

English Officers' Holster Pistols of the Early Georgian Era

Lynn M. Chenault

English officers' holster pistols arms are the exact opposite of what I really collect, which is what I call "stylish" American hunting rifles, information on their uses on the American frontiers, and their markers. So, how is it I accumulated this little group? Well, it has to do with "style", surprisingly with useage on the American frontiers, and, probably most importantly, the effects of some Scotch whiskey. Not the usual gun collector criteria: condition and rarity, although, as far as rarity, these guns are more rare, at least on this side of the pond, than Kentucky's and Sharps. Let's contrast these two diverse ends of the collecting spectrum.

First of all, they're obviously pistols and not rifles; that's easy. They're English and not American, and in fact were mostly made in London. There was a thriving gun manufacturing trade in Birmingham, England at this same period, but most of my collection seem to have been produced in London, or at least sold there by some markers who had shops in both places. I think they were produced in London because of the proximity to the crown's proof-house at the Tower of London, who would pass on these few pieces destined for officers individually, whereas samples could be examined from large lots of arms produced for the troops at Birmingham. Some George III style pistols were made in Birmingham but marked "London." Finally, these pistols were used by officers in the military. Many of the officers in His Majesty's military establishment became officers not by skill in their trade but by being born into the right family, or perhaps were able to buy their commissions from the proceeds of successful commerce. This may account for the fact that many of the English officers' pistols I've encountered are often showing little use at all, some are almost like new in spite of 250 +/- years. My opinion is that these pistols were often as much ceremonial and for show of rank as they were for actual use in the field. My interest in American rifles for their use on the American frontiers is actually about the only connection between this little group of English guns and the rest of my accumulation. In the times of their popularity, England was at war with a lot of different nations in an attempt to expand and defend its colonies. The English were also fighting the French and Indians who were marauding the American colonies from bases in Canada.



One could argue that the American longrifleman, whom I admire, might have carried such a pistol as a sidearm, and in fact one George Washington did carry a silver mounted pair like these in the American Revolution, even though by then back in merrie olde England they were somewhat outdated. Imagining how and why their use occurred is one of their appeals to me.

The period we know as the French and Indian War ran from 1754 through 1763, and this style of pistol would have been the standard for British officers fighting on the side of the American colonists. Doubtless, many of these pistols stayed in America after that conflict; some American officers may have been given pistols like mine by their British allies during the conflict. In fact, several of the pistols I have accumulated seem, to me at least, to bespeak of American usage, with the area of the action being the American frontier.

During that time, in 1755, the Brits expelled the so-called "Acadians" from eastern Canada and by 1765 many of them eventually wound up in South Louisiana as the "cajuns". Canada was captured from France in 1759, but the residual French were allowed to stay in Quebec, a fact many Canadians rue to this day. The "Peace of Paris" came in 1763, which ended, for a time, the long war with France.

The pistols were made for English officers to use while mounted on horseback. I believe that most of the pistols were made as pairs, although less than half of the specimens I have encountered still have their mates. (Perhaps they were split among heirs, or, more likely, they were lost while in use.)



Figure 1. Queen Anne style pistols. A pair of Queen Anne style pistols, lent to me for photography by John Chalapis and shown here for comparison purposes. Slow to load due to the turn-off barrel, they were considered by some as more a civilian arm than a military holster pistol, and were often carried in greatcoat pockets as travelling pistols. But, as the military action of Queen Anne's reign was limited to some battles with France carried on by the Duke of Marlborough, they may have seen military service as well as being favored by the palace courtiers. These are shown as a style model in contrast to the Early Georgian pistols, and the George III style.

They were carried in double holsters, slung over the pommel of the saddle, in similar form to those used as late as the Mexican War here. The English saddle having little or no horn, however, meant that the bridge between the holsters was solid, and not opened in the center to accept the horn. These holsters had flaps over the butts of the pistols and straps for attaching, since there was no saddlehorn to hold them. Few have survived, especially with the flaps intact. I imagine it was tricky to extract and fire with one hand while controlling the horse with the other. Re-inserting the fired pistol would have been a two-hand job in the best of circumstances, which probably explains both why the flaps were removed and how a lot of pistols got separated from their mates.

