

# The 1908 British Cavalry Troopers Sword

## — PART TWO — THE PRODUCTION PATTERN

By JOHN D. MORGAN

### INTRODUCTION

The Pattern 1908 sword is arguably the finest service sword ever made and although perhaps regrettable it had not evolved earlier, the sword was nonetheless available for issue to the Regular Cavalry before the commencement of hostilities in 1914 and saw significant active service.

Its development through a succession of committees, experimental patterns and field trials culminating in the introduction of the MK1 Pattern in July 1908 was discussed in the first part of this study. Apart from the contemporary committee reports other interesting information is contained in an article by Major R.M. Poore D.S.O., 7th Hussars, in an issue of the Cavalry Journal in 1908 entitled "The New Cavalry Sword and Mounted Swordmanship"; one of the signatories of the 1908 Committee Report. He referred to the "universally condemned" 1899 pattern and described how the shape of the "handle" and angle of the straight blade of the new sword assisted the soldier in holding and pointing the weapon. He added that "...some found it difficult to hold the sword correctly but that "these complaints" may be the outcome of want of knowledge in swordmanship. The cavalry training now embodies the new sword drill and as soon as practice swords are issued swordmanship throughout the cavalry should make rapid strides". He cited several past incidents of the superiority of a straight blade over a curved one where the point reached first thus "preventing a contemplated cut from getting home", wounds from a point being the more serious.

### DESCRIPTION OF THE SWORD

As seen, the sword is very different from its predecessors the grip being the most changed component, moulded and shaped (as described in Part One) so that when held for action the

sword came up naturally to the pointing position. The Specification to govern manufacture and inspection of the grip, SA/327 with drawing AID 641 dated November 1909 specified the grips to be made of



Fig. 2. Sealed pattern MK1 sword (SP. 1211), and scabbard (SP. 1212), its introduction confirmed by LoC 14325 of July 1908. The associated manufacturing and testing specification No. SA/321 with drawings AID/572 & 573 have an approval date of August 1908. The distinguishing features of the sword are the black grip, narrow 1 and 1/4 ins. wide mullet, shoulder, of blade with no provision for retention of buff washer and the flat mouthpiece to the scabbard. The blade has the usual inspection stamps and both blade and scabbard are dated 2/09 (February 1909). (MoD Pattern Room, Nottingham).

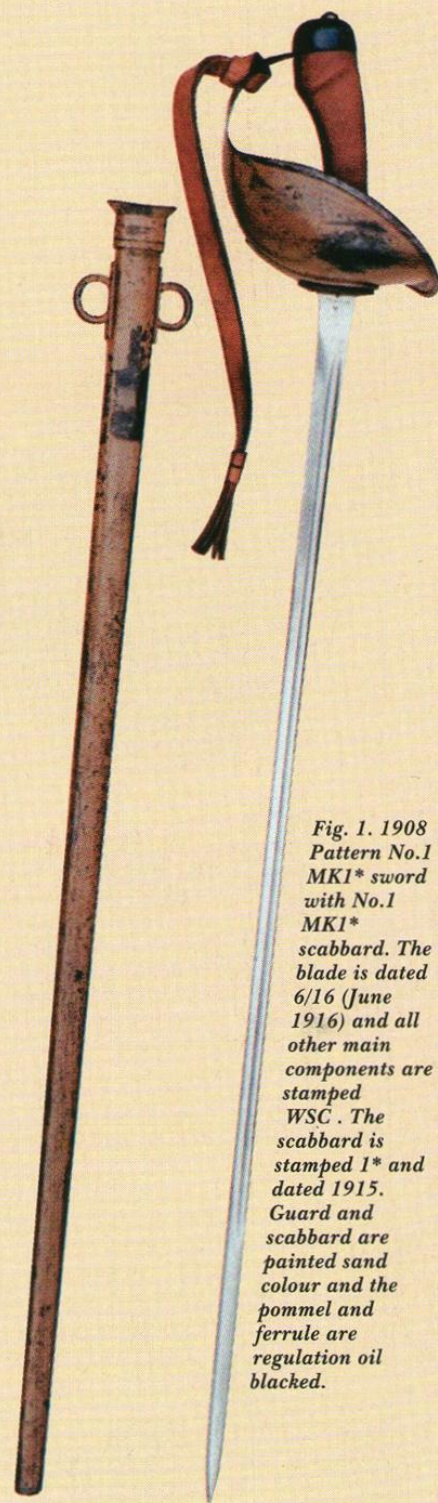
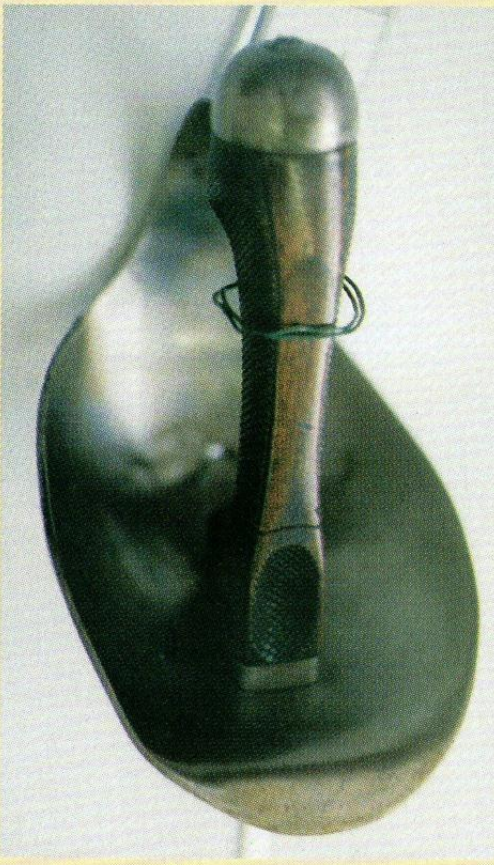


