

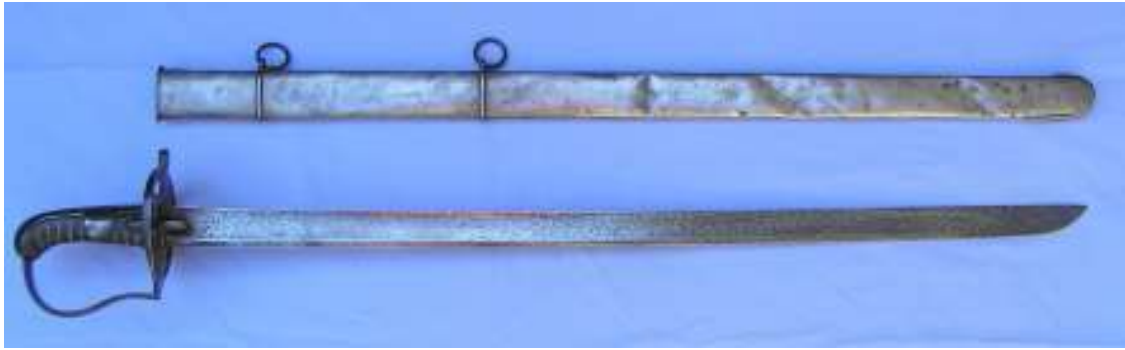
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### THE 1796 PATTERN HEAVY CAVALRY OFFICERS' "UNDRESS" SWORD

When the first regulations for British army swords were promulgated in 1788, one of the recommendations followed was that officers should carry the same pattern of sword as their men. As all students of British military patterns will know, this principle holds true for the 1788 patterns, both light and heavy cavalry, and for the 1796 pattern light cavalry pattern, albeit as would be expected, officers' swords generally tend to have decorated blades and show a degree of ostentation not found on troopers' swords. Later patterns such as the 1821 light and heavy cavalry also in general follow the same principle right through to the 1908/1912 patterns. The notable exception is, of course, the 1796 pattern heavy cavalry officer's undress (or service) sword. Although the blade of the officer's sword is the same as that of the trooper's, the hilt is of an entirely different form. The hilt of the trooper's sword is the well known disc-hilt whereas the officer's sword has a hilt of a form that has become known as the ladder hilt (occasionally also called the first honeysuckle hilt). Originally labelled in early works such as ffoulkes and Hopkinson's *Sword, Lance and Bayonet* (Cambridge University Press 1938) as a heavy cavalry sword dating from 1834, the ladder hilted sword was undisputedly identified as the 1796 heavy cavalry officer's undress pattern by Brian Robson in his 1975 edition of *Swords of the British Army*. Robson cited various examples known to have belonged to heavy officers in the period from 1796 to 1821 and, of course, stylistically there can be little doubt that this sword belongs to that period.

Why then did the 1796 pattern heavy cavalry officers' sword not follow the regulation that officers were to carry the same sword as troopers? No official explanation for this discrepancy has come to light to date but the answer may simply be one of aesthetics. Unlike the elegant 1796 light cavalry pattern, the 1796 heavy cavalry troopers' disc hilt sword was a brute of a weapon, copied from the Austrian pattern 1769 heavy cavalry pallasch and designed with functionality only in mind. Would it have been possible to refine such a sword so as to make it fit for an officer to carry? At Plates 1 and 2, I illustrate a unique sword which may possibly have been one such attempt. This sword has the standard 1796 pattern heavy cavalry blade, 34¾ in. in length and engraved *J J Runkel Solhingen* along the back edge, the early spelling of Solingen with an "h" indicating manufacture before 1800. The disc hilt however has many distinct differences to a trooper's disc hilt : the disc itself has a rim as opposed to simply an upturned edge, the disc piercings are larger and well defined, the diamond shaped reinforcing piece on the inner face of the disc is fixed with small delicate screws as opposed to being riveted and, of course, it has a faceted stirrup knucklebow. The grip is grooved wood covered with leather and bound with three strands of twisted silver wire. The langets are also notable, being smaller than the standard trooper's sword and extending through the disc into the grip (a feature known as double langets). Double langets of this type are sometimes found+- on some very early troopers' swords but they are not common (see John Morgan, *Classic Arms* Vol. 8 issues 1 to 3). It is clearly an officer's sword and, in my

opinion, it is certainly British<sup>1</sup> and of early manufacture, circa 1796. This may lead one to suppose that it might have been a prototype or experimental 1796 heavy cavalry's officer's sword. However, it is not (in my view) an aesthetically pleasing result and aesthetics (perhaps wrongly) were just as much a consideration for some officers of the day as functionality.