The pistols were mounted in brass, steel, silver, and gold. Brass was the most common, and pistols additionally with brass barrels and even sometimes locks are considered by some collectors as destined for naval officers. Steel mountings are more rare and tend to be earlier. Silver mountings were the stuff of high ranking officers and palace courtiers. Gold mountings were reserved for royalty and not necessarily only English royalty. Some important features to note when looking for quality in these pistols include the side plates, thumb plates, buttcaps, ramrod thimbles, and wood carving. Absence of fine detail in these areas means the pistol was intended for lower ranking officers or even sergeants. Incidentally, the gunmakers typically delivered the pistols in soft leather drawstring bags, and not in wood cases. The popularity of the wooden pistol case was to emerge later; pistols found in cases are of later manufacture. Nobility often got their pistols in brocade or tapestry cloth bags.

It is important to understand what was going on in the history of the world at the time of their popularity and use. For



Figure 2. Richard Maskall Pistol. A pistol made by Richard Maskall, who finished his apprenticeship in 1697 and worked in the Covent Garden area of London until his death in 1724. He made many more muskets than pistols, apparently all steel mounted. His son, John, apprenticed to him in 1724, but the business failed in 1726. This, then, represents a quite early Georgian-style pistol, which may have been silver-plated originally. Note particularly the very fine sideplate and thumbplate, and that the buttcap extension reaches almost to the raised carving around the sideplate. These are features to look for in the better early Georgian pistols. Note the barrel length, 10", which would have been an upper extreme, compared to the Harmon in Figure 8, which, at 7", would have been the opposite extreme. Most of the early Georgian pistols would have been in between, nominally, 8" or so. Continental pistols of that time, mostly German or French, which emulated this style, were longer and of straighter grip. I believe these pistols hold naturally and would have been easy to fire accurately with a bit of practice.



Figure 3. Left side of Richard Maskall Pistol. Detail of the left side of the pistol made by Richard Maskall. This very early Georgian-style pistol may have been silver plated originally, but none of that is left now. Note particularly the very fine sideplate and thumbplate, and that the buttcap extension reaches almost to the raised carving around the sideplate. These are features to look for in the better early Georgian pistols.

a little background, the distinctively different Queen Anne style pistol was obviously popular during the reign of that monarch, accounting for their relative rarity compared to the early Georgian pistols. Queen Anne ascended to the throne in 1702, and only ruled for a dozen years before she was succeeded by the first of the four Georges. A major event of her reign was the union of Scotland and England, a relatively peaceful time.

With the crowning of George I in 1714, came a long periods of war for Great Britain, including both wars with Spain and the conflict with newly acquired Scotland. George I's reign also was the dawn of the Early Georgian pistol style in England, which was actually a German import!

It was during the reign of George II (1727-1760) that the particular style of pistols I call "early Georgian" replaced the Queen Anne style in popular use. George II was the last monarch to actually lead his troops into battle, an event that took place in Bavaria in 1743. This style pistol was firmly entrenched as the standard by that time. George II also contin-



Figure 4. David Collumbell Pistol. The maker of this pistol spanned the Queen Anne and early Georgian periods, and worked into the late Georgian period as well. The pistol is by David Collumbell, a Scot who apprenticed in 1712, the last year of Anne's reign. A Queen Anne style pistol is known by his hand. A very fine pair of gold mounted Collumbell pistols of this style, with the double-headed eagle motif on the buttcap instead of the grotesque mask, were in the Hermitage Collection in St Petersburg, Russia, in the early '70s, indicating he probably made them for the Russian Imperial family. He was proving guns for the Gunmakers Company by 1730. He worked in the Westminster area of London most of his career, but was in Grosvenor Square at his death in 1777.



