Sword Hilts of the Border Reivers

A Brief Survey of 16th Century 'Basket Hilts' of the

Anglo-Scottish Border Marches

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(Note: The following article is an excerpt from the quarterly journal of The Society of Border Reivers.)

While the elaborate basket-hilt broadsword of 18th and 19th century Scotland is familiar to all, its simpler, utilitarian ancestor isn't nearly as well known. The superior protection afforded by a sword-guard enclosing the hand became increasingly desireable as the use of steel gauntlets declined during the 16th century. Apart from that, the origins of the basket hilt are obscure and hotly debated. Scottish and English historians tend to claim it as a native invention of their respective nations, although English documents of the period often refer to the style as 'Irish hilt', hinting at a Gaelic pedigree. Less jingoistic scholars point to continental origins, speculating that the British version may have evolved from the Italian 'schiavonna', or various German patterns. Of course, the obvious utility of the design also presents the possibility of parallel invention. Throughout the long history of armament, useful developements have tended to follow changes in tactics and fighting styles. These factors, and the resultant innovations, have often occurred simultaneously in many countries.

The 'riding families' of the Anglo-Scottish borders, notoriously indifferent to issues of nationalism, probably cared little about the origins of the basket hilt. Always eager for improved weaponry, these border reivers were among the earliest warriors to embrace the new design. It suited their lightly armed fighting style admirably, and it quickly became the standard among border horsemen. To put this into historical perspective, Highland Scots of the same period generally carried the simple cross-hilted broadsword, virtually unchanged since the early medieval era.

Locally-made basket hilts were common in the Marches, although a few genuine Italian and German pieces have also been found. Whether this reinforces the continental-origin theory of basket hilt evolution, or simply demonstrates the borderer's cosmopolitan tastes in weaponry is an open question. It's known that other types of arms (wheellock firearms, armour, and helmets, for example) were routinely imported, so the presence of foreign-made sword hilts may have little significance in the history of the native version.

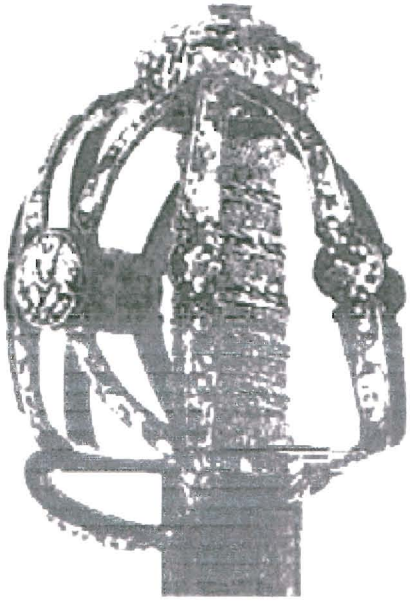

fig. 5
c. 1611

HOME

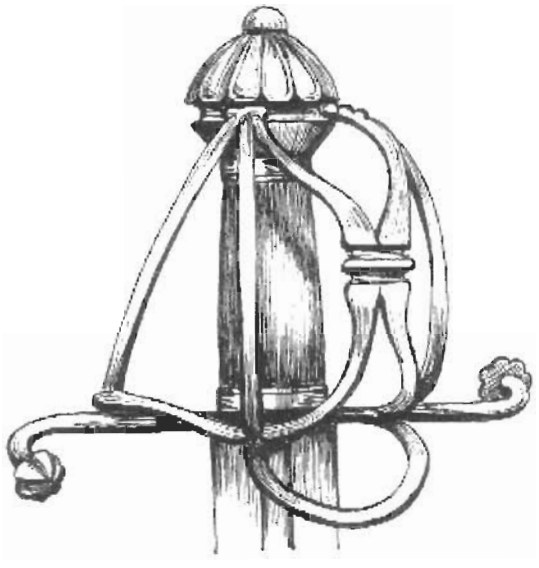

fig.3
C. 1570

"Observations on some blades found in Scottish basket hilted swords"
by Baron of Earlshall
Park Lane Arms Fair
#13 (1996)
pp. 30-38

"Scottish Two handit Swords"
Tony Willis
Park Lane #13

ribbon hilt beaknose - steel crossguard that extends beyond the basket.