Fig. 1. 1908 Pattern No.1 MK1\* sword with No.1 MK1\* scabbard. The blade is dated 6/16 (June 1916) and all other main components are stamped WSC. The scabbard is stamped 1\* and dated 1915. Guard and scabbard are painted sand colour and the pommel and ferrule are regulation oil blacked.

Dermatine, chequered and shellac varnished Gryphonite was used in the early examples, the first six samples needing modifications by the contractor before approval. At some stage during 1909 sword production had been delayed due to difficulty in obtaining grips, Gryphonite being a foreign production obtained through a factor. A substitute in the form of Dermatine was then found, but this being lighter than Gryphonite various parts of the hilt had to be made heavier to correct the balance.

The Specification heading "Grips, Sword, Cavalry, Pattern MK1" has a later undated handwritten amendment changing the wording to "Sword, Cavalry, Grip No.1". Mark

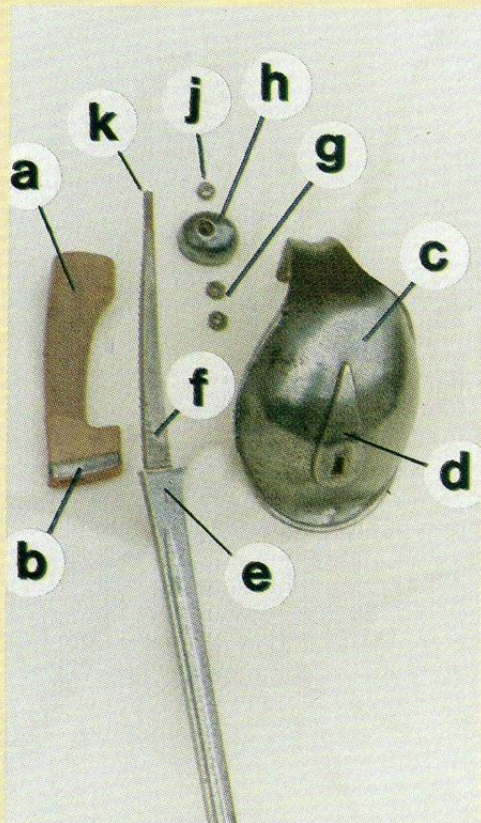


*Fig. 3. This sword has no sealed pattern label and the guard is worn with some holing. It is as the early MK1 sword with 1 and 1/8th ins. wide mullet and has no washer fixing provision to the blade. Its interesting features are the grip which is of correct profile, but of wood, and the blade which is in very good condition but surprisingly without markings. I can only assume it was just one, or one of a batch, made to confirm the final 1908 pattern and for some reason did not undergo any official testing procedure. I am surprised to see the wood grip, wood grips having previously been criticised in the 1907 field trials. The sword might be regarded as a prototype but this is uncertain. (MoD Pattern Room, Nottingham).*



