coincidence that this is exactly one hundred years after the arrival of the first settlers from Solingen, among them his grandfather. Yet, once again, we can only speculate.) It has been suggested it was erected as a meeting place for members of the guild of sword-makers, but there is no proof of that, nor even of the existence of a guild in Shotley Bridge. (There was certainly one in Durham City about then - the Blacksmiths, Lorimers, Locksmiths, Cutlers and Bladesmiths Guild - which descendants of Clem Schaffe are known to have been members of. We also know the family moved to Framwelgate in Durham early in the eighteenth century. It is recorded that two men called Clement Schaffe were, at different times, warden of the guild. Yet by the end of the century there was no-one of that name to be found in Durham.)

When William died, in August 1810, his will reveals just how much of Shotley Bridge he had owned. To his wife he leaves, besides a large amount of possessions and money, *"...the Dwellinghouse that I now live in..."*. To his son William he leaves *"... my Copyhold Estate situate near Shotley Bridge, commonly called Cutlers Hall, with all the Buildings and erections thereupon and a field thereto adjoining with all appurtenances and also a Copyhold House and Garden at Shotley Bridge now tenanted by John Wilson and the Shop that he at present works in ..."* To each of the other sons is bequeathed *"...the shop in which he now works"* plus at least one other property, be it a house or (in one case) a wood. Jointly they inherit *"... my Grinding Mill and Warehouse with the ground above buting* [sic] *against the bridge"* plus *"... all my Work Tools now and usually employed in the shops hereinbefore given and bequeathed to each of them save and except the Old Bellows and Anvil for the equal use of my s^d three sons ..."*. His daughter, by this time Mrs Mary Brown, gets *"... the Copyhold House at Shotley Bridge aforesaid that she now lives in ..."*. All in all, an impressive estate and one which must have comprised a sizeable part of the village as it was in those days.

From the middle of the eighteenth century, however, the swordmaking families started to move to other parts of the country; some perhaps even emigrating[66]. The obvious reasons for this were (a) the fall in demand for swords and (b) the growth of newer and more attractive centres of industry in places such as Birmingham. So, whether they liked the idea or not of leaving their (second) "fatherland", the men had to go where the work was.

Ann Mole lived on in Cutlers Hall until her death in 1831, while the Oleys and the Mohlls continued their trade for a few years more, forging swords for an ever-dwindling number of clients, though apparently diversifying in to scythes, sickles, shears and the like. The final act came, however, when Robert Mole felt it necessary to move his business (by now the only one left in Shotley Bridge bar one) down to Birmingham. Here he soon established a reputation for the high quality of his workmanship, and his blades started to appear all over the world. (A large number were even shipped out to South America). The firm faced stiff competition from one of its London rivals, Wilkinsons of Pall Mall[67], but it is known that the two companies co-operated from time to time. However, the prestigious award to the London firm of a Royal Warrant of Appointment as Swordmaker to the Prince of Wales in the 1850s seems to have tipped the balance slowly but inexorably against Mole. In 1889 Wilkinsons absorbed Robert Mole and Sons[68] and took it over totally in 1920, at which point the latter name vanishes for good from the records of business. (Ironically, that was not quite the end of the tale, in a way, for until recently one of Wilkinson Sword's main factories was in Solingen itself, with another in Cramlington New Town, not too far from Shotley Bridge.)

---

[66] There is, for example, an Oley Valley in Pennsylvania; but whether it was settled from Shotley or from Solingen is not known.

[67] Founded 1772 by Henry Knock. Wilkinson began there as apprentice but soon became a partner.

[68] The Wilkinson Sword Company's trademark, the crossed swords, obviously had its origins in Shotley Bridge. The same design was until recently to be found on the Hospital Nursing Badge of Shotley Bridge Hospital, and is also on the façade of the main pub in Shotley - 'The Crown & Crossed Swords'.