According to Scots dictionary the basket hilt also referred to as a ram head or sheeps head
Sword From fanciful resemblance

earliest reference 1576 records of Inverness
'heland hiltis'

Scottish broadsword $\frac{JA}{S}$ John Allen of Stirling
c. 1725-1750 running wolf ihn Solingen
rounded bars circles and stylized hearts
fluted conical pommel
Charles Whitelaw attributed $\frac{JA}{S}$ to John Allan the younger - Freeman of Hammermen of Stirling 1741 - it has been subsequently shown that it was actually John Allan the elder (freemen 1714) previously journeyman to John Simpson of Glasgow.
"Observations on the Dating of Scottish Basket Hilted Swords C.R. Rolland Seventh Park Lane Arms Fair pp. 18-23
and "John Allan of Stirling" David Oliver 14th Park Lane Arms Fair pp. 14-19

An interesting feature of early hilts is the long cross-guard, as shown in Fig. 3. Apparently seen as a needless complication, its quillons, or arms, were commonly cut off by the borderers. The cropped stumps of these quillons can be seen on many swords (Figs. 1 and 2). Later patterns omitted this guard entirely, eventually evolving into the classic Scottish basket hilt. In Fig. 4, a transitional piece made at end of the reiver era, the beginnings of that evolution are clear.

Fig. 1
C. 1550

Most hilts were constructed by forge-welding or brazing as many as twenty separate iron bars together. A far less common method involved piercing, splitting, and spreading a solid sheet of iron, somewhat in the manner of modern 'expanded metal'. Either technique required a highly sophisticated level of blacksmithing skill. The later method of casting the hilt in one piece, and then forming it to shape, doesn't appear to have been used in this period. Another later practice, the use of brass, bronze, or other nonferrous metal, was very rare in the border reiver's age.

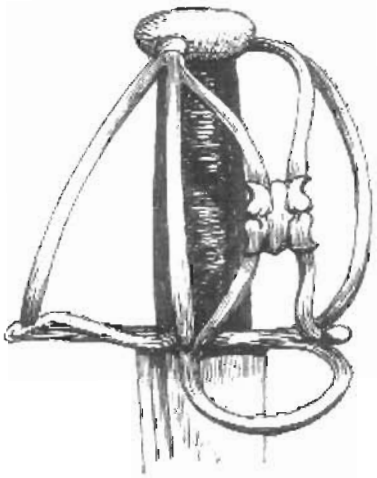

Fig. 2
C. 1560

In the earliest hilts, the top ends of the separate bars were joined and inserted into holes formed in the sword pommel (Figs. 1 and 2). In a later form, the bars simply rested in a groove cut around the pommel's circumference (Figs. 3 and 4).

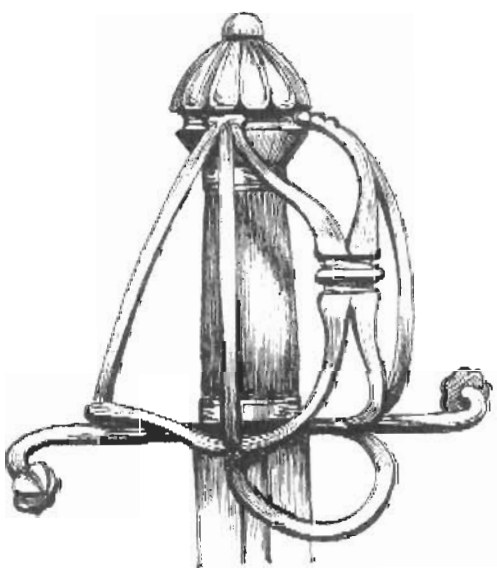

Fig.3
C. 1570

The success of this style of sword, and its wide appeal, is perhaps best shown by the example in Fig. 5. This splendid, gold-encrusted piece closely follows the form of plainer border weapons. Yet, it was made in London, after the sun had permanently set on the reiver's day. Its lavish ornamentation might have made an old borderer stare in awe, but the shape would certainly have been familiar to him.

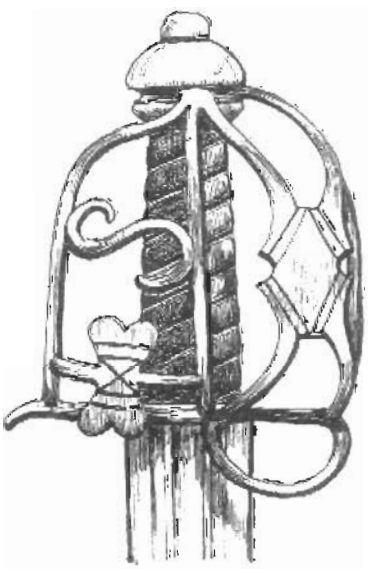

Fig. 4
C. 1620

These swords, while perhaps common, weren't the only weapons used in the Marches. The reiver's arsenal also included rapiers, daggers, pole-arms, firearms, and, of course, the ubiquitous lance. These weapons, and more, will be explored in future articles. Please visit again soon!