*Fig. 4. Close up of MK1 scabbard with flat mouthpiece. This example is in addition to the sealed scabbard illustrated in fig.2. (MoD Pattern Room, Nottingham).*

*Fig. 5. MK1 1908 sword by Wilkinsons, dated 4/10, and marked to the 18th Hussars. The buff washer is missing, which is not surprising there being no provision for securing it. The sword has been dismantled for the photograph to show the component parts, in this case possible without affecting the sword's integrity for only on swords made after 1913 was the task made more difficult with the blade tang then being riveted over the pommel. The parts are:- a) Grip, b) Ferrule, c) Bowl, d) Mullet, e) Shoulder, f) Tang, g) Nut and lock nut to secure guard, h) Pommel and k) Tang thread.*



1 Pattern grips were black, subsequent ones being generally light and dark brown though rare examples do exist with wood grips still of standard profile (fig.3). The grip is fitted with a ferrule, chequered to aid a firm hold and has a thumb recess with its shape remaining unchanged and, apart from the Gryphonite grips being lighter, fully interchangeable which is one reason why not all MK1 swords are found with black grips.

The steel bowl guard, slightly larger on the offside, is of homogenous steel of 17 SWG and reinforced with edge rolled over on each side and a tapering steel strengthening piece, or mullet, brazed to the face with the blade tang passed through and the blade shoulder seated against it. Difficulties had at first been experienced in the manufacture of the guard necessitating an entirely new method of production, and though this increased the cost of tools it did result in a cheaper and better guard.

Another difference to the previous patterns is the threading of the blade tang so the weapon can be easily dismantled for repair; this also allows for any looseness to be tightened (fig.5). The pommel and grip ferrule are of malleable cast iron, the pommel being adjusted to weight to obtain the correct balance of the sword at 2 and 1/2 ins. to 3ins. from the shoulder. The manufacturing Specification, SA/321, described the blade as... "of the best crucible steel (from Sweden or other High Class approved ores only) in one solid piece; or the tang can be of best wrought iron neatly and soundly shut on at the shoulders of the blade".

Some of the blades were found to exhibit, after rolling, a flaw at about 6ins. to 8ins. from the shoulder. The Superintendent of Research at first suspecting bad material subsequently found that a cold setting had

followed the rolling and when this was discontinued flawed blades fell to a negligible quantity (RSAF 1909/10 Annual Report). In the 1908 Specification the manufacturers were ordered to submit the blades in the set and stiffened stage for testing by the Inspection Department.

The blade has an average length of 35ins., is straight, narrow with a flat back and widens at the shoulder and with a cutting edge generally provided in manufacture to within 7ins. from the guard though its use in this respect is dubious. On some examples I note that the full length of this edge has been sharpened. The identification P.08 is always stamped on the blade back at the shoulder and blades are usually profusely stamped with inspection and acceptance marks, dates of manufacture and makers names (EFD, MOLE and WILKINSON).

Any Regimental markings are normally stamped on the inner face of the bowl, eg. 14H, 5DG, etc; the part referred to as the quillon on earlier swords.

The MK1 scabbard was of homogeneous sheet steel of 19 SWG with a lining of pine or other suitable wood. (The stronger MK1\* scabbard introduced in February 1911 is made from 18 SWG steel sheet). The scabbard has no projecting shoe, such protection being unnecessary with the sword carried strapped to the saddle and rarely worn on the soldier and therefore not subject to wear against the ground. It does have the two, opposite, fixed loops as the previous pattern, which still allows the dismounted trooper the means to carry it on slings from a waistbelt if required. The loops are also used to strap the scabbard securely in the shoe-case frog fitting (fig.13). The scabbard mouthpiece is secured by two machine screws and is easily detachable for



**Fig. 6.** This example is a Mk1 Pattern sword with the mullet widened to 1 and  $\frac{5}{8}$  thins. and blade with the serrations to retain the buff washer, all as confirmed by LoC. 15212 and LoC. 15388 respectively. The scabbard has the curved mouthpiece confirmed by LoC. 15212 of 1910 and is made of the heavier gauge steel as confirmed by LoC. 15500 of February 1911. The scabbard sealed label includes the wording No1 MK1\*, approved 8.2.1911, LoC. para 15500. Strangely, this scabbard does not, on the back, have the normal 1\* stamp! (MoD Pattern Room, Nottingham).

repair or to replace the wood liners. The first MK1 scabbards had a flat mouthpiece and surviving examples with the flat mouthpiece appear to be rare. (See figs.2 and 4). Another example of a MK1 scabbard with flat mouthpiece appeared in Wallis & Wallis sale 421, Lot 1156.

