

BRITISH PATTERN 1759/76 LIGHT DRAGOON PISTOL

by Peter A. Schmidt



Figure 1. Pattern 1738 Dragoon pistol (top) over a Pattern 1759 (middle) and Pattern 1759/76 (lower).

The Pattern 1759 Light Dragoon pistol (Figure 1) is a well-known arm to British Military collectors and thanks to the extensive research by De Witt Bailey, more in-depth knowledge exists today regarding their manufacture and use in the service than ever before. Some background information is in order here to better understand the development of this pistol. In 1728, British Cavalry General Henry Hawley wrote a paper in which he advocated for Light Dragoons, suggesting they be armed with a cartridge box across the left shoulder, and close under the right arm, with a good short sword, a small saddle with one pistol on the near side.¹ Nothing came of this idea until 1745, when the Kingston Light Horse were raised to serve in the Rebellion of 1745, and was disbanded three years later.

At the start of the Seven Years' War in 1756, General Hawley revise his original plans suggesting that one Light Troop be added to each of the 14 Regiments of Dragoons.² These Light Dragoons would be mounted on smaller nimbler horses, issued carbines, but no mention of pistols, indicating they must have retained their standard issue Dragoon pistols, lacking anything else to issue. The experiment must have been a success because in 1759 six entirely new Light Dragoon Regiments were raised numbering 15th - 21st.³ They settled on carrying a carbine having a 37-inch-long

barrel and after some experiments with different pistols, settled on a pair of pistols having 9-inch-long barrels of carbine bore (.65 caliber), simplified brass furniture (Figure 1 and 2) and a sword with a 37-inch-long blade either curved or straight depending upon the regulation of the Regiment.

These pistols have locks produced between 1759 and 1762 as dated by the different lock makers employed. Among the lock makers I have noted are Richard Edge, William Grice (Figure 3, top), George Haskins, Edward Jordan and George Vernon. This group of pistols were the first to include a new lock construction that first appeared on these Pattern 1759 Light Dragoon pistols (Figure 3). The first notable difference is that the head of the pivot-screw, where the steel rotates, now enters from inside of the lock plate with the screw threads into the outside pan bridle (Figure 3). This would mean that the battery screw cannot work its way out if the screw threads become loosened. The second notable difference is in the comb of the cock which is now a straight narrow pillar with a well-developed notch at the front. The pillars square shape corresponds to a three-sided slot in the top jaw that rides around the cock's pillar instead of being flat with a narrow groove to maintain its position by a projection in the top jaw during tightening to hold the flint (Figure 3, bottom). A less noticeable fea-



Figure 2. Reverse side of the Pattern 1738 (top) over 1759 with simplified brass furniture.



Figure 3. Lock plate markings of Pattern 1759 Grice pistol (top left); inside of William Grice 1759 lock showing “WG” makers stamp inside (top right); comparison of steel pivot screws between 1738 and 1759 locks (bottom left) and top jaw tangs of the Pattern 1738 and 1759 pistols (bottom right).

ture is the lock plate is slightly smaller than previous pistol locks. In 1763, at the end of the Seven Years' War, Britain reduced the number of effectives to a peacetime establishment having more manageable cost. This resulted in many pistols being turned into store and either preserved intact or broken down into repairable components to be reused another day.

When the American Colonies revolted in 1775, Britain's entire army expanded to war time strengths, including two light Dragoon Regiments that were destined to make the 13-week voyage to America in order to subdue the Colonies. The 16th Light Dragoons, also known as the Queens Light Dragoons, along with Preston's 17th Light Dragoons needed to be augmented to full combat strength before their voyage to America. Lacking a sufficient quantity of pistols in store to outfit the two expanding Light Dragoon Regiments, the Board of Ordnance, having a quantity of refurbished barrels from those broken up after the 1763 reductions, needed pistols set up with new locks (Figure 4). This resulted in a contract awarded in December, 1775 to produce enough new locks required to set up the 684 pairs of Pattern 1759 Light Dragoon pistols required for augmentation of the two regiments.⁴ The pistols were completed by July, 1776 and the Board directed 300 pairs

for the 16th and the balance of 384 pairs for the 17th Light Dragoons.⁵ This group of pistols are easily identified by only having the word "TOWER" (Figure 4, bottom) engraved behind the cock without a date since the Board of Ordnance stopped dating Locks in 1764. Additionally, this pistol's lock is stamped "GH" inside the lock plate identifying a George Haskins made lock. Due to the death of George Haskins in 1775, we know these are the last locks he produced, so these undated Haskin Locks could not have been made later in the war, and according to the records were specifically procured for this group of pistols destined for North American service.⁶ It is unclear to me why Bailey did not designate this group as Pattern 1759/76 pistols, in accordance with his other designations. It may be that he located the archival information but he did not have access to actual specimens in England to examine. Blackmore referred to these 9-inch-long barreled pistols as "Elliot's Pattern" named for General George Augustus Elliot, Colonel of the 15th Light Dragoons as the officer responsible for its design. I believe that DeWitt Bailey's use of pattern dates such as "Pattern 1759 Light Dragoon Pistol" promotes a maturity in collecting because as each batch of these pistols were manufactured, improvements were made so that now collectors can communicate



