

A TARGE WITH A SECRET

by Steve Andrews

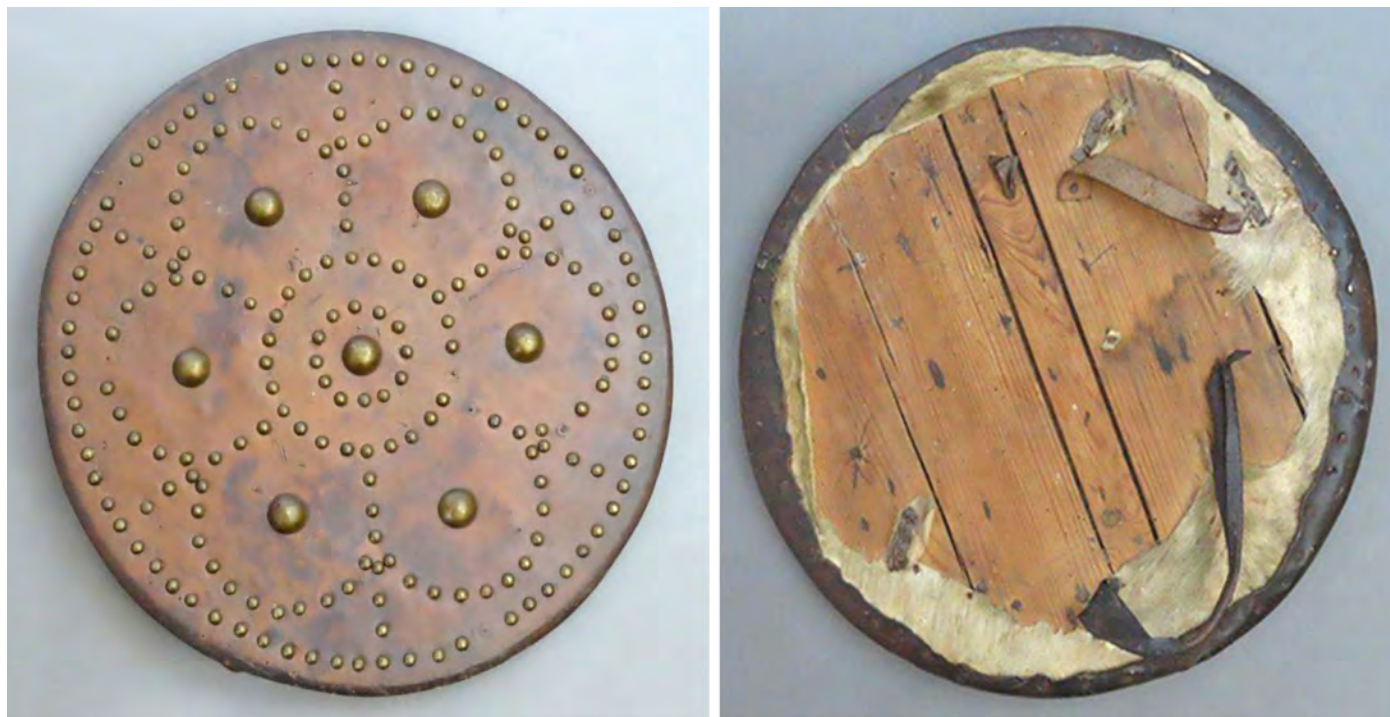


Figure 1. Front and back of the targe that is the topic of this manuscript.

The time frame I am discussing is the period from the first quarter of the 17th century through the second quarter of the 18th (1600- 1750) when targes in general are known to have been widely carried by Scottish soldiers and clan warriors. This piece is especially rare by virtue of its secret, the five iron plates inserted between the two layers of boards comprising the body of the targe. The targe before you is a rare, original early 18th century Scottish targe (Figure 1).