Apart from the oil blacking of pommel and grip ferrule, the colour of overseas service painted finish ordered for guards and scabbards in December 1914 was not specified and examples are found in khaki-green (figs.12c and 13), sand colour (fig.1), black (fig.7a) and even leather covered (fig.12b); all finishes depending on the theatre of the war in which the sword was to be used. I know of an example with traces of khaki-green over a sand colour suggesting initial use in Palestine or Mesopotamia before ending up on the Western Front. The present owner acquired the weapon in Belgium and it may have been one of the many swords purchased by the Belgian Government. Leconte, a Belgian author who wrote about Belgian military small arms referred to the matter of their Government having to purchase large numbers of the Pattern 1908 to replace the swords lost in the beginning of the campaign. He described the swords as having a painted khaki-green finish and commented... "it allowed only thrusting and this was not perfect..." This rather backs up other reports of the Belgian Cavalry not liking, or understanding, the British sword. Incidentally there are apparently a number of Pattern 1908 swords in the Belgian Army Museum,

though without Regimental markings.

### THE OFFICIAL MODIFICATIONS

The sword underwent a number of minor Official changes and modifications mostly covered in the "List of Changes in War Material" and the dates given, together with other information therein and the profuse stampings on actual swords, provide an excellent "framework" in which surviving examples can be "placed" by the collector and researcher.

LoC. 15151, in June 1908, confirmed the increase in size of the sword knot slot to 0.8 ins x 0.025 ins.

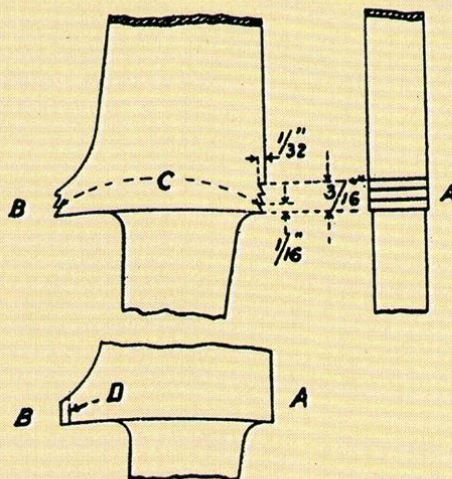
LoC. 15212 in July and August 1910 specified strengthening of the tang at the junction with the blade; it also included modifications to prevent water leaking into the scabbard. The mullet was thus increased in width - from about 1 and  $\frac{1}{4}$  ins. to 1 and  $\frac{5}{8}$  ins. and the mouth of the scabbard was made

concave to suit the shape of the guard, the standard buff washer completing the seal. It is interesting to note that at least one other idea at the time of how to deal with the problem was put forward as entry no. 868 in the 1927 Pattern Room inventory of weapons records. "Sword, Cavalry, Pattern 1908 MK1 fitted under guard with encircling sleeve for mouth of scabbard to prevent the entrance of water submitted by Foreman Bentley".

Whereabouts of this example now unfortunately not known.

LoC. 15388 of December 1910 confirmed that serrations were to be made to the front and back of the shoulder of the blade to prevent loss of the buff piece, fig.8., and all previously issued swords were to be thus altered. But some did escape; very occasionally one finds MK1 swords without this modification. (see figs.3, 5 and 7a).

LoC. 15500 of February 1911 confirms the introduction of the Scabbard MK1\*, made