Figure 4. Barrels of Pattern 1759/76 pistols showing refurbished barrel with faint proofs (top); lock of the TOWER Pattern 1759/76 pistol made by George Haskins in 1775 (bottom) with George Haskin's "GH" maker's stamp inside.

the different variations by date such as Pattern 1759/76 Light Dragoon and those made using Pattern 1777 locks as Pattern 1759/78 pistols and with additional research beyond the year 1800.

This example first came to my attention in a Bonham's auction catalog in 2013 offering the sale of deceased American Society of Arms Collectors (ASAC) member Clark Hoffman's collection. The description for item 4266 stated that "R/28" was marked on the bow of the trigger guard (without a picture) and stated there was a date of 1786 below the storekeeper's mark on the stock. These two features made no sense because British Light Dragoon Regiments only contained six troops and if marked alphabetically would have been A through F (Figure 5, left). This meant the "R/28" marking did not belong on this pistol and I lost interest in it since it was described as having a post war date of 1786 below the storekeeper's mark. In passing on this pistol, I was following one of my proven instincts, if you see one thing wrong there will probably be more, so I did not bid on the pistol.



Figure 5. Typical Queens Light Dragoon trigger guard with "A/1" indicating troop and soldier fraction (left; Don Troiani collection) and Tower Pattern 1759/76 trigger guard showing the pistol's "R/28" fraction.

The following year at the Maryland Arms Collectors Association show in Baltimore, I saw the same pistol on a dealers table and immediately recognized the mysterious "R/28" on the trigger guard (Figure 5, right). But now having the opportunity to study the "R/28" engraving more closely, I decided the "R/28" was authentic of the period and I was unable to find a 1786 date beneath the storekeeper's mark, this error was probably caused by a cut & paste of text by the cataloger at Bonham's. (Figure 6). At this point in time, I fully understood the TOWER lock marking connection to George Haskins as well as the faint proof mark, indicating a refurbished barrel. So, after deciding the gun was ok, I purchased the pistol after some negotiations, still not understanding the meaning of "R/28" on the trigger guard.

After several years of owning the pistol, my curiosity was sparked to see on page 18 of *Don Troiani's Soldiers of the American Revolution*,⁷ a print showing a dismounted 16th Light Dragoon trooper carrying a Pattern 1776 infantry rifle (Figure 7). The caption contained an observation that stated "and a Hessian eyewitness - a pistol probably worn in a simple holster attached to a waist belt - or shoulder belt". This made me wonder, could the "R" indicate a Rifle Troop? This was the first thought that made any sense, but by itself very circumstantial at this point in time.



Figure 6. Storekeeper's markings on both Light Dragoon pistols lacking dates.



Figure 7. Plate from page 18 of a dismounted 16th Light Dragoon trooper in *Don Troiani's Soldiers of the American Revolution*.⁷

I searched available sources for information on the Pattern 1776 rifle and first read an article written by Anthony Darling on British rifles in a 1972 issue of the *Canadian Journal of Arms Collecting*.⁸ One of the photographs in his article caught my attention showing the Butt Plate tang of a British Pattern 1776 rifle, owned by an American collector, altered to percussion, with an engraved “R/23” in a similar fashion to the engraving on my pistol (Figure 8). Darling noted in the caption that he believed it to be the designation of a Rifle Company. Believing these two markings may be connected, meant I needed to learn more about the development and use of the Pattern 1776 rifle, since I had already exhausted what I could about these pistols. A thorough reread of DeWitt Bailey’s book *British Military Flintlock Rifles 1740-1840*.⁹ provided some excellent supporting information.

