THE SHARPE PISTOLS

A pair of English flintlock, breechloading, turnoff, superimposed-load, pillar-breech pistols marked "Sharpe". Probably William 1 or William 2, London, around 1670-1680.

by Matthew Schneiderman

Sometime in the last couple of years, I asked Secretary Paul why a particular member of the American Society had resigned. One reason: there were just too many flintlocks displayed at Society meetings. I knew the importance of this revelation immediately. It supplied incontrovertible proof of the existence of at least one parallel universe and of a path there and back. That's clearly where this guy was attending meetings.

Personally, I think the Sharpe pistols are, as my late mother-in-law Ruth used to say, the best thing since sliced bread. In this universe I realize that most of you won't agree, but I hope you'll enjoy hearing about them in this talk and looking at them in the display room.

I'm going to discuss four of the ways they're special.

1. The overall form and decoration.

The pistols are 14 ½" overall, with 7 3/8" .69 caliber octagonal smoothbore cannon barrels that turn off for loading, and are stocked in burl wood (Figure 1). They look different, because of their odd grip angle and long barrels. The trigger forms the rear of the trigger guard, a feature I can't recall seeing elsewhere. They have cute little belt hooks. Linking the large butt cap and the back of the breech, both functionally and aesthetically, is a long, thin, beaded back strap or butt tang. There's a bee flying out of a hive behind each cock—food, pollination, industry! There are many floral decorative elements: on the frizzen, on the back portion of the butt, and on the octagonal breech. There's also a perched bird on the trigger guard bow.

These pistols come fully equipped with grotesques, which I find very appealing: on both sides of the butt, spewing foliage, and on the trigger guard tang (Figure 1, bottom right). A grotesque, whether in decorative arts or architecture, is defined as a monster that's being discussed by someone who's read *Gargoyles and Grotesques*.[1] A gargoyle is an architectural grotesque designed to carry water away from the side of a building.

The star piece of decoration on these pistols is the face on the end of the butt, with floral elements emanating from his eyebrows, cheeks, and mouth, and the aforementioned grotesques flowing from the sides of his head (Figure 2, left). This is a Green Man,[2] a

Figure 1. A Sharpe pistol overall (top). Note the grip angle, the long octagonal barrel, the pan lever, the surprising location of the trigger, and the unusual form of the frizzen spring; the belt hook (second row); the breech decoration, maker's name, and London proof and view marks in ovals (third row); the back strap or long butt tang, and its screw attachment to the breech (fourth row). Bottom row, starting at the left and moving rightward: a bee and hive are engraved behind the cock; a floral decoration on the back of the frizzen; more flowers and foliage on the back of the butt; partial view of a grotesque spewing foliage on the butt (around 6 o'clock in the photo); a perched bird on the trigger guard bow; and a grotesque on the trigger guard tang (bottom right).

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Figure 2. Full view of the Green Man engraved onto the butt cap of the Sharpe pistols (left; photo curtesy of Bonhams). Wood carving of a Green Man2 (right).

folkloric figure dating back at least two and a half millennia, with a face made of or sprouting leaves, and generally thought to represent fertility and rebirth. Like grotesques, Green Men appear in a wide range of architecture and decorative arts (Figure 2, right). The Sharpe pistols show the earliest Green Man I've seen on a firearm, though there are probably earlier ones. He was fairly popular on English pistol butts in the 18th century (Figure 3, left). The latest decorates the grips of an 1870s/1880s Belgian-made British Bulldog revolver (Figure 3, right).

2. Superimposed loads.

Gunmakers and gun users have always wanted two or more shots. One method is superimposed loads, placing more than one charge in a barrel.[3] The earliest examples are from the 14th century. Superimposed loads are fired sequentially, not all at once (i.e. not like a volley gun). There are two broad types, without control and with control. The former, usually called "Roman Candle", uses special bullets with a passage in the middle, separated by charges. After initial ignition, the flame moves backward through

Figure 3. A Silver Green Man butt cap from a Queen Anne boxlock turnoff pistol by John Waters, Birmingham, hallmarked 1777 (left, photo by John Burgoyne). A Green Man grip on a Belgian-made British Bulldog revolver, the 1870s-1880s (right).