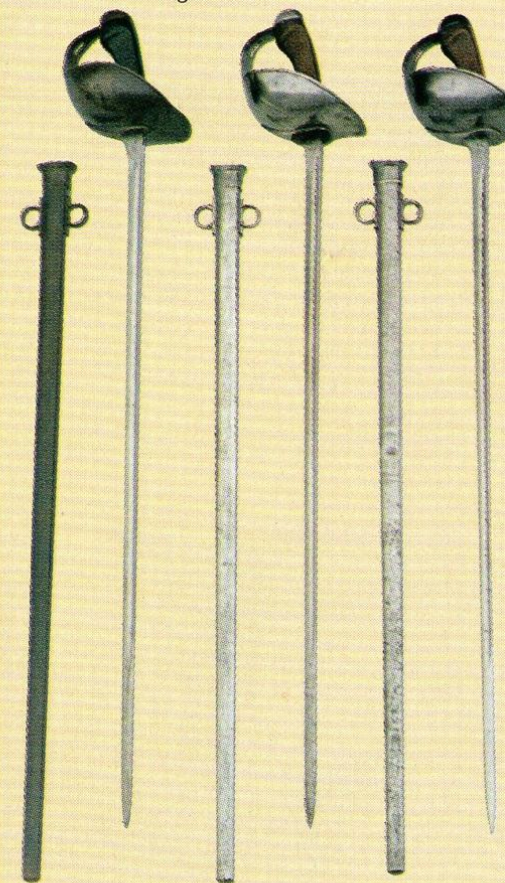
**Fig. 8.** LoC 15388 confirms the serration of blade at shoulder to prevent loss of the buff piece. This detail drawing is from the List of Changes and produced to assist armourers alter swords in the possession of troops and in store; the work to be carried out with two specified grades of files.

**Fig. 7.** Three Pattern 1908 MK1 swords. The left hand example is dated August 1909, was made at Enfield and marked to the 3DG. It has the later, replacement, stronger MK1\* scabbard dated 1915 introduced in 1911 LoC 15500). Both hilt and scabbard are painted black for overseas service with the finish worn where saddle parts and shoe-case have rubbed. As correct for the early issues, the blade has no provision for holding the buff washer securely and the grip is black.

The centre sword was made by Mole with blade dated October 1910 and serrated at the shoulder for the buff washer, this being done subsequently in accordance with the Directive of December 1910. The guard has the narrow mullet, is stamped 9L and the grip is dark brown.

The blade of the right hand sword is dated December 1910, made by Wilkinsons and with bowl guard stamped to the RHG. (see also fig. 12 in Part One); the serrations to retain the buff washer for this example would have been made at the time of manufacture.

The mullet is 1 and  $\frac{5}{8}$  thins wide as confirmed by LoC. 15212 of August 1910. The sword is still with its original MK1 scabbard of lighter gauge and thus rather dented, the damage showing why most MK1 scabbards seem to have been replaced. The scabbard is dated 4/11 and therefore has the concave mouthpiece introduced in August 1910.



from thicker material and stamped 1\* on the back below the loop plate; however this modification did not affect the interchangeability of scabbard components (fig.6).

LoC 15848 of November 1911 confirmed the fitting of an auxiliary mouthpiece to facilitate the return of the blade to the scabbard and so prevent damage to the scabbard linings.