Construction of the targe and discovery

This targe was advertised for auction as a probable Victorian copy, however fellow American Society of Arms Collectors (ASAC) member, Tony Willis, suspected it was in fact an original. After viewing the targe, Tony said it checked the boxes for an original targe so he purchased it at Bonham's Dunrobin Castle auction. Someone in the past had cut away the deer skin rear cover exposing the wood. When looking at the back of the targe, Tony could see a dark line in the gap between the wood forming the targe's body. A magnet confirmed that a metal plate or plates were lodged between the layers of wood. Knowing that the Scots did insert thin iron sheets in some targes, he decided to submit a sample of the hide cover for radiocarbon dating to establish an age parameter. The result was that it was about 95% certain to be pre-1740.

This date is important since the use of the targe as a defensive weapon essentially ceased after the Battle of Culloden in 1746. A supporting factor in establishing the age of this targe is the construction itself. The use of hand-made square iron nails holding the whole assembly together, the irregular sized, hand-made decorative brass tack heads used to embellish the front are not exact

copies of each other, as would be expected if of a mass-produced piece from a later era.

The shape and construction of this targe conforms to other known, original targes. Typically they were constructed by hand from two layers of wooden planks using fir, pine, oak or birch. The boards were placed at 90 degrees to each other then fashioned into a circular or oval shape usually with a diameter of between 18 and 22 inches. This targe is likewise constructed of wooden planks and spans 19 1/2". The diameter of targes generally seems to conform to the length of a man's arm from the elbow to just past the knuckles formed by a fist or grip. The planks are fastened together with wooden dowels and/or iron nails and the front covered with thick leather hide which is stretched and folded over the beveled edge and secured to the back by more iron nails. Many were decorated with brass tacks as is this one.

Targes are also found embossed with intricate hand-tooled designs in the leather cover. These are usually found in the more elaborate pieces carried by officers and clan elite. The leather was decorated with a variety of symbols however there is no current evidence which would connect the targe to a particular clan or owner. Perhaps the designs were intended to exhibit a talisman for good fortune or the like.

Leather hand and arm straps were nailed to the back of the targe (Figure 1 and 2) and padding such as wool, moss or straw was placed between the back planks and a rear, deer hide cover, to protect the carrier's arm from injury. The back of this targe displays indentations where the original arm bands were located permitting the warrior to maintain as secure hold on the targe (Figure 1). The

remnants of the deer skin covering on the back of our targe was cut away at some time in the past and now reveals glimpses of the iron plates in the prominent gap between the two wood layers. The existing straps on this targe are later additions made sometime in the past.



Figure 2. Example of how the targe was carried when in use with a dirk.

After I purchased the targe I took it to local veterinarian Dr. Samuel Stanley DVM and had it x-rayed. The x-ray disclosed the size and positioning of the iron plates between the layers of board (Figure 3). As you can see the plates are irregular in shape, probably scraps left over from the forge.

In a letter dated 21 January 1716, which is cited by Claud Blair in his contribution to a book composed by David H. Caldwell¹, one Henry Fletcher wrote to his brother Andrew Fletcher in Paris about the construction of a targe with iron plates. Following a lengthy description the letter continued to say: "...The nails sometimes throw off a ball, especially when it hits the Targe a squint: but tho' a ball came directly upon it and miss the nail heads, piercing

betwixt them, yet they reckon that the leather, the cork (wooden plank), the wooll so deaden the ball that the Steel plate, tho' thin, repells it and lodges it in the wooll..."