Figure 4. The pan and touch hole for the forward (first) shot (left). The control lever points forward. The pan and touch hole for the rear (second) shot (right). The control lever, rotated 180 degrees, points backward. The ignition flash will also enter the forward touch hole, but without any effect.

each bullet to the next charge, firing each round automatically in turn, though the shooter can move the gun during the process. In the latter, the shooter chooses when to fire, making some sort of mechanical adjustment between each shot.

The Sharpe pistols are loaded with rear (second shot) powder, rear ball, forward (first shot) powder, and forward ball.[4] There are two pans, cut into the top and the bottom of a rotating cylinder. Each which would be pre-primed. This works because the pans rotate within a tight-fitting outer enclosure that keeps the priming powder in place. Figure 4 (left) shows the pan and the touchhole for the forward (first) shot. The ignition channel for this shot travels forward through the breech wall, a remarkable technical feat. Figure 4 (right) shows the second pan, revealed after a 180 degree rotation of the control lever. The second touchhole is in the standard position, and leads directly to the rear (second) shot. Superimposed-load firearms are rare, but not super-rare. Many people bought them and used them successfully for centuries.

3. Pillar breeches.

The British have a great word to express not just astonishment but the feeling of being overwhelmed by wonder, surprise, and shock. I was gobsmacked to discover that the Sharpe pistols have a pillar breech. There's a thin post in the center of the breech (Figure 5). The breech is about 2 ¼" deep. I can't measure the length of the pillar, but I estimate it's about 1/3 of the breech depth. (In the photos, you see the end of the front or first shot ignition channel—that's a long trip). My early-firearms-collecting colleagues and I have never seen such a breech prior to the 19th century. What's its purpose?

The French general Louis-Etienne de Thouvenin invented the pillar breech in 1844. In Europe this structure is called a "tige", and it appears in some mid-century Continental military rifles.

Figure 5. A view of the pillar breech. The breech is very deep, with the pillar far down—enough room for two shots. Although the pillar looks off-center in the right photo, it is central. In both photos, the end of the forward-shot ignition channel is at 11 o'clock in the left image, and at 4 o'clock in the right.

I know it from the French civilian Devisme percussion revolver, invented in the mid 1850s.[5] Figure 6 shows a typical casing. Note the short rammer stored in the butt and the formidable mallet in the case. Figure 7 (left) shows the Thouvenin pillars in place. They take up most of the space in each chamber. You would fill the area around each pillar with powder, place a ball in the mouth of the chamber, and then smash it down onto the pillar with the rammer and mallet, or, if you'd lost or misplaced your mallet, with the butt of the revolver (you'd have removed the cylinder for loading) (Figure 8). This deformed the ball and sealed the chamber. It allowed the use of a ball smaller than the chamber diameter, easier to load and less apt to be interfered with by fouling, and made the ball take the grooves of the rifling that always accompanied this pillar breech. It eliminated windage. Devisme's improvements over other examples were to make the pillars removable (Figure 7, right), allowing cleaning (a big challenge otherwise), and to incorporate both the nipples and the ignition channels.

The Sharpe pistols appear in Keith Neal and David Back's book *Great British Gunmakers 1540-1740* (Figure 9).[6] The authors say "*The pillar in the interior of each breech was designed to expand the ball to obtain obturation to the rear when the rear charge was fired. The system was reintroduced in 1844 by Thouvenin when he sought a system ensuring that a projectile would take the grooves of a rifled barrel without stripping. This pair of pistols shows that Sharpe had anticipated the invention by one hundred and fifty years*". This is repeated verbatim in three different Bonhams sale catalogues.[7]

In this matter I have the pleasure of not only disagreeing with Neal & Back, among history's foremost authorities on early English firearms, but also of being correct. The Sharpe pillars are too thin to affect the shape of the ball; they were clearly not made to be anvils. These are turnoff pistols—no ramrods, no mallets for ball-mashing. Gunmakers could make breeches precisely, causing the ball to stop and fill the space exactly where they wanted it to without a pillar. Patches could be used to prevent unwanted backward ignition. Thousands of superimposed-load firearms were made over hundreds of years without pillars and worked well. I'm sure the Sharpe pillars simply provided powder measurement for the rear charge, not obturation. Metaphorically speaking, this is an example of convergent evolution: some creatures from different epochs independently develop structures of similar appearance but different function.