Figure 5. Freeman Pistols. Pair of pistols by Freeman, possibly James Paul Freeman, who finished his apprenticeship in 1716, and worked in private practice until 1736, or by his son, James, who apprenticed to his father in 1730, and was freed to the trade by the Gunmakers Company in 1738, working independently until 1756. (Could as well have been the work of Thomas Freeman, who apprenticed in 1702, was freed to practice in 1725, and worked in the Furbishers Office at the Tower of London in 1719.) James (2) is possibly the safest bet. But, who can tell? Numerous Queen Anne style pistols marked Freeman are known.

ued George I's war with Spain, and initiated wars with Scotland, Austria, and France. The conflict with Scotland finally ended in 1746, with the famous battle of Culloden. That defeat of Bonnie Prince Charlie allowed England to turn its attention outward to the extensive international warfare that was to come; peaceful times as those enjoyed under Anne were gone. East India was brought into the Empire in 1757, and Britain was coveting the Portuguese and Dutch holdings in Malaya and Indonesia. So pistols of this form were likely present in all those theatres of war. My interest is in the events closer to home.

Some of these pistols were quite likely in America. The Maskell pistol was found as a walk-in at the Baltimore gunshow by a prominent English collector and taken back to London, where I found it in a shop a couple of years ago. The single Harmon pistol came out of an auction here in the U.S. from an old collection. It's condition appears to have seen much use, as it might have in the American frontier, as opposed to the pair of

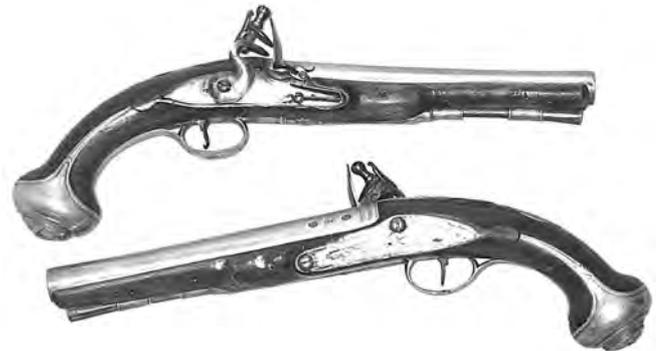


Figure 6A. John Hall Pistol. This pistol is by one of the John Hall's, father/son gunmakers. The elder Hall apprenticed in 1694, and died in 1740. His son, also John, apprenticed to his father in 1729, and died in 1746, still maintaining the family shops on Tower Street in London. His father had been employed at the Tower of London proving guns from 1721 to 1731.

Figure 6B. Thomas Hatcher Pistols. Pair of pistols by Thomas Hatcher, who finished his apprenticeship with the Mercer Company in 1724. He practiced gunmaking privately for a time, and by 1744 was appointed Master Refurbisher in the Small Gun Office of the Tower of London. He worked at the Tower 1749-1772 inspecting guns being sent to the East India Company, among other places. In 1769-1771, he was in business with his son, also Thomas, but died in 1772. Hatcher ran afoul of the Ordnance Department in 1753-1754 over his evaluations of the weapons being sent out to India. Brass barreled pistols like these are said to be intended for Naval Officers.

Harmons, which show the typical English penchant for keeping their guns very clean, by heavy polishing or by other means.

A few final notes on the historical events surrounding the use of these pistols: George III took the crown in 1760, and demanded more revenues from the colonies by instituting the Stamp Act of 1765. The citizens of Boston responded in 1773 by dumping tea in the harbor, leading, among other skirmishes, to the War of Independence as we call it. We were finally recognized officially in 1783, but in reality, it took the War of 1812 (actually fought 1807-1814) as a distraction from Britain's latest war with France to put it to rest. By the time George III occupied the throne, the popularity of the Early Georgian style officer's pistols began to wane. Pistols produced for use, for example, in the American Revolution (1775-1783) and Napoleonic wars (1793-1815) were quite different in style from either the earlier Queen Anne or my pistols.

The last of the four King Georges, George IV, came to power in 1820 and was succeeded by William IV in 1830. By that time early Georgian pistols were quite out-of-date, and



Figure 7. Jean LeMaire Pistol. Pistol made by Jean (aka John) LeMaire (aka Lemar, Lemere, Lamarre), gunmaker to King George I by 1719, who was naturalized into England in 1710. He was allowed to prove guns as a “foreigner” in 1728. His ancestors (Bartholomew, Henry, and James (aka Jaques) had come to England in the period 1639–1666 from France and Holland, where they had apparently fled after the Hundred Years’ War which ended in 1453, with other Huguenots. Jaques apparently brought Jean back with him from a visit to France in the late 1600s.

would have mostly been tucked away in bureau drawers in London or would have been in America, or in some other part of the far-reaching British Empire of the day.