**Plate 1 – Heavy cavalry officer's sword c. 1796 with blade with blade by J J Runkel, Sohlingen.**



**Plate 2 – Detail of hilt**

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<sup>1</sup> As far as I am aware, Runkel only ever supplied the British market and the style of backpiece, stirrup knucklebow and other hilt components is characteristically British.

For whatever reason then, heavy cavalry officers did not follow the style of the disc hilted trooper's sword for their service sword. Instead they adopted the more ornate and certainly more aesthetically pleasing ladder hilted sword, an example of which is illustrated at Plates 3 - 5. This impressive sword was made by James Woolley & Co. in Birmingham around 1797. The blade has blued and gilt decoration for approximately half of its 35 in. length including the pre-1801 Royal Arms, the regimental badge of the 4<sup>th</sup> Queen's Own Dragoons and the owner's initials "FH" (Plate 5 and 6). It was the sword of General Francis Lewis Hugonin of the 4<sup>th</sup> Dragoons who served in the regiment from 1768 until his death in 1832. At the time this sword was made, Hugonin commanded the regiment as its Lieutenant Colonel<sup>2</sup>.

[Note that the Hugonin sword was only recently discovered in an attic in Middlesbrough where it had laid for over 25 years. It is currently undergoing cleaning and restoration but Plates 3 to 6 show the sword in its unrestored state.]



**Plate 3 – 1796 Heavy Cavalry Officer's sword of General Francis Hugonin of the 4<sup>th</sup> Queen's Own Dragoons.**

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<sup>2</sup> Francis Hugonin's father Major General James Hugonin had commanded the 4<sup>th</sup> Dragoons before him and subsequently Francis Hugonin's son, Lt Col. James John Hugonin commanded the regiment after him, thus three generations of the same family were in command of this regiment for well over 100 years, a feat unique in British military history.



**Plate 4 – Detail of hilt. Note the flat sided backpiece and long extended quillon, a feature of earlier made swords of this pattern.**



**Plate 5 – The basket “ladder” pattern guard which conforms to the standard 1796 pattern.**



**Plates 6 and 7 – Blade decoration.**

Another example of the standard pattern is illustrated at Plates 8 and 9. This sword has a blade 34½ in. long x 1½ in wide at shoulder by *J J Runkel, Solingen* and dates from around 1800 – 1808<sup>3</sup>. It was originally blued and gilt over etched decoration but only traces of the gilding now remain. The tip of the blade has been converted from its original hatchet point into a spear point to make the sword more effective in the thrust. This modification is well known on troopers’ disc hilted swords of the period but it is much rarer to find on officers’ swords. The reason behind the modification of the hatchet point to the spear point was graphically recorded by James Smithies of the Royal Dragoons on the eve of Waterloo :

*“ ... for the first time ever known in our army, the cavalry were ordered to grind the backs of their swords, as so our Captain Clarke said, we should have to use both sides. It was thought by the men that this order had been given because we had to contend with a large number of French cuirassiers, who had steel armour and through this we should have to cut”* (The Mounted Troops of the British Army, Col. H C B Rogers OBE).

Notable features of this sword include the bar langets which are not all usual on this pattern and the smaller “rolled” quillon which is more generally associated with this pattern rather than the extended quillon on the Hugonin sword illustrated above. The scabbard has the cartouche of *R JOHNSTON, late FOSTER, Sword Cutler to his MAJESTY, 68 St. James’s St., London.*

<sup>3</sup> The spelling of Solingen without the “h” this time indicates manufacture post 1800 and Runkel’s business of importing swords and blades from Solingen came to an abrupt end in 1808 after Napoleon introduced an embargo of all trade between Britain and continental Europe under his control.



**Plate 8 – 1796 pattern heavy cavalry officer's sword with blade with blade by J J Runkel, Solingen and scabbard by Richard Johnston of 68 St. James's Street, London.**



**Plate 9 – Detail of hilt**

Variants of the standard pattern in both the form of the hilt and the blade are sometimes encountered. Plates 10 illustrates a variant hilt form of the 1796 pattern but which still retain the standard blade form.