Figure 6. The Devisme revolver cased, and a view of its butt and rammer. Photos courtesy of Bolk Antiques.

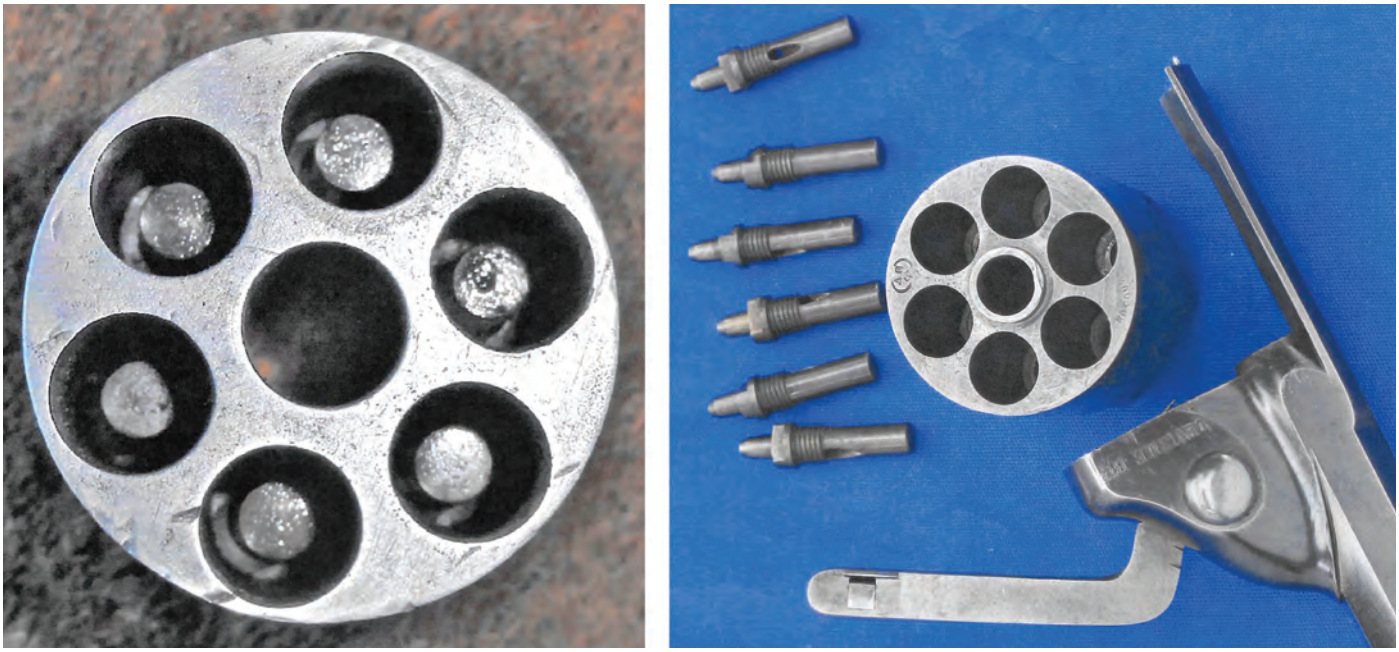

Figure 7. The Devisme cylinder, containing the Thouvenin pillars (left) and with the pillars removed (right). Note the nipples and the ignition channels are part of the pillars. Photos courtesy of Bolk Antiques.