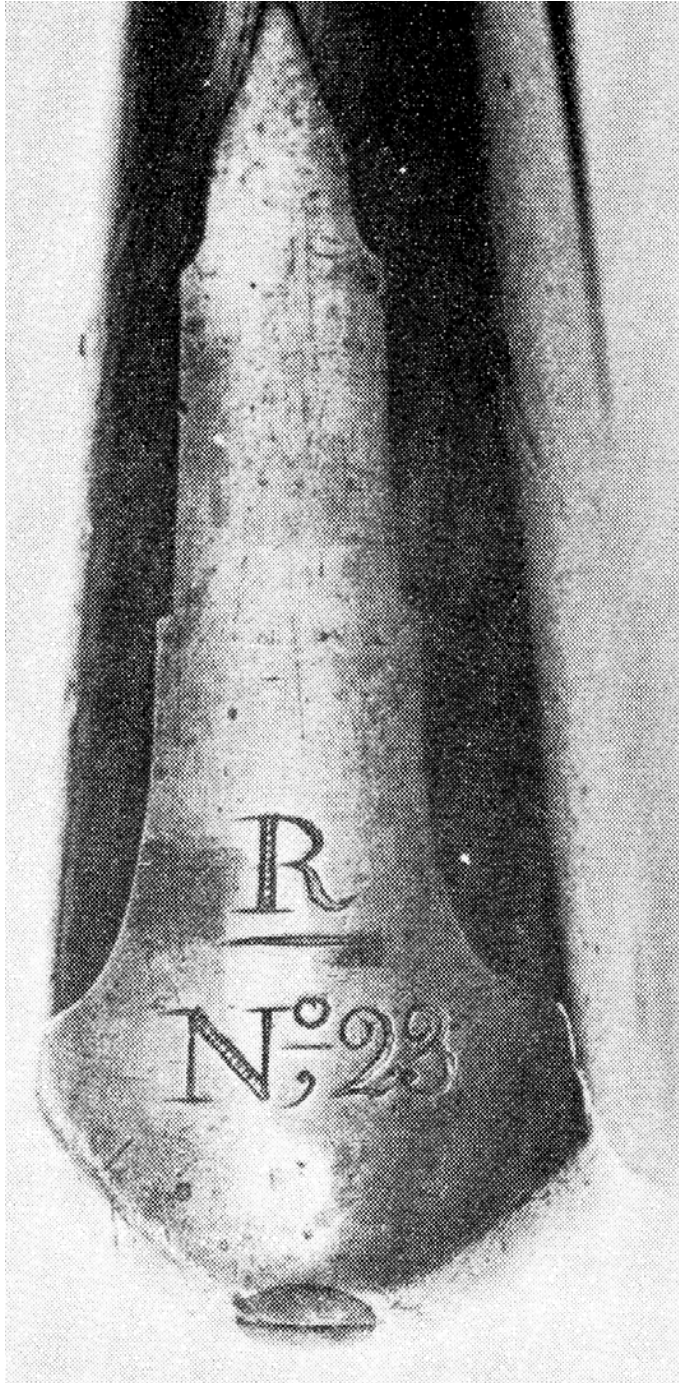


Figure 8. Pattern 1776 rifle showing the “R/23” fraction on butt plate tang.

Development of the British Pattern 1776 rifle is too extensive to cover here, but initially 200 rifles were made by a German gun maker August Heinrich Huhnstock, samples passed trials in Great Britain, and then 800 more rifles were produced within the British Ordnance system.¹⁰ On December 16, 1775, before the 800 rifles were completed, the following letter was written by Lord Townsend to the Secretary of State for America.¹¹

The Highlanders who have many marksmen & Deer Killers amongst them are particularly desirous of having 5 of those pieces per Company, I am persuaded they would be of great use in America, Colonel Harcourt desires also the same proportion, and I would submit whether every Battalion Engaged in this Service should be provided with this much boasted weapon of that Country.

William Harcourt was the Lieutenant Colonel of the 16th Light Dragoons and the 16th was raised by General John Burgoyne in 1759. The unit was renumbered the 2nd Queens Light Dragoons in 1766, then due to confusion with a new numbering system, renumbered the 16th in 1769. If each of the dismounted troopers were issued a pistol and short rifle, there is good reason for Harcourt to be boasting of his units firepower when he wrote to his father the 1st Earl Harcourt on 23 May 1776.¹²

The Dismounted part of the Regiment, which I have the vanity enough to think are at least as well trained and much better armed and appointed than any Light Infantry in the army, are now in the neighbourhood of London, and will be seen by H.M. on their march on Saturday next...

From the above, it is clear that Lieutenant Colonel Harcourt intended to arm a seventh troop of dismounted troopers with the rifled guns even before they were finished and indicates there must have been a serious anticipation of the advantage the new rifled guns offered. Note that by this time, if the issue of five rifles included both Battalions of the 42 and the 71 Regiments that would have consumed 200 rifles.