**Plate 10 – 1796 pattern heavy cavalry officer's sword with variant hilt form but standard blade  $34 \frac{7}{8}$  in. long. Note the provision for langets, now removed.**

Plates 11 and 12 illustrate a sword with a standard ladder pattern hilt but with a most unusual curved multi-fullered  $29 \frac{3}{4}$  in. blade decorated with alternate acid etched and blue and gilt panels by *W Harvey Warranted*. The cutler William Harvey was working in Birmingham from around 1816 to 1839.



**Plate 11 – 1796 pattern heavy cavalry officer's sword with variant curved multi-fullered blade by W Harvey of Birmingham.**



**Plate 12 – Detail of hilt**

From the start of the eighteenth century, many cutlers in Britain had been experimenting with different blade forms, in particular by stiffening the back edge to form what is known as a pipe backed blade. After campaigning began in earnest with the arrival of the first troops in Portugal in 1808, the debate over cut or thrust began to intensify. The result was the appearance of more blade forms designed so that the sword could be used for the cut or the thrust (see Richard Dellar “The Osborn & Gunby blade and other developments in cavalry blade design” *Classic Arms* Jan/Feb. 2000). Plates 13 and 14 illustrate such developments in later forms of the 1796 pattern heavy cavalry sword. The sword on the left has a pipe backed blade of some 34¼ in length by *Brander & Potts of 70 Minories, London* ; that on the right has the so-called “quill-pointed” blade which the cutler John Prosser of London claims as his invention. This sword was made by *Hawkes Moseley & Co.* of 22 Piccadilly between 1815 and 1820. It is quite noticeable on both of these swords how the basket hilt has become smaller and now has small variations in pattern from the standard pattern.



**Plate 13 – Later 1796 pattern heavy cavalry officer's swords with pipe backed blades**



**Plate 14 – Hilt details**

The Peninsular campaign of 1808 to 1814 also produced another effect on the British army. Many British army NCO's and indeed some junior commissioned officers were offered and accepted commissions in the Portuguese army. The sword at Plate 15 belonged to one such officer. The sword itself is a standard 1796 heavy cavalry officer's sword with a blade by *J J Runkel, Sohlingen* but which has been hilted and scabbarded by the cutler John Prosser of Charing Cross, London. The interesting feature of this sword is that the original blade decoration, which undoubtedly would have include the GR cipher of George III, has been polished out and a new cipher has been etched onto the blade in the form of JR for King John VI of Portugal (John became king in 1816 but had acted as Regent from 1799 due to the incapacity of his mother Queen Maria).



**Plate 15 – 1796 pattern heavy cavalry officer's sword etched with the cipher of King John VI of Portugal (photograph courtesy of John Morgan)**

Finally, I will end this photographic study of the 1796 heavy cavalry officer's sword with a one-off example at Plates 16 and 17. This sword has the standard pattern hilt but the blade is that of a 17<sup>th</sup> century Scottish claymore, cut down and mounted with the 1796 hilt and a purpose made iron mounted leather scabbard. The blade bears the imperial orb mark commonly found on Solingen blades of the period. The scabbard has the cartouche of *JOHNSTON'S, Sword Cutlers & Co., 12 Newcastle Strt., STRAND.*



**Plate 16 – 1796 pattern heavy cavalry officer's hilt mounted with a cut down blade from a Scottish claymore**



**Plate 17 – Detail of hilt**

As can be seen, although it is a very rare sword in itself, the 1796 pattern heavy cavalry officers' sword does appear in many diverse varieties. The scarcity of existing examples when compared to its light cavalry counterpart may be due to two reasons: first, there were far fewer regiments of heavy cavalry than light cavalry. Between 1796 and 1821, there were just 12 line regiments of heavy cavalry (discounting the Household Cavalry and the 6<sup>th</sup> Dragoons disbanded in 1799) whereas there were 19 regiments of light cavalry plus over 300 regiments of yeomanry, cavalry associations and fencible cavalry all of whom were equipped as light cavalry. At a rough estimate, light cavalry officers outnumbered their heavy cavalry counterparts by about 20 to 1. Second, the heavy cavalry officer serving between 1796 and 1821 was required to purchase not one but two swords as the undress pattern was to be accompanied by a dress sword for use on dress occasions and when unmounted. It may well have happened that some young officers would just have bought the dress sword and maybe drew a standard trooper's sword from the regimental armourer when action was called for.

This is a sword well deserving of its place as a favourite amongst many British collectors.