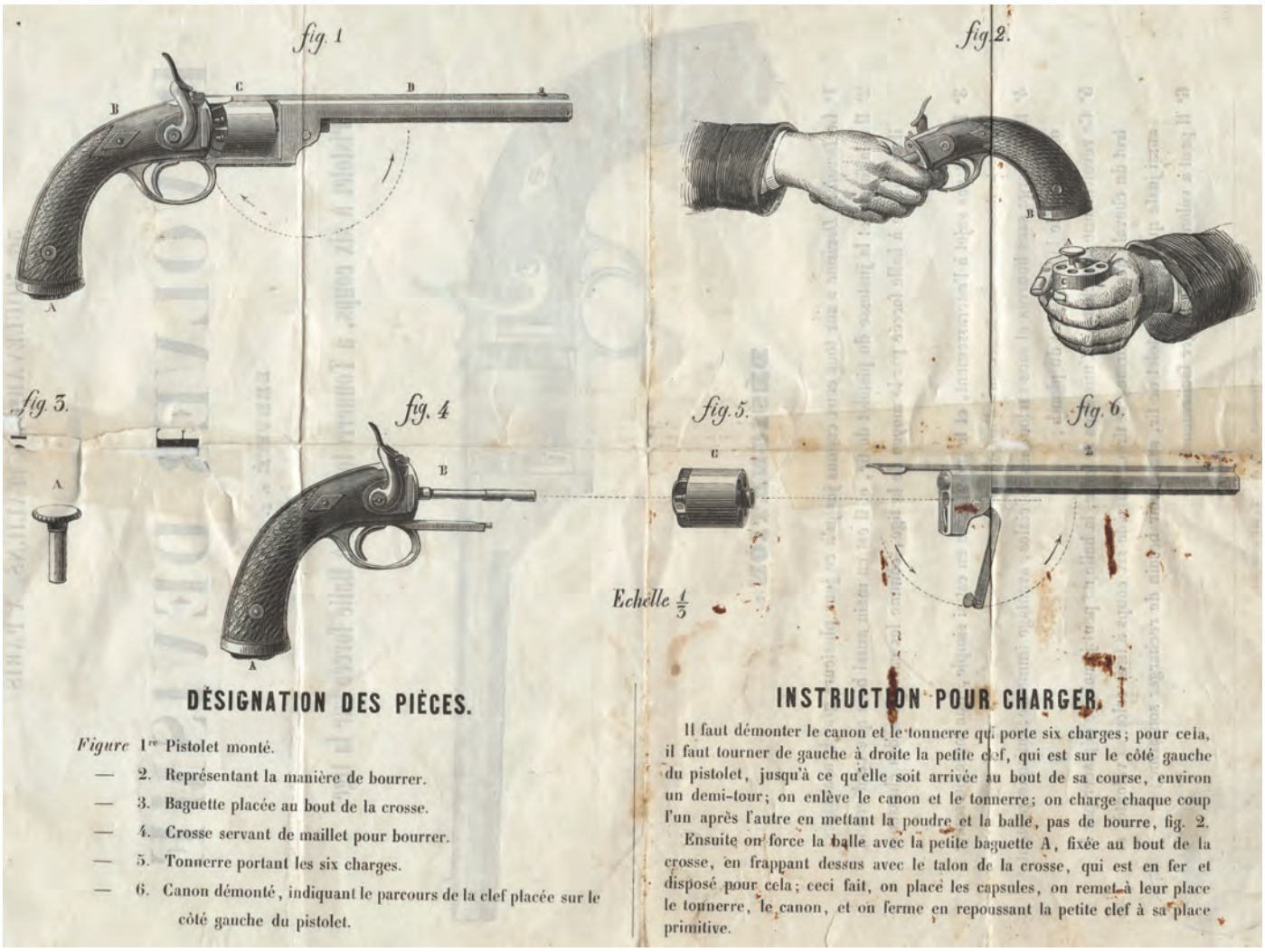

Figure 8. From an original Devisme percussion revolver information and instruction pamphlet, courtesy of Aaron Newcomer. See Figure 7.

Figure 9. The pistols displayed on top of their pages in Neal and Back's book.[6]

4. A debate: who made these pistols, and when?

Neal and Back say these pistols were made by Robert Sharpe around 1700. He was apprenticed to Thomas Hodgson in 1689, completing his training and joining the Gunmakers' Company in 1697. Neal and Back show the only other firearms attributed to him, a pair of pocket pistols and one gun. I have discussed these pistols with a group of colleagues who collect and study early English firearms, including Brian Godwin, Advisor on Firearms to Britain's National Trust and one of today's foremost authorities on 16th, 17th, and early 18th century firearms. Following the important collecting principles of "Take Nothing for Granted" and "Trust Your Connoisseurship", Brian raises the important questions "Who actually made these pistols, and when?"