One member of the Oley family remained in the village long after all the other swordmaking families had departed. That was Joseph Oley, grandson of the William who built Cutlers Hall, who was born in 1806. He carried on producing blades in Shotley Bridge until 1840, when at last he had to admit that there was no longer a demand for swords of any kind and so closed his forge down for good. He did not quietly fade into the background at that point, however, for he was still young – being only thirty-four. He became an auctioneer and remained in that job for the next fifty years! He died finally in 1896, a well-liked and respected man in Shotley Bridge. His tombstone can still be seen in Ebchester churchyard, next to those of Christopher and Richard; bearing an inscription that forms the most fitting way to end this tale:

In memory of
JOS. OLEY
of Shotley Bridge
Upwards of 50 yrs auctioneer
born Aug 27th 1806
died Jany 7th 1896
He died in the Lord
The last of the Shotley Bridge swordmakers

Joseph Oley (taken in the 1870s or 1880s)

8. Hollow Blades or Hollow Promises?

In this short book I have tried to bring together all the known information and "dis-information" about the swordmakers of Shotley Bridge and to present it, warts and all, for readers to try to decide for themselves where the possible "truth" might lie. But, as I hope I have shown, the story is far from straightforward where evidence is concerned ... especially true of the period before 1703, Richardson's "shrouded years". It is even more regrettable - since surely the greatest source of interest in the whole tale concerns those original immigrants themselves - that the descendants remained as silent and secretive about the past and about their German ancestors as those ancestors did about the "hollow blades".

It has been the story of a group brought over to the North-East, under somewhat "suspicious" circumstances, at what seemed a very opportune moment for everyone concerned, because they possessed special skills lacking in this country at that time. They were brought over not just because they made swords of quality but because they made very special swords - the "hollow blades". But here we run into problems, and these raise one large question that calls into doubt not only the title of this book but also the whole platform on which it is based.

That question is: How *real* were these 'hollow blades' as far as production at Shotley Bridge is concerned? Were they *ever* produced, or were they, like so much of the background information to this story, mere speculation?

We are left with so many snippets of evidence ranging in veracity from the very probable (yet not necessarily true) to the highly unbelievable (yet not necessarily false). In the case of the swords, at least we can crosscheck with evidence from Solingen and find out more about their manufacture and the techniques used. But, as to the people themselves, we can only speculate for the most part. Even so, the story of the actual "hollow sword blades" of Shotley Bridge is not without its doubts and reservations – one of them very large indeed.

For a start, there was the point that, during those 'shrouded years' [69], no direct mention was ever made of the 'hollow sword blades' in publicity of any sort. The original petition to have the men brought over merely talks of new equipment and techniques. The advertisements for sales of swords make no mention of them. Richardson at least suggests one reason – that they

---

[69] *Richardson's phrase now begins to assume somewhat more significance than probably he originally intended it to have.*

simply could not produce them – but leaves it at that. Why they could not produce them is unclear – unless it was that they had not managed after all to bring with them any of the new machines which fashioned the special blades swiftly and cheaply. To produce such blades manually would have been far too slow for the swift completion of any large order – and far too costly. Not until the 1703 Agreement is there a mention of hollows to be ground in sword blades (n.b. *not* "hollow sword-blades" as we have earlier defined them), and even then only as part of the list appended to it, without any emphasis on them whatsoever.

Next, there is the fact that Cotesworth had to buy in secretly swords of inferior quality to fill the orders. It cannot be said that this shows up the speed of production among the Shotley men in a good light; even more so does it make one wonder what sort of a state the so-called "works" were in and what sort of work went on there.

Finally, and perhaps most damning of all, there is the case of the spectacular arrest and trial of Hermann Mohll in 1703, to which all writers give prominence as a "newsworthy" and intriguing item - mainly to do with Mohll himself. Yet I believe it may well be a highly important pointer to the fact that Shotley Bridge was *not* producing the pieces for which it was supposedly famous – the hollow sword blades. (There again, it could equally indicate no such thing – such is the nature of this whole story.)