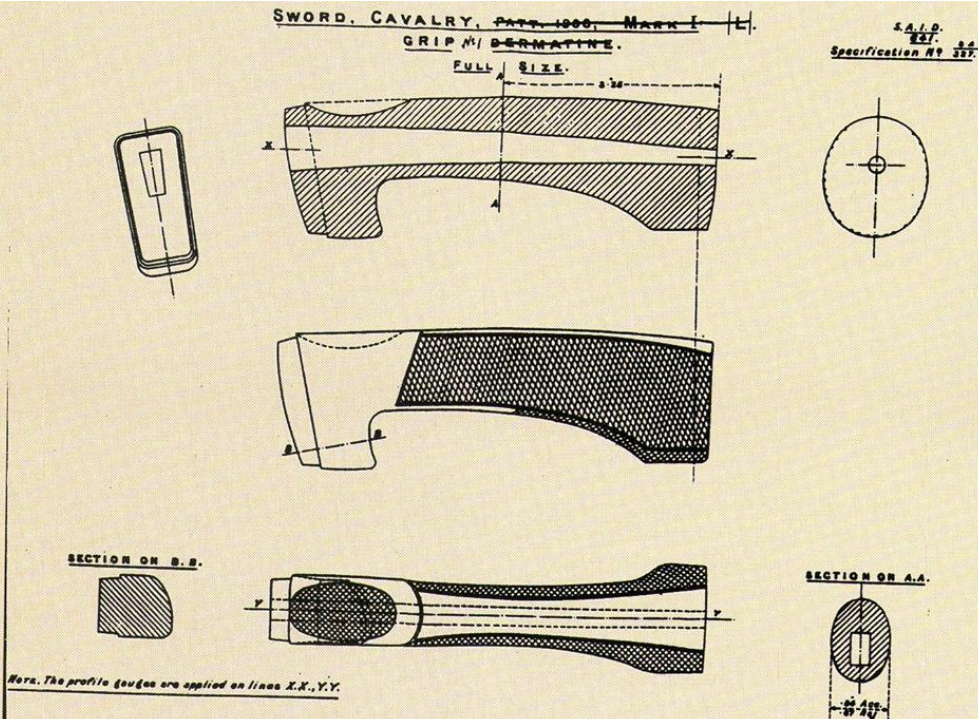


Fig. 9. Drawing AID 641, for P.1908 grips, attached to the manufacturing specification is changed from Grips MK1 to Grip No. 1 and AID changed to SAID. The latter was introduced after 29/10/1923 to avoid confusion with the Aeronautical Inspection Unit though this change does not appear to have been retrospective. (MoD Pattern Room, Nottingham).

LoC 16089 of May 1912. A cross pin fitted through the blade at the shoulder to retain the buff washer indicating that the previous modification was not entirely successful. The sword was now designated Sword, Cavalry, MK1\*, as further confirmed by the dated label attached to the Pattern Sword. (fig.10). The sealed label states "Sword, Cavalry, No.1, MK1\*". The wording "MK1\*" has been crossed through and whether "No 1" is a later addition is a little uncertain; the prefix "No1" was presumably intended to differentiate the sword from the P.1912 Officers

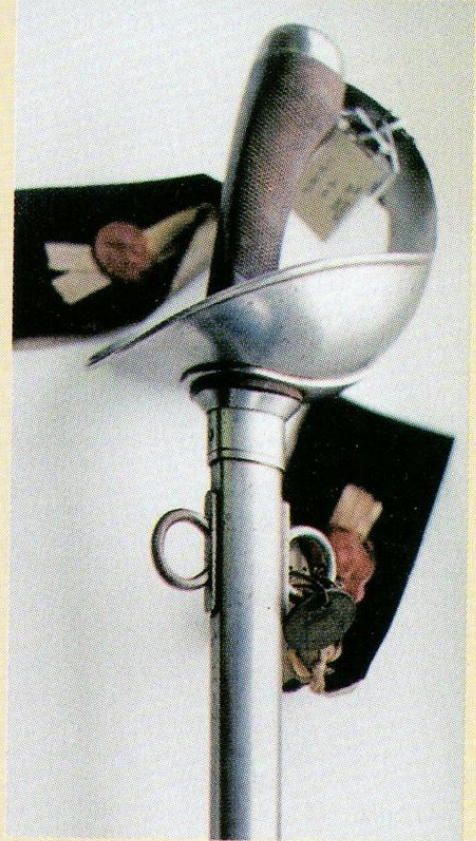
sword, which had been referred to as No.2 since early September 1911. The Specification for the manufacture and testing of the No.1 MK1\* sword, No.SA/356 with attached drawings AID 778A and 779 has a later approval date of 21st March 1915.

The Specification is basically as that of the August 1908 Specification for the MK1 sword, though with some minor differences, the weights of the components vary slightly, the grip is now to be made of Dermatine instead of Gryphonite and the buff washer is now secured by a cross pin. A note on the



Fig. 11. Close up of hilts. The left hand sword is a MK1 with no provision for securing the buff washer, note also the narrow 1 and 1/4 ins. wide mullet. The centre sword is also a MK1 but has the serrations to back and front of blade to hold the washer in place; note the wider mullet introduced in August 1910. The right hand No.1, MK1\* sword has the pin through the blade to hold the washer firmly against the hilt; LoC. 16089, May 1912.

Fig. 10. Both sword and scabbard are now No.1, MK1\* (sealed pattern No. 1205). The scabbard is the same as the one in fig.4 although this one is stamped in the normal way with the 1\* on the back below the loop plate; the previous example was not thus marked. The sealed labels refer to the sword and scabbard No.1, MK1\*, but in each case the MK1\* has been crossed through and OR (other ranks) written under. The sword sealed label also confirms approval on 28.5.1912; LoC.para.16089 and refers to the hilt being either painted or polished. The scabbard sealed label refers to approval date 8.2.1911 and LoC.para.15500. (MoD Pattern Room, Nottingham).



drawing states that the edge of the pin hole through the blade, nearest the shoulder, is to be squared with a punch forming a flat at an angle of 45 degrees to prevent turning of the pin.

