

Proofs on Sterling Silver

By Robert Holter

In the early 1960s I acquired a pair of English flintlock pistols (Figure 1). These small pistols are brass throughout the screw barrel and breech piece with the usual iron frizzen, cock, trigger and trigger plate. One pistol is stamped with the number 1 on both the barrel and the breech piece while the other is not numbered; also there appears the mark of the London firearms proof house. The fine-grained English walnut grips still evidence silver filigree. The grip caps are also of silver. The iron trigger guards slide forward to lock the flint hammers in the half cock position. The pistols are marked “Barber” (Figure 2) on one side and “London” on the other. Dating? None. These pistols were probably made by Peter Barber, son of Louis Barbar.

The pistols, while not of exceptional condition, were maintained in my collection more as a curiosity than items of great value, but I must confess that I fired them with very small charges of black powder. During a business trip to Washington, I visited the Smithsonian’s display centered on Thomas Jefferson. Included in the display was a pair of Barber pistols, identical to those in my collection, that had belonged to Jefferson. The display card said they were made in 1775. There was no explanation of how the date of manufacture was determined.

When I arrived home, I took another look at my Barber pistols. I did recall there were marks on the silver butt caps (Figures 3-5), but had no means of deciphering them. Most of my friends out west collect items associated with the



western settlement of the United States. Among them are collectors of traps, Indian artifacts—great hunt items, Indian war items, and the like. Most have no experience with English flintlock pistols other than “gee whiz”.

One day while looking at a lot of “for sale” books I came across *Old Silver and Old Sheffield Plate* by Howard Pitcher Okie (Figure 6). I liked the references to both English and American Silver marks (Figure 7) since family collections contained some of each. It was a perfect book to attract the attention of a born collector of anything interesting.

I decided to see if I could unscramble the marks on the butt plates of the Barber pistols, which did not take long. I found the Lion Passant and the Anchor, indicated by Okie to be the marks of the Birmingham Assay Office. The CF in a square block indicated the butt caps were the product of Charles Freeth, whose mark is noted on page 141. I could find no date stamp on the exterior or inside surfaces of the butt caps. However, Okie provided an additional bit of information: opposite the name and date mark of 1775-6 appears the notation “Mounts for horse pistols”.

The Freeth 1776-7 entry carries the notation “Light Striker” and the entry for 1777-8 indicates Charles Freeth partnered with Richard Bickley, and the two



Figure 1.



Figure 2.



Figure 5.



Figure 3.



Figure 4.

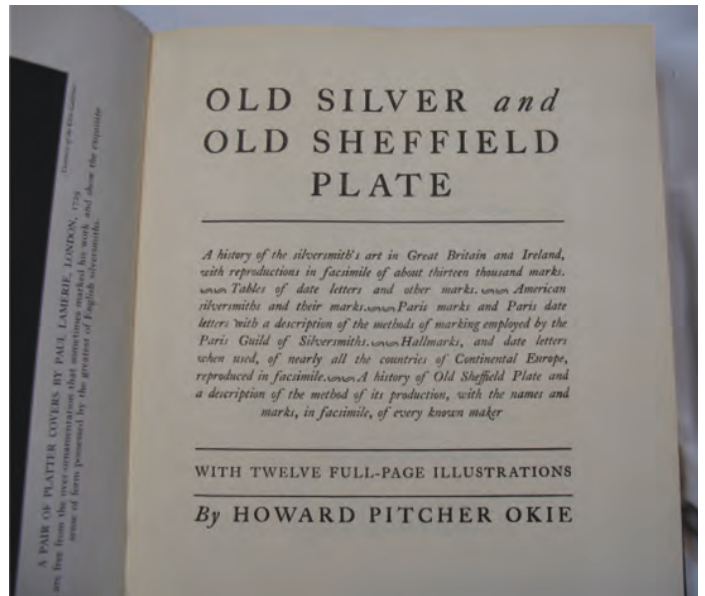


Figure 6.

adopted a different stamp incorporating both of their initials. The entry delineating the dual mark indicates they were making “mounts of pistols”. By deduction, the Barber pistols in my collection bear butt caps made before 1777.

The requirement of proof marks on English precious metals was first established around 1300 when Edward I required that silver goods could not be taken from the hands of the maker unless it be assayed by the wardens of the silversmith’s craft and marked with a leopard’s head. Later, “her Majesty’s Lion” was recognized. The proof requirement gave the guild system almost absolute control of all production of items of trade made from precious metals. Over the years, the proof system led to different results. For instance in 1697 to prevent the melting down of English coins that were .925 fine from being used to make silver items, a new law required all such items in order to be proofed to be made of .958 fine silver. It took the bureaucrats 20 or more

MAKER'S MARK.	MAKER'S NAME.	ARTICLES AND OWNERS.
MB IF	Matthew Boulton & John Fothergill.	Pair of salts: Birmingham Assay Office.
" "	" "	Candlesticks: Mr. M. B. Huish. Do. : B'm'ham Assay Office.
CF	Charles Freeth.	Mounts of horse-pistols. Mr. F. Weekes.
" "	" "	Light striker: Mr. F. Weekes.
RB CF	Richard Bickley, Charles Freeth.	Mounts of pistol: Mr. Dudley Westropp.
MB IF	Boulton & Fothergill.	Cake-basket: Mr. H. D. Ellis.
" "	" "	Candlesticks: Mr. W. Boore.
TW	T. Willmore & Alston.	Pair of shoe buckles: B'm'ham Assay Office.
		Marks from B'm'ham Assay

Figure 7.