In the shipment that Mohll brought back with him were supposedly forty-six bundles in all. The one found at South Shields apparently held thirty swords, so at a rough estimate there were about *fourteen hundred* swords in total[70]. (And, I wonder, how many more bundles went into the estuary, never to be recovered or even mentioned?) This has to be seen against Richardson's rough estimate - arrived at by extrapolating from the prices being charged on bills between November 1710 and August 1712 - that at Shotley they were perhaps producing on average 34 blades- *of all sorts* - per day. He is of the opinion - and the evidence does seem to support this - that they were still working as a cottage industry and not as a full manufacturing concern like that, for instance, of Ambrose Crowley. Fourteen hundred swords would easily have satisfied the current customers, among them Sandford, who had so "bravely" spoken up for him, and Carnforth. That Mohll would not want it known that he was importing blades which were to be passed off as being produced at Shotley would perhaps explain why he started to drop some overboard, in a panic. Richardson also queries whether this was in fact Mohll's first trip back to Solingen. I personally am beginning to think that it was not, and that perhaps (yet again that word!) he had been on several more trips before this – for the express purpose of bringing in, clandestinely, the hollow sword blades that his colleagues at Shotley could not produce in sufficient numbers to satisfy the demand[71] (if of course they were producing any in the first place). This, I suspect, just happened to be the first time he had been found out, thanks to a very unfortunate (for him) set of circumstances. Of course there is no proof of this at all, and it is highly dangerous to base a theory on mere speculation. Nevertheless, there are so many little bits of circumstantial evidence that help to create a vague unease in one's mind – though admittedly several of these are indicative only by what they do *not* say – that this idea cannot be totally discounted.

(It also raises the question as to exactly how and where Mohll was able to purchase these blades. Yet again one can only speculate: this time that, perhaps because of the general fall-off

---

[70] But what happened to all these after the trial? They just disappear and are not mentioned again, so where did they end up, I wonder. This is yet another area for some fascinating speculation.

[71] Remember the official comment on these blades: *"a weapon which at this time was made nowhere else in England except at Shotley Bridge"*. A "cover-up"? This may have been said to divert attention from the fact that the blades originated in Germany and *may* just indicate that they had not been stamped at all and so could be passed off as being from Shotley by the simple means of adding their own trademark at the works.

in sales in the trade, the swordmasters of Solingen were not now so loath to have dealings with a "traitor" and competitor.)

As I have said, during the first sixteen years of sword manufacture at Shotley the mention of the hollow blades, not to mention evidence of their sale, is almost non-existent. We have also queried already whether or not there were ever at Shotley any of the special grinders needed to hollow out the blades.

It must surely be highly significant that not one hollow blade has ever been *identified* as coming out of Shotley Bridge, the only confirmed Shotley swords still in existence being of the "normal" sort, with a two-edged or single-edged blade. Ryan averred he had never come across a hollow blade identifiable as being made in Shotley Bridge. Aylward - in the article (mentioned earlier) in *Notes and Queries* and in his very good book on *The Small Sword in England* - said the selfsame thing, as did the late Bill Wake, ex-curator of the Joicey Museum in Newcastle (which used to have a good exhibition on the Shotley swords while it was in existence) in an interview for a Sunday Sun article on the swordmakers (September 23, 1984). Richardson too comes to the reluctant conclusion that no "secret" machines were set up at Shotley and that any hollow sword blades that did come out of the works there were made painstakingly by hand. If those machines had been there, he quite rightly goes on to say, "*then fortunes would have been made for everyone concerned*" - but *no-one* connected with the industry seems to have been so blessed (Cotesworth included). Swords *were* made at Shotley, of that there is no doubt, and in reasonably large numbers, but they were almost all of the more "normal" kind, and there is evidence of that at least.

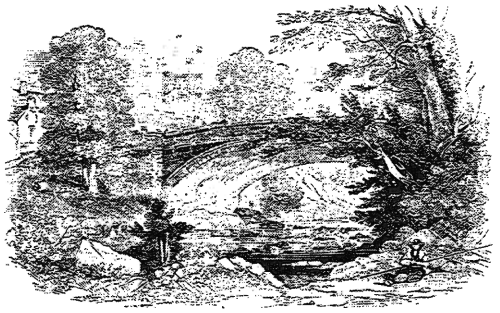
Yet, after all the positive things I have read about the swordmakers, I have to admit I find it rather disheartening to have even to query whether they were all that competent at the job they had been brought over to do, something that eventually the evidence does call into question. Where the blame lies for such a debacle (as it certainly seems to have been) is anyone's guess. I suppose that the commonest thought in the heads of all those involved over the years might have been the old recurring one: "It seemed a good idea at the time".