The targe clearly was intended as a defensive weapon not just for edged weapons, but to deflect shot as well. Some targes have been found equipped with a metal spike screwed into a front, central boss which served to injure an opponent on contact in close combat or to deflect or trap a weapon.²

A short history

The earliest existing example of a dated targe is 1623. History tells us that shields in general did not just suddenly materialize in Scotland in 1623, but existed for centuries prior to that date in various forms. James Drummond, R.S.A. (Royal Scottish Academy) a nineteenth century, historian of Scottish weapons, states in his work *Ancient Scottish Weapons* etc.³:

"In an inventory of 1605 of the arms in (the) charge of the porter of Balloch, we meet with the arms of which Sir Michael Balfour of Burley (who) had the monopoly of sale together with horsemen's armour from Leith, and targets (targes) gilt with gold:

'Item, targis ourgilt with gold that come fra the Priorie of Chargerhous, i

Item, mair of stiell targis, i' (believe it refers to a pair of steel targes)

Drummond references production sites for targes.⁴ He notes that while Glasgow and Edinburgh served in the production for arms and equipment, targes were made in large numbers, on short notice throughout Scotland. As an example, in the first few months of the 1745 Jacobite rebellion it was noted in the payment accounts of Lawrence Oliphant of Gask, paymaster for Prince Charles at Perth:

"1745-

Nov. 15, To Wm Lindsay, wright, for six score targets, £30 14 6

1746-

Jan. 16. To Wm Lindsay for 242 targets-
To 24 Hyds leather from the tannage, £16 16
To Goat skins, wood, nails, etc. £15 10
To two Officers target pr. Order 1

Feb. 3 To Wm Lindsay for paying leather £16 16"
of 200 targes,

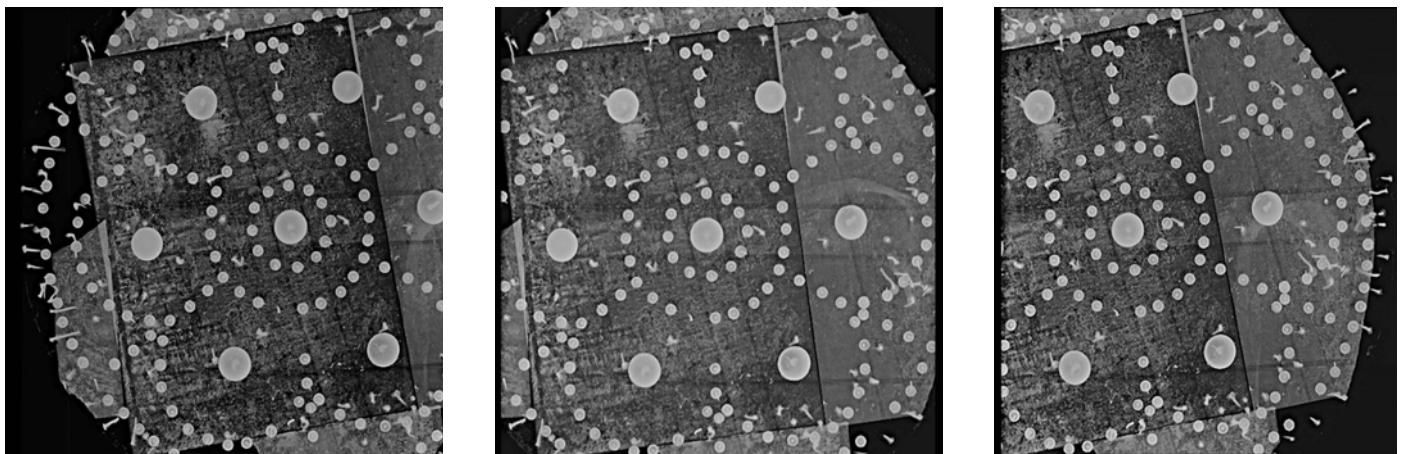


Figure 3. X-ray of the targe showing the metal plates between the wooden planks and the nails around the edges attaching the hide to the wood.

From the above it appears that the cost of two officer's targes was 10 shillings each while the other or common targe was five shillings each. The targe before you would fall into the category of the five shilling targe, which has become its common designation to collectors.