Relatively little research has been documented on the English pistolmakers. I have been able to fill only about half a bookshelf on the subject since I became interested. The makers of these early Georgian pistols spanned several decades in their active gunsmithing work and were responsible for pistols of any style the officers wanted at the time. Many Queen Anne’s are also known as a Freeman’s or a Collumbell. Collumbell worked in London from 1712 to 1777, so he very likely produced the late George III style of pistols as well. Hall was active from 1694 to 1746, so he probably produced Queen Anne’s too. Most of the gunmakers represented in my small collection worked from 1694 to 1777, but this style of pistol was probably their most popular product from about 1720 to 1760.

To me, one of the most interesting pistols is the LeMaire. This Frenchman was an interesting artisan, working in London from 1710 to at least 1728. This pistol would have been part of his late production and exhibits skill developed over the years. When he fled after the Hundred-Years’ War in France, as did many other Huguenots, he wound up in England, and under special dispensation from the King, was allowed to practice his trade in connection with established London gunmakers. The ruling monarchs apparently were able to recognize his skill as an asset, even though he was deemed a “foreigner”. Since my own ancestors were also Huguenots, (who left England for Virginia in 1760) this pistol is one of my favorites.

I’ll close by recounting the tale of how I became interested in these pistols, as a collector of a vastly different type of firearm. For several years, business occasionally took me to London. My favorite hotel there was Durrant’s in the West End, conveniently across the street from the Wallace Collection of ancient arms and armour from all over the world. Interestingly, it was also the favorite of author Agatha Christie, and the setting for some of her mysteries. Just down the street is the



Figure 8. John Harmon Pistols. These 3 pistols are by John Harmon, who was apprenticed in 1707. His shop was in the Strand (London, not Galveston) from 1718 to 1745, and between 1721 and 1731, he was proving guns for the Gunmakers Company alongside John Hall (the elder). He was personal gunmaker to the Prince of Wales, and specialized in silver-mounted guns, as the pair (now converted to percussion) show. The flint pistol was obviously for a somewhat lower-ranking officer, and shows much use. Harmon also made a pair of pistols for Frederik Wilhelm I of Prussia in 1729. He made longarms too, especially shotguns. By 1760, he was applying for employment again with the Gunmakers Company, but was unsuccessful in that attempt. Apparently, he had fallen from favor in the political arena, also in 1729.

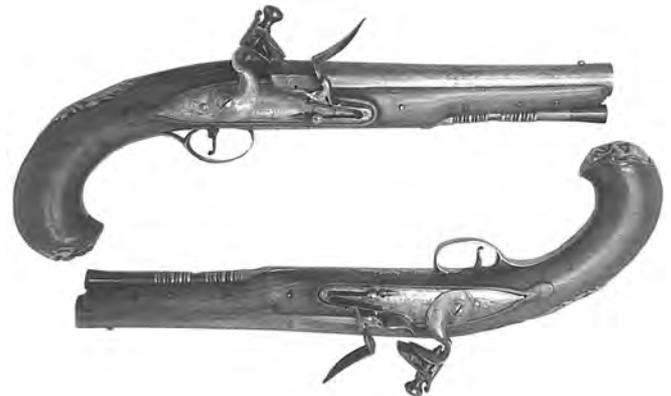


Figure 9. Brazier Pistols. A pair of George III period pistols by Brazier. The Brazier family were active gunmakers in London as early as 1361, as brass founders. The last of them was still plying the trade as late as 1856, truly a remarkable dynasty of 4 centuries. Based on the George III styling of this pair, the most likely maker was John (2) Brazier, who apprenticed to his father in 1734, graduated in 1741, and was still active until his death in 1769. Just because this style pistol is referred to as Late Georgian, or George III, doesn’t mean that the Early Georgian style was obsolete at the time of George III’s reign. In fact, a gold-mounted pair of Early Georgian style pistols by Mortimer was owned by King George III himself and are in the British Museum. (Courtesy of Mike Clark of Collector’s Firearms.)