It is perhaps not quite right to end a book dealing with such an apparent brave venture as this on so dubious a note, but I nevertheless believe that such doubts have to be expressed and examined. What a different story it might have been if, for instance, there had been unquestioning belief in the idea that the swordmakers came over here because of religious persecution; that they bravely ventured forth on their perilous journey, roaming across Europe to Rotterdam, thence to London and then on up to the North-East - forever in search of a secluded haven, which was finally granted to them by Providence in the shape of the quiet Derwent valley at Shotley; and that there they produced, in large quantities, the famous hollow sword blades, thus assuring themselves of fame and fortune. It would have made a much better yarn, one for telling and retelling on winter nights round the fire, like all good adventure tales, being embellished bit by bit over the passage of the years. It might even have been turned into a good Hollywood film script in times gone by.

But then, the *human* side of the story would have been replaced by the mythical aspect, and, while this book has been concerned in the end with doubts, it has certainly not been built on legend. At least, I hope not.

So were those fabulous swords ever produced in numbers? Was it all either a confidence trick or a vainglorious venture, kept going only by blades smuggled in from Germany? It is very likely we shall never know, yet - that having been said - we never know!

9. Fact or Fantasy?



Our story of the Swordmakers of Shotley Bridge is almost over, and all we are left with now is a few loose ends to tie up from previous chapters and one or two tales – apocryphal or otherwise – to tell.

Any writer of a book such as this has to draw on previous sources, written or oral, finding as many as possible and then balancing the one against the other in order to *try* to get at the "truth". But he has always to be cautious of accepting material from the past without due thought and caution – though that is much easier said than done in the case of a story like this, where so much is shrouded in mystery. (I have tried wherever possible to check out points - I hesitate to call them "facts" - but have no doubt that at some stage I have been guilty of lack of caution or judgement - or even of downright error! And I *know* I have not consulted all possible sources – but there have to be limits, especially for a small volume like this one!)

Unfortunately, Surtees, to begin with, does not seem to have checked his "facts". He simply repeats the old story about the religious persecution and then tries to claim that the two inscribed stones bear this out – which, of course, they do not.

The Revd. Ryan was also not always as careful as he might have been in checking his sources. For a start, he inferred there was "evidence" for believing the Shotley swordsmiths arrived in England during Elizabeth I's reign – but this is just not so. He also seems to accept Surtees' statements uncritically. Moreover, his point of view must have been, to say the least, slightly coloured, since he had married a Miss Oley. So it is fairly legitimate to assume he accepted some of her family "reminiscences" uncritically. In one way he had no choice but to do this, for, as we have already learnt, right from the start the whole swordmaking "clan" at Shotley was determinedly tight-lipped about its past, and what-ever fell from his wife's lips must have seemed to Ryan like treasure indeed. But he must also have acquired rose-tinted spectacles during his delvings into their history, since he came up with, for example, his "discovery" of the name Matthew Oley in the parish registers in *1619*. It turns out, however, from Richardson's researches, that the entry in question, though very faint, is just legible and can be deciphered as: *"... Mathias Wrightson Cler ..."* – *Cler* being short for *Clericus* or priest. Truly the wish must have been father to the thought in this case.[72]

---

[72] This is repeated without question by "B ".

About the twentieth century writers it is rather more difficult to make a judgement. Aylward speaks from the point of view of an expert in swords, and his "backers" add their weight to his arguments from a scientific point of view (I am thinking particularly of the correspondence about the iron that must have been used). And there are few if any counter-arguments to be found here. As to the "first-hand" information gleaned from Joseph Oley (The Last Sword-maker) and later Ann Peters (née Oley) we have to exercise caution, because of old age and the tricks it can play on the memory. Lloyd Langley, who interviewed Mrs Peters in 1984, said that, she being into her nineties and apparently no longer as lucid in her mind as she formerly was, the reminiscences she came up with did not always ring quite as true as they might have.

Just about the biggest problem, as already indicated, has been that of the variation in the spelling of names and, occasionally, their duplication, which no amount of archival excavation can ever remedy. We can obtain all the documents we want that are "relevant" to the swordmaking families from Solingen and from Shotley Bridge and compare them carefully – but we will never be able to match the names up with certainty.

In closing, there are two tales that are worth recounting, though their integrity cannot of course be vouched for. They may not be true as records of actual events, but they do at least have the "true" ring of good advertisements for the Shotley Bridge swordmaking trade!