When the 16th landed at New York, in September, 1776, a Hessian Major Baurmeister, reported seeing 40 dismounted Dragoons.¹³ Major Carl Leopold Bauermeister was the Adjutant General of the Hessian forces but his quantity was incorrect as Harcourt’s own statement after the war when requesting replacement arms as the Regiment was being re-raised requested 54 rifles.¹⁴ The records also show that the 16th Light Dragoons were authorized 54 unspecified long arms, listed under carbines, as well as 54 pistols on 27 September 1775.¹⁵ So, we know they got the pistols.

During 1776 the 16th Light Dragoons participated in the Battles of White Plains, New York and the Trenton, New Jersey campaigns. The 16th went on to participate in the Philadelphia Campaigns of 1777 including Brandywine, Germantown, Paoli and Crooked Billet. The following year (1778), action included the retreat through the Jerseys and the Battle of Monmouth Court House where it is reported the regiment suffered heavily. After Monmouth Court House, the depleted regiment transferred the enlisted mounted men to the 17th and the officers returned to England to re-raise the Regiment. It is noted in the Regimental History of the 16th Light Dragoons that at this time “a dismounted detachment was sent to the West Indies, and the remainder of the Regiment embarked for England.”¹⁶ Of course, all their arms were left in America.

The last relevant information I found regarding the Rifle Troop happened after the 16th Light Dragoon officers return to England. In 1779 Harcourt sent a request for arms for the new recruits, since the Regiments arms were left in America. A warrant was issued March 8, 1779 for 420 carbines and 420 pairs of pistols and on March 30th, Harcourt applied for rifles as well. The Board responded that *“Harcourt be acquainted to his letter of 30th Ult. desiring 54 rifle Barrel Carbines for the 16 Regiment of Dragoons, that no other arms can be issued than what are mentioned in the Kings Warrant: and that Lord Amherst is pleased to observe that as the 16th is reduced to the same number as the other Light Dragoons. They can have no men to serve on foot.”*¹⁷



Figure 9. Pattern 1759 Lock compared to Pattern 1777 Locks with two screws visible to the left of the cock.

The pistol marked “R/28” cannot be post-war issue because the issue of 420 pairs of pistols, once the regiment returned to England, happened on 4 March 1779. These newly issued arms would have been set up with the Pattern 1777 locks, having a short sear spring and a second screw pin protruding behind the cock¹⁸ (Figure 9). I could find no other references to any British mounted regiments having a dismantled troop carrying rifles, and it seems clear that this was an experiment by Lieutenant Colonel Harcourt adding one foot troop carrying a Pattern 1776 rifle and one Pattern 1759 Light Dragoon pistol. Unfortunately, this pistol in not marked “QLD” on the barrel, which would have put the mystery of “R/28” to rest long ago, but the question of what else can it mean if this specimen was not one of the 54 pistols issued to the foot troop?

In closing, even though “QLD” (for Queens Light Dragoons) is not present on the barrel of either this pistol or the rifle, published information cited above makes a compelling argument that the existence of one Pattern 1776 rifle and one Pattern 1759 Light Dragoon pistol exist in America, with an “R” over private’s rack number no higher than 54, as were the arms issued to the Foot Troop of the Queens Light Dragoons. It is also clear the British did not structure any other such units as Amherst stated in 1779. It is difficult to compare the engraving styles of rack numbers because it is likely that different hands performed the engravings depending upon when each series of arms were issued to the regiment. It appears in some cases that regimental designations were engraved by one hand prior to being sent to the Regiment and the final fraction designation may have been done by another hand prior to issuing to the individual soldier. This leaves an open question as to if or when every British arm received all the regimental designations. Since these pistols were reported to have been completed in July, 1776, the Queens Light Dragoons should have already departed for North America in late June in order to make the 13-week voyage as they were reported to have arrived in late September, 1776.¹⁹ This means that the pistols were shipped separately arriving on a transport ship after they had landed in New York. This timeline makes it likely that there may not have been enough time to engrave them as was customary to do when sufficient time was allotted to mark the arms.

Correspondence revealed there was an intention for the balance of the Pattern 1776 rifles to be issued at the rate of five rifles per company to British Foot regiments serving in America, and if that order was carried out, there would have been no reason for double digit rack numbers as on the rifle in Darling’s article.²⁰

Finding no other documented use for these designations, it is hard to draw any other conclusion than these two arms were issued to the Foot Troop of the Queens Light Dragoons. In reviewing the Pattern 1776 rifles, we know they were here in quantity because New York had 16 serviceable and 210 repairable rifles in store between January, 1780 and May, 1781. It is also stated that 14 serviceable rifles were issued from New York to Provincial Troops between 1 January 1780 and 7 May 1781. Near the end of the War on March 10, 1783 New York reported 234 serviceable, 141 repairable and two unserviceable rifles in store for a total of 377 of these rifles.²¹ The written evidence suggests the British issued rifles in small quantities.