The Sharpe pistols are advanced, complex, and idiosyncratic in their decoration and their function. It seems unlikely that a man just out of apprenticeship would have attempted and completed them. Neal's dating ("circa 1700") almost certainly arose from a misunderstanding of the dating power of London proof and view marks in the 17th and early 18th centuries. Traditional dating, not supported by any literature or historical evidence, says London proof and view in an oval, as on the Sharpe pistols, began in 1702. (Figure 10, left). Before then, supposedly, the marks were struck directly on the breech or barrel. (Figure 10, right). However, current expert opinion, supported by some writing[8] and many examples, now sees a transition from directly-struck to within-an-oval occurring gradually over the last quarter of the 17th century. This means no specific dating power. Requiring a gunmaker named Sharpe "circa 1700", Neal looked in the reference books and found Robert. Here's Brian's analysis, which makes good sense to me and which should serve for future reference.

My opinion is that the pistols date closer to 1670-80, based on form/style, decoration, etc…. It seems to me that Keith Neal has taken the Sharpe pistols to have been made by Robert Sharpe, without any proof that this is correct [see reference 6, page 257]. Robert Sharpe is recorded in Blackmore's Dictio

Figure 10. The Sharpe pistols' London proof and view marks, within ovals (left) and proof and view marks on a pistol by Thomas Hawley, struck directly on the breech (right). Above is Hawley's maker's mark.

nary as Free in 1697.[9] *Could he really have produced such wonderful work as [these] pistols so early in his career?*

Surely William Sharpe, either 1 or 2, would have been more likely and capable of such fine work - William 1, whose working life must date back to 1660? and then certainly as Gunmaker to Charles II in 1673, or perhaps his son, William 2, having been trained by his father. When I look at [these] pistols I see elements of work that are much earlier than the suggested date of 1700 - the butt caps with long tangs that reach as far as the breech and are fixed there by a screw; the octagonal cannon shaped barrels with belt-hooks; the early shape and fixing of the frizzen springs; the typical design and form of the engraving.[10]

Conclusion

Glorious 17th century decoration, a rare ignition system, and the unique pillar-breech feature make the Sharpe pistols a special treat for me, and I hope fun for you. The added fact that I, a mere journeyman, though with advanced consultants, get to correct two Masters not once but twice should inspire all of us in our continuing research.

Acknowledgements

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As always, I welcome questions and comments at schneiderman615@gmail.com

Endnotes

1 Woodcock, Alex. *Gargoyles and Grotesques*. Shire Publications, Oxford, UK, and New York, NY, 2016.

2 Hayman, Richard. *The Green Man*. Shire Publications, Oxford, UK, and New York, NY, 2010. In addition, here's an excellent website that provides Green Man information and discussion: http://www.lukemastin.com/greenmanenigma/

3 The classic and central book in this area is Baxter, D. R. *Superimposed Load Firearms 1360-1860*. South China Morning Post, Hong Kong, 1966.

4 For help with understanding the Sharpe pistols' superimposed-load construction and function, take a look at Schneiderman, Matthew, and Burgoyne, John. "Superimposed-Load Flintlock Pistols: Three Examples of 18th Century Technology", *Arms Heritage Magazine*, Vol. 7, No. 4:21-25 (August 2017). If you can't find this reprint, I can supply it.

5 For a good discussion of the Devisme percussion revolver, see Boas, Glen. "Devisme The Other Civil War Period French Revolver", *The Gun Report*, Vol. 52, No.12:16-20 (May 2007). I can also supply this reprint.

6 Neal, W. Keith and Back, D. H. L. *Great British Gunmakers 1540-1740*. Historical Firearms, Norwich, UK,1984, pages 258-260.

7 Bonhams November 27, 2019, lot 392; May 24, 2023 lot 370; and November 22, 2023, lot 288.

8 Dixon, Norman. *Georgian Pistols*. George Shumway Publisher, York, PA, 1971, pages 111, 121, and 122.

9 Blackmore, Howard L. *Gunmakers of London 1350-1850*. George Shumway Publisher, York, PA,1986, page 176. "Free" means he finished his apprenticeship and was admitted to the London Gunmakers Company, which was the gunmakers' guild.

10 Brian Godwin, email of January 17, 2024.