The first concerns either a William or a Robert Oley (here we go again!) – though which of the two names or exactly which of the several men who bore either of those names was involved, or when or where it took place, we just do not know. Whoever it was, he became involved in a wagerwith two other swordmakers (names and provenance unknown, of course) as to who could make the best weapon. On the appointed night, two weeks later, the other two were at the rendezvous, displaying their swords, but there was no sign of Oley having brought his. The two were ready to reproach and chaff him for having failed, when he took off his hat to reveal a sword, double-edged and about nine inches long, curled up inside the hat. So sharp and flexible was the blade that the other two could not remove it without grave danger to their fingers – but they had to concede that Oley had won the bet[73].

The other tale runs that Robert Oley, nephew of the William that built Cutlers Hall, travelled to London in the early nineteenth century for a competition for the best sword in all England and carried off the top prize, which was a crown. As a result, according to local lore, the inn in Shotley, at that time called the *"Sword Inn"* was renamed in his honour the *"The Crown & Crossed Swords"*. So it is called today – and *that* piece of information at least is fact[74].

[73] LAX, a local poet, relates that Robert made the wager with no less than eight foremen smiths to produce a spring better than any they could manufacture. At the meeting place he showed the "spring" inside his hat – it was a sword. He then offered to pay the amount of the wager to anyone who could tell him to which side the sword had been coiled, i.e. to the left or to the right. No-one was able to do so. (Retold, with some omissions, in HYDEN)

[74] On nineteenth century maps, however, it appears as the *Commercial Inn*!

Bibliography

(Books and articles consulted or referred to)

ATKINSON, D: *The Swordmakers of Shotley Bridge*, [North-East Centre for Education About Europe,1987]

AYLWARD J D: *The Hollow Sword-Blade Company:* [article in *Notes & Queries*, 4.Sept 1948, p.377ff, and 18.September 1948, p.399ff.]

"B": *The German Swordmakers at Shotley Bridge* [article in the *Monthly Chronicle of North Country Lore & Legend*, May 1888]

BEWICK, T: *A Memoir of Thomas Bewick, Written by Himself* - [Robert Ward, Dean Street, Newcastle-upon-Tyne, 1862; facsimile by Frank Graham, Newcastle, 1974.]

COTESWORTH Manuscripts [in Tyne & Wear Archives, Discovery Museum, Newcastle-upon-Tyne]

DICTIONARY of the Middle Ages [Charles Scribner's Sons, New York., 1988]

DIDEROT, D: *Encyclopédie, ou Dictionnaire Raisonné (A Pictorial Encyclopedia of Trades and Industry)*

FLINN, M : [1] *Industry & Technology in the Derwent Valley of Durham & Northumberland in the Eighteenth Century* [article in *Transactions of the Newcomen Society*, vol. 29, 1953-5, pp255-62]

[2] *The Travel Diaries of Swedish Engineers in the Eighteenth Century as Sources of Technological History* [article in *Newcomen Society*, vol. 31, 1957-59, pp.95-104]

HUGHES, E: *North Country Life in the 18th Century* [OUP, 1952]

HYDEN, J G: *History of the Derwent Flour Mill Society, 1872-1922* [pub.1922]

KALMETER, H: *Dagbok över en ...1718-26 Företagen Resa (Diary of a Journey made in 1718-26)* [fo349, MS journal in the Kunglika Biblioteket, Stockholm, MSM.249]

JENKINS, R: *The Hollow Sword Blade Company & Sword Making at Shotley Bridge*: [article in *Transactions of the Newcomen Society*, vol.15, 1934-35, pp.185-194]

LAX, J: *Historical and Descriptive Poems* [Geo.Neasham, 1884]

RICHARDSON, D: *The Swordmakers of Shotley Bridge* [Frank Graham, Newcastle-upon-Tyne1973]

RYAN, REVD J: *History of Shotley Spa*, [R Vint & Carr, Sunderland, 1841]

SURTEES, R: *History of the County Palatine; vol.II* [1820]

Acknowledgements

I should also like to thank the following for their help in a variety of ways:

Lloyd Langley and Jim Lawson of Beamish Open-Air Museum, Co. Durham;
Alasdair Wilson and Carolyn Abel of Tyne & Wear Museums Service;
Eileen Carnaffin of Gateshead Central Library;
Frank Graham, retired publisher;
and finally
Emeritus Professor Gordon Batho, who encouraged me to try my hand at writing this volume.

(Sadly, the Committee of the Derwentdale Local History Society, Shotley Bridge, who hold archive material on the swordmakers from the old Shotley Bridge Heritage Centre, felt unable to co-operate.)