Blunderbuss, a delightful little shop crammed with every imaginable kind of arms, armor, and military collectible. When neither of these attractions was open, and when business didn’t call too loudly, I spent a good deal of my time at Durrant’s sipping Scotch whiskey in the cozy wood-paneled bar. The walls are adorned with some muskets, fowlers, a neat little cadet fusil, and two pairs of early Georgian officers’ pistols. The more I gazed at those guns, the more I felt the graceful style of them was almost as attractive as my Kentucky rifles, hanging alone on

my wall halfway 'round the world. Eventually, the Scotch had its effect, and I decided I must own an example of one of those pistols as a souvenir of my times at Durrant's. The Blunderbuss was my salvation, they had 3 of them for sale. Over a period of a few days, I must have added years of wear to those pistols, trying to decide which one was the very best for me. Finally the Collumbell won, and it was quite a good match to the pairs hanging in Durrant's bar.

Later, as I was recounting this tale to Robin Dale, the current proprietor of Peter Dale LTD, probably the best antique arms shop in London, he produced the Maskell, very reminiscent of some of the very fine specimens in the Wallace collection, and with some American provenance. So, now I had two. As I learned more, I began to yearn for a pair, like the ones in Durrant's. Auction house catalogs solved that problem, along with my friend Ted Gewirz, who brought the pair of Harmons to an American Society of Arms Collectors meeting the very week I was making the winning mail bid on the single Harmon. That's how collecting grows on a fellow, and before he knows it, is a collector of Early Georgian period English Officers' Holster Pistols. At least, that's what happened to me. I blame it on the Scotch whiskey.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Bedford, Clay. *Early Firearms of Great Britain and Ireland*, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, 1971.

Blackmore, Howard. *English Pistols*, Tower of London, London, 1985.

Blackmore, Howard. *Gunmakers of London 1350-1850*, George Shumway, York, PA, 1985.

Blackmore, Howard. *Gunmakers of London Supplement 1350-1850*, Museum Restoration Service, Alexandria, NY, 1999.

Brooker, Robert. *British Military Pistols 1603-1888*, Taylor Publ Co, Dallas, TX, 1978.

Neal, W. Keith and DHL Back. *Great British Gunmakers 1540-1740*, Historical Firearms, London, 1984.

Neal, W. Keith & DHL Back. *British Gunmakers, Their Trade Cards, Cases, and Equipment - 1760-1860*, Compton Press, London, 1980.

Neumann, George C. *Battle Weapons of the American Revolution*, Scurlock Publ Co, Texarkana, TX, 1998.

ENGLISH "RULERS"

James II, 1685-1689

An experienced military officer, his conversion to Catholicism led to his downfall and exile to France, where he died in 1701. This in turn also led to the

principle that future monarchs of England "ruled" only by virtue of Parliamentary accord.

William III and Mary, 1689-1702

Their reign was filled with unpopular wars with France, while James was festering in exile.

Anne, 1702-1714

Wars with the French continued, led by the husband of Anne's best friend, the Duke of Marlborough. England and Scotland were officially united.

George I, 1714-1727

A German, he established the office of the Prime Minister. The Scots rebelled, but were put down in 1715. In 1718, strange bedfellows, the Britts, the French, the Austrians, and the Dutch, united against Spain.

George II, 1727-1760

He presided over "the heyday of English aristocracy", and was the last reigning King of England to lead his troops into battle, in Bavaria in 1743, against the French. War with Spain had broken out in 1739, and Austria in 1740. The Scots rebelled again in 1745, and were beaten at Culloden in 1746. The "Seven Years" War with France (1756-1763) included the driving of the "Cajuns" from Acadia, in Canada; they eventually settled in Louisiana. In 1759, General Wolfe captured Quebec from the French, and secured Canada as an English colony. In 1757, the French were defeated and driven from India, establishing it as a part of the British Empire.

George III, 1760-1820

He dealt with the American and French Revolutions, and the Napoleonic Wars. Australia was "discovered", and populated with convicts. He is considered, even by his countrymen, to have been insane during the last 10 years of his reign.

George IV, 1820-1830

A fancy, silly boy, who apparently took after his father in his late years.

William IV, 1830-1837

Known as the "Sailor King" for his early days in the Royal Navy, (also dubbed "Silly Billy"!) his best act was expiring, thereby giving up the throne to Queen Victoria, to begin a "renaissance" in English culture.