My experience in studying marked Revolutionary War arms that were issued and used in the War has taught me that very little has survived. The goal of this paper is that another marked pistol or rifle will be identified as it would be of interest to know if any other specimens exist of either of these two arms with an R over a corresponding number between 1 and 54. Lastly, I have to thank some excellent research done over the years by Howard Blackmore, Lewis H. Gordon Jr. Anthony D. Darling, De Witt Bailey, Don Troiani and of course Major Baumeister for publishing his observations after the War. Together their works were key facts in completing this study.

ENDNOTES

- ¹ Rogers, Colonel H.C.B. *The Mounted Troops of the British Army, 1066-1945*, London, Seeley Service & Co. Limited. 1959, p. 98.
- ² Ibid., p. 99.
- ³ Gordon, Lewis H., Jr., “The British Cavalry and dragoon pistol”, *Canadian Journal of Arms Collecting*, Volume 5, No. 4, Museum Restoration Service, 1967, p. 112.
- ⁴ Bailey, De Witt. *Pattern Dates for British Ordnance Small Arms 1718-1783*, Thomas Publications, 1997. pp. 63 and 114. It should also be noted that the term “Augmentation” meant bringing the Regiments from a Peace time strength to a war time footing.
- ⁵ Bailey, De Witt. *Small Arms of the British Forces in America, 1664-1815*, Andrew Mowbray Incorporated, Woonsocket, R.I, 2009. p. 218.
- ⁶ Bailey, DeWitt. *British Board of Ordnance Small Arms Contractors 1689-1840*, W.S. Curtis Publications, 1999, Page 48. Bailey also states the Augmentation number of 30 men per troop in six troops for each regiment in *Small Arms of the British forces in America 1664-1815*, 2009. p. 356.
- ⁷ Troiani, D. and Kochan, J. L. *Don Troiani's Soldiers of the American Revolution* Stackpole Books, 2007.
- ⁸ Darling, A. D. “An 18th century English military rifle”. *Canadian Journal of Arms Collecting*. Vol 10 no 2. 1972. Page 60 Figure 6. The rifle illustrated has been altered to percussion indicating it was in America and left behind.
- ⁹ Bailey, DeWitt. *British Military Flintlock Rifles 1740-1840*, Andrew Mowbray, 2002, Page 22, also see Blackmore, Howard, *British Military Firearms, 1650-1850*, London, Herbert Jenkins, 1961, pp. 67-70.
- ¹⁰ Bailey, Ibid., pp. 24-25.
- ¹¹ Bailey, DeWitt. *British Military Flintlock Rifles 1740-1840*, Andrew Mowbray, 2002, p. 22, also see Blackmore, Howard, *British Military Firearms, 1650-1850*, London, Herbert Jenkins, 1961, Page 67-70.
- ¹² Ibid., p. 22. Bailey lists his source as Harcourt, E. W. (ed) *The Harcourt Papers*, v, XI, 170.
- ¹³ *North Carolina Historical Review*, Volume 34, Number 4, October, 1957 pp. 546-548. Major Carl Leopold Bauermeister was the Adjutant General of the Hessian Forces and was considered a keen and relatively unbiased observer.
- ¹⁴ Baily, DeWitt. 2009.Op. cit. p. 32.
- ¹⁵ Baily, DeWitt. 2009. Op. Cit. Appendix V, p. 308. There is no doubt that 54 long arms are listed under “C&B” an abbreviation for carbines & bayonets, which makes sense because these arms were called “rifled carbines” in Ordnance Records and the 54 pistols are listed without wording while the others are listed as “PrP” indicating Pairs of Pistols.
- ¹⁶ Colonel Graham, Henry. *History of the Sixteenth, the Queens, Light Dragoons (Lancers) 1759-1912*, University of Michigan, 1912, p. 8.
- ¹⁷ Bailey, DeWitt. Op. cit. 2009, p. 32.
- ¹⁸ Bailey DeWitt. Op. cit. 2009. P. 358.
- ¹⁹ Troiana and Kochen, Op cit., pp. 18-19.
- ²⁰ The author has never seen one of these rifles up close as they are extremely rare.
- ²¹ Baily, DeWitt. Op. cit. 2009, Pp. 321-323.

