. Faceted knucklebows are found on virtually all officers' swords, regardless of maker. The Gill knucklebow has a small reinforcing piece at the junction with the crossguard, a feature very much characteristic of Gill's swords.

Langets – The langets on the Woolley sword are slightly smaller than generally found on troopers' sword and have a slightly chamfered edge. Those on Gill's sword are shield shaped which is characteristic of that maker's swords. The langets on the Osborn sword are virtually the same as on the troopers' sword. Although langets are generally half oval in shape, other varieties can be found. Square langets are not uncommon, ogee langets appear on some later made swords (see Plate 8 below) and, in a few rare cases, some officers' swords have dispensed with langets altogether.

Backpiece and ears – The backpieces on the Gill and Osborn swords are faceted, matching the knucklebow ; that on the Woolley is plain and smooth. The backpiece ears however are different on all three swords : the Woolley has large half oval ears much akin to a troopers’ sword, the Gill has triangular shaped ears and the Osborn has what are termed “comma” ears. These comma ears appear to have been Osborn’s design and appear on virtually all of his swords. They were later copied by many other makers. It should also be noted that many officers’ swords exist without backpiece ears at all.

Grip and ferrule. – Like the troopers’ sword, the grip is made from plain wood, either pine or beech and can either be grooved for grip or is bound with cord. All three swords in Plate 3 have a black leather covering which is then bound with three strands of twisted silver wire. These three swords were all made before 1800 and at that time leather seems to have been the preferred covering for the grip of the 1796. Some grips are found covered in fishskin (normally shark skin) and this appears to become increasingly popular from the beginning of the 19th century. The ferrule on each sword is different : the Woolley has a plain ferrule engraved with borders, the Osborn has a faceted ferrule matching the knucklebow and backpiece and the Gill has a reeded ferrule.

Scabbard – The scabbard of officers’ sword generally follows the same construction as that of troopers’ sword. It is the scabbard bands that form the distinguishing feature ; in virtually all cases the bands are sculptured into the loops that retain the hanging rings. The Woolley has broad rounded bands, the Osborn narrow plain bands and the Gill has reeded bands. Most officers’ swords also employ split hanging rings.

As well as the “standard” officers’ sword as the foregoing examples might be called, there were also some special regimental patterns and other variations. Two of the best known regimental patterns are illustrated at **Plate 6**. The sword on the left is a special pattern carried by officers of the 10th (Prince of Wales’s Own) Hussars. A total of twenty-seven of these swords were ordered by the Prince of Wales (the future George IV) who then presented twenty-one to the officers of the 10th of which he was Colonel in 1807. The blades were of German origin with false Damascus work and mystical symbols and were thought to have been originally been purchased from the cutler Robert Foster in 1798. They were then hilted and scabbarded by the cutler John Prosser who had a close association with the Prince of Wales in 1807 at a cost of £5-13s-6d each. The hilt of is gilt brass with a silver PoW plume of feathers applied to the langets. The scabbard is made from sheet bronze. This particular example belonged to John George Lambton, the 1st Earl of Durham who joined the regiment as a lieutenant in 1809 at age 17 and retired two years later aged 19. The sword on the right in Plate 6 was also made by John Prosser and was carried by an officer of the 19th Light Dragoons. The 31 in. blade is unfullered with a large latch-back point and is etched both sides with a panel containing XIX LD, the regimental badge of an elephant and the battle honour ASSAYE (the future Duke of Wellington’s first battle as commander and that of which he is said to have been most proud) . Several other identical examples of this pattern are known. Since the battle honour of Assaye was not granted until 1807 and the regiment was converted to Lancers

in 1817, the sword can be firmly dated between those dates. The 19th was disbanded in 1821.



Plate 6 - Regimental patterns ; right 10th Hussars, left 19th Light Dragoons

Plate 7 shows two more variants of the standard pattern. The sword on the left was made by John Gill (no relation to the more famous Thomas Gill) and has a presentation inscription along the blade “Lt Col. Vivian to Qr Master Greenwood”. Both of these officers were in the 7th Hussars (Vivian was CO) and the sword was probably presented in 1809 when Greenwood gained his commission. The sword on the right has a large unfullered blade profusely and deeply acid etched with various motifs including what appears to be a Mogul temple but also with the GR cipher and pre-1816 Royal Arms. The hilt has an extraordinary extended metal pommel. There is no maker’s name but it is believed to have been carried by an officer serving in India.