An unusual use in sports

In researching the targe, I became interested in its use in combat. I was surprised to find that the targe was used in an unusual and bloody sport of public entertainment in England, Scotland and Ireland. Men and women considered members of the lower class engaged in prize fighting on a public stage with basket hilted swords, both broad and back sword, while carrying a targe or other secondary weapon.

The 'sport' began at an unknown time but was practiced until the mid-eighteenth century. In a 1791 treatise titled, "*Lecture on the Art of Defense*", in *Highland Broadsword: Five Manuals of Scottish Regimental Swordsmanship*, Archibald MacGregor wrote: "*Those gladiators (vulgarly called bullies) used to travel from one place to another challenging whole armies, towns and cities to produce a man who would fight them. There is a tradition to this day among us, that when any of these gladiators came to a place the people were obliged to give so much money or produce a man to fight them with the sword.*"⁵ As an aside, many of these fights ended in death. The last known death from such a fight was in 1753.

The end of the era

It is well established by historians that before the Jacobite rising in 1745-46, targes were becoming a thing of the past. After the defeat of the Jacobite forces at Culloden, the British Disarming Acts resulted in most targes either being confiscated or destroyed.

James Drummond, noted that James Boswell, 9th Laird of Auchinleck, a Scottish biographer and lawyer, wrote about the scarcity of targes in 1773 regarding the armory at Dunvegan Castle on the Isle of Skye: "*There is hardly a target to be found in the Highlands. After the Disarming Act they made them serve as covers to their butter-milk barrels.*"⁶ When I was visiting Edinburgh Castle in 1985, one of the Docents told me that the remaining targes were used locally as covers for rain barrels.

Modern weapons and tactics that evolved over the decades literally rendered the targes effectiveness as a defensive weapon obsolete. They were being discarded by the Scottish soldier prior to Culloden. Enlistments of the clan regiments in 1745 indicate that few of the enlistees carried targes. As stated, after Culloden the strictly enforced British Disarming statutes of 1716, 1725 and 1746 (after Culloden) later banning the Scots carrying weapons, including targes, made their abandonment permanent. The highlander leaving the field is demonstrative of the effect of the Act in that everything he is either carrying or wearing except his shirt and shoes was essentially banned by the Act. No weapon, tartan, blue bonnet, white cockade, bagpipe, or other national symbol was permitted; violation of which could lead to fine and imprisonment, conscription or transportation to the colonies.

Broad swords and dirks are typical arms that would have been used in conjunction with the targe. You can imagine the effect this lethal combination would have on an opponent in hand to hand combat or while standing in a line attempting to reload a musket or repel such an attack with just a bayonet.

In its time, the targe, when used in combination with a sword and dirk, presented a formidable weapon in the hands of an experienced warrior. You may note that the leather front of this targe evidences a few pricks and nicks, possibly from bayonets or other edged weapons. While it has clearly seen some use it is still in remarkable condition for its age and rarity. Now a form of armor relegated to history through obsolescence by the transformation of warfare, military tactics and prohibition by law.



'Disbanded' by John Pettie University of Edinburgh Fine Art Museum, Edinburgh, United Kingdom.

ENDNOTES

- ¹ Blair, Claud. "A type of highland target." pgs 391- 398. In: *Scottish Weapons and Fortifications 1100-1800* edited by David H. Caldwell, John Donald Publishers, LTD, 1981, 138 St. Stephen St., Edinburgh
- ² Thompson, Christopher Scott. *Lessons of the Broadsword Masters*, Paladin Press. 2018.
- ³ Drummond, James. *Ancient Scottish Weapons*. George Waterston & Sons, Edinburgh & London. 1881, p. 14.
- ⁴ Ibid. p. 17
- ⁵ MacGregor, Archibald. "Lecture on the Art of Defense". In: *Highland Broadsword: Five Manuals of Scottish Regimental Swordsmanship*, eds. Paul Wagner and Mark Rector. Highland Village: Chivalry Bookshelf . 2004.
- ⁶ Drummond, Op. Cit. p. 18.