Marks on London Plate

CYCLE XIII. FOUR STAMPS AS BELOW.				CYCLE XIV. FOUR STAMPS AS BELOW.					
DATE	BRIT. ANNIA.	DATE LETTER.	LION'S HEAD ERASED.	MAKER'S MARK.	DATE	LEOPARD'S HEAD CROWNED.	DATE LETTER.	LION PASSANT.	MAKER'S MARK.
1716-7		A		HO V	1736-7		a		MY
1717-8		B		FF KE	1737-8		b		LA MF
1718-9		C		HA FE	*1738-9		c		RZ
1719-20	LEOPARD'S HEAD CROWNED	D	LION PASSANT.	TE LA			d		TK
1720-1		E		WP BK	1739-40		e		RA
				ED FA			f		MR
1721-2		F		TS GB	1740-1		g		SH
				ES IS	1741-2		h		DR
1722-3		G		EV IL	1742-3		i		IG
				BN	1743-4		k		WH
1723-4		H		NG CO	1744-5				LP
				TE TF	1745-6				BN
1724-5		I		RB SC					
				HU SH					

Figure 8.

years to discover the silversmiths were still melting down silver coins and simply added pure silver to the melted coins to achieve the required standard of .958. The law was repealed in 1720; however, silver could be produced above the .958 standard and would carry the stamp of Britannia to note the higher silver content.

What Okie designates on page 29 as Cycle XIII and XIV on London plate (Figure 8) has been selected as an illustration. First note cycle XIII starts with the year 1716-17 while cycle XIV starts with the year 1736-37. The reason for these

"fiscal year" type of changes was that the Guild adopted St. Dunstan's Day (May 19) for the beginning of the new mark. Thus the Mark for 1716 would be applied on items made between May 19, 1716 and May 18 of 1717. Why St. Dunstan's day? He was the patron saint of silver-smiths and goldsmiths, an interesting historical character who lived from the year 909 to 988 and is venerated in the British Isles.

Note the stamp "Britannia" appears for the date of 1716 and is used until 1719. Thereafter, the Leopard's head in various forms replaces it. This is the mark of the Assay Office. In general, these two stamps were used to indicate the item conformed to the proper silver content. Marks changed and the usage of the marks changed throughout the whole period of employment. In order to make sure the marks on the piece display the complete story, a thorough study of the piece and all the marks is necessary.

Looking at the date stamp, I could find no reason why the London proof utilized 20-year cycles in the stamping process, but that is what they did. Every cycle used only 20 letters of the alphabet to designate the year of proof, frequently omitting some of the last letters of the alphabet. The year stamp was within a distinctive, usually shield-shaped surround that varied with each cycle. Interestingly, the Birmingham proof house used the full 26 character alphabet. It was the lions head or the lion passant that certified the piece was genuine English silver.

The last column illustrates the marks of the individual silversmith. These must be examined with great care to properly determine the name of the maker. Okie devotes many pages displaying the marks of individuals who worked in different locations in England. First, you need to determine the date and place of manufacture if possible, and then examine the makers marks for that approximate time. This research may require a lot of time.

Not all English silver was manufactured in London. Okie exhibits information about York, Norwich, Exeter, Newcastle, Chester, Birmingham, Sheffield, and minor English Guilds. In addition, there is Edinburgh, Glasgow, and minor Scottish Guilds. Ireland had proof houses at Dublin and Cork, as well as those of minor Guilds. Okie includes listings of American silversmiths and their marks and concludes with continental marks. The book is an excellent resource to untangle the marks on the majority of sterling silver.

I selected plates XIII and XIV for display because they delineate the hallmarks utilized during a very interesting period in English history. A recent article, in *Man at Arms* by John Burgoyne and Craig Ross, explains that during this time many French Huguenot artisans were expelled from France and made their way to England. Their numbers included gun makers who added artistry to their work not existing in English firearms made before this time.

The article explains that before the Plate Offenses Act of 1738, very few mounts for firearms were hallmarked. The 1738 act required all sterling products that included gun mounts to bear the stamp of the maker and all the other proof house stamps. The reason proofs on mounts were not utilized before that date is unexplained, but the dearth of precious metal mounts on English firearms before the Huguenot influence leads to the inference that if such mounts were made, they were insignificant in numbers and did not attract the attention of the Guild. It might also be explained by the growing power of the proof house with economic control of the precious metal trade and guaranty of the silver content of the article bearing the marks.

There is a lack of references in Okie's book relating to firearms. Okie usually did not specify the particular type of product a possessor of a hallmark usually produced. It appears most of them made what we today call silverware or silver dishes or pots. These items appear to have been Okie's principle interest. In the *Man at Arms* article, the authors

use the maker's and proof house stamps on Barbar pistols to date them. The maker of the silver mounts used the stamps JB. JB was James Brooker, who first registered his stamp in fiscal 1734. The letter "e" in a shield indicates the proof house year of 1741. Okie book does not mention the type of product Brooker usually produced.

References in the Okie book regarding guild members producing mounts for guns are almost non-existent. It was sheer luck that I found the maker of the mounts for my Barber pistols, Charles Freeth. A study of a large number of English pistols would perhaps uncover the names of more mount makers. But then, how many English pistols actually have silver mounts? I personally do not have enough exposure to large collections to undertake such a study. A limiting factor is that in the later years of the 18th century, silver mounts for pistols fell into disfavor.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

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