Plate 7 – Variants of the standard pattern. Left : presentation sword to QM Greenwood, 7th Hussars ; Right : Sword with unfullered etched blade and extended “beak” pommel

By far the most important variant of the standard pattern appeared around 1811/1812 and forms an important group of swords in its own right. This is the pipe-back bladed light cavalry officers' sword, two examples of which are given at **Plate 8**. Back in 1994, the late Geoff Worrall wrote an article in *Classic Arms & Militaria* on this particular style of sword which he dubbed “the Waterloo pattern”. Worrall illustrated various examples known to have been carried by officers in the period from 1812 to 1821. Whilst this group of swords does not form an official pattern per se, it is important to note that they were clearly fashionable in the period immediately preceding Waterloo and represent a move away from the purely cutting function of the standard 1796 to a compromise cut and thrust blade. No doubt many officers would have purchased such a sword in the brief period at home between the Peninsula and Waterloo. The sword at Plate 8 (top) has an etched blade including regimental crest and Duchess of York's Own XIV L. D. (Light

Dragoons). That at the bottom on Plate 8 was made by “PROSSER, Charing Cross, Maker to the Prince Regent” ; it also has acid etched panels on both sides bearing the regimental designation XVI QLD (the 16th Queen’s Light Dragoons) and the regimental badge (two intertwined C’s back to back in a garter ribbon for Queen Charlotte 1750-1818). This sword can be dated between 1811 when the Regency was declared and January 1816 when the 16th Light Dragoons were converted to Lancers.



Plate 8 – Light cavalry officers’s pipe-backed swords. Top : 14th Light Dragoons c. 1814 – 1816 ; Bottom : 16th Queen’s Light Dragoons 1811-1816 (by Prosser)

That officers were experimenting with new designs around the Waterloo period is again evidenced by the quite remarkable sword in **Plate 9**. This was the sword carried at Waterloo by Lt. Col. the Honourable Frederick Cavendish Ponsonby of the 12th (Prince of Wales’s) Light Dragoons. The recurved blade and scabbard is quite unique in my experience.



Plate 9 – Sword of Lt Col. Ponsonby, carried at Waterloo (see acknowledgement)

The 1796 light cavalry sword enjoyed a remarkably long service life at a time when the British cavalry was engaged in some of its most famous and glorious actions. It was superseded by a new pattern in 1821 but such was its popularity that officers’ swords are

sometimes found with the ciphers of George IV (1820-30) and William IV (1830-38). It is a sword well deserving of its place as a favourite amongst collectors from all over the world.

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Acknowledgement:

The sword of Sir Frederick Ponsonby at Plate 9 above is in the possession of the Ponsonby family having been collected by Sir John Ponsonby (d. 1952) together with Sir F Ponsonby's other swords. I am most grateful to the family for giving permission to reproduce the photograph of this remarkable sword which, to my knowledge, is illustrated for the first time. I also owe thanks to Mr Trevor Rutter and to Mr Mick Crumplin who acted as intermediaries between myself and the family.

Historical Footnote:

The experiences of Lt. Col. The Hon. F C Ponsonby at Waterloo are almost unique : Lying grievously wounded on the field after a most gallant charge in the French lines, a lancer who was passing by and saw Ponsonby move exclaimed "*Tu n'est pas mort, coquin*" and struck his lance through the English officer's back. "My head dropped" recounted Ponsonby in a subsequent narrative "the blood rushed to my mouth, a difficulty of breathing came on and I thought all was over" But the bitterness of death was not yet past. Soon after a *tirailleur* came up and roughly searched him all over, robbing Ponsonby of what money he had about him. He was hardly quit of this scoundrel before another appeared with the same intent. At last a good Samaritan appeared in the shape of a French officer, who administered brandy to the apparently dying Englishman, and then passed on "to pursue the retreating British"! What followed is best given in Ponsonby's own words : "Presently another *tirailleur* appeared, who came and knelt and fired over me, loading and firing many times and conversing with great gaiety all the while. At last he ran off". The evening came and with it the Prussians. "Two squadrons of Prussian cavalry, both of them two deep, passed over me at full trot, lifting me from the ground and tumbling me about most cruelly. A German soldier, bent on plunder, came and pulled me about roughly before he left me". An English private next appeared, and on Ponsonby telling him who he was, the soldier picked up a sword and stood sentry over him. Next morning Ponsonby was removed in a cart to a farmhouse. He had received seven wounds ; a surgeon slept in his room and he was saved by continual bleeding – 120 ounces in two days, despite the great loss of blood on the field. He died in 1837. (Account from the Waterloo Roll Call by Charles Dalton, 1904).