LoC. 16089 also confirms that from May 1912 the scabbard linings were to be waterproofed by soaking in melted paraffin wax.

LoC. 16258 of January 1913 confirms the riveting of the tang end over the pommel nut. Up to this time the sword could be easily and quickly dismantled.

LoC. 16259 of January 1913. Blades for active service to be further sharpened to front and back for a distance of 4ins. from the point.

LoC. 16969, October 1914, confirms new sharpening instructions, with detailed drawings; which were to be carried out on receipt of orders for proceeding on active service, the work being restricted to a length of 1ins. from the point.

LoC. 17083, of December 1914 specified a painted finish for all swords in manufacture and on repair in the Ordnance Factory; guards and scabbards to be painted and pommels and

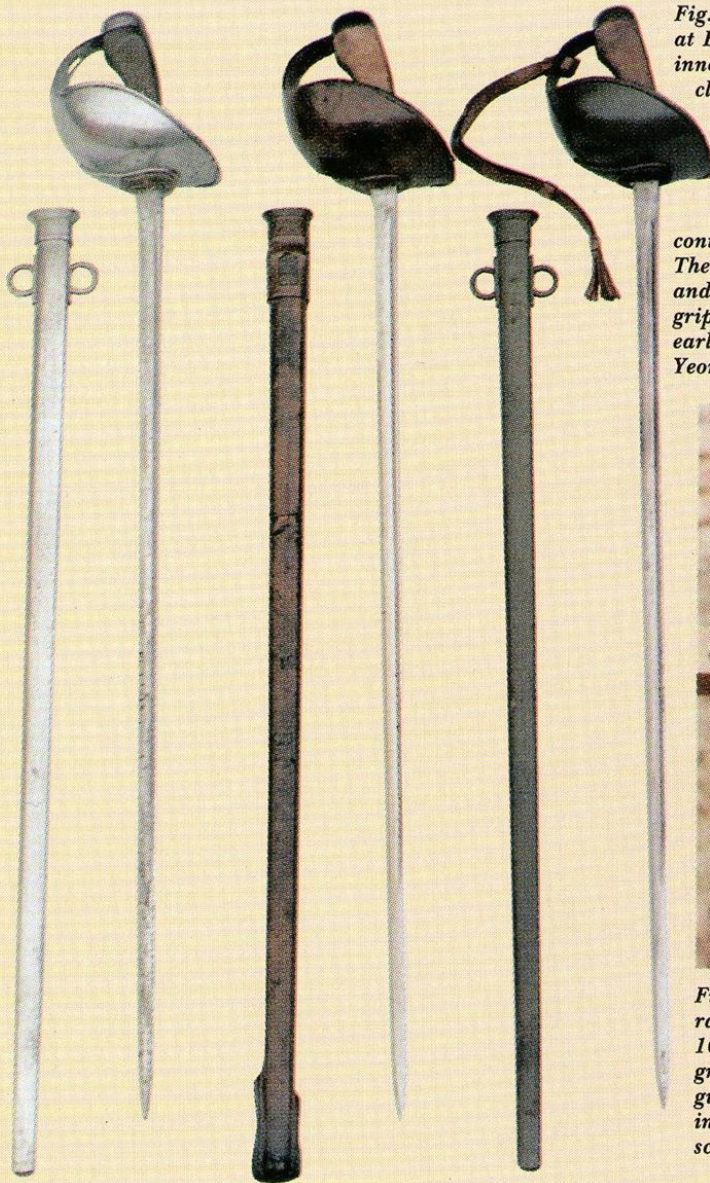


Fig. 12. Three No.1, MK1\* swords. The left hand one is dated July 1914 and made at Enfield. The buff washer is held on firmly by the pin through the blade; this innovation, confirmed by LoC 16089 in September 1912, changed the sword's classification from MK1.

The centre sword is dated June 1915 and has a near perfect blade by WILKINSON with the front cutting edge sharpened to within 6ins. of the hilt. The guard and scabbard are encased in leather but a sand colour paint finish can be seen underneath indicating use in Palestine or Mesopotamia. I have yet to see an official instruction for this leather covering, or even contemporary photographs, but other examples do exist.

The right hand sword is dated November 1915 and also by WILKINSON. The hilt and scabbard are painted khaki-green for use on the Western Front. Pattern 1908 grips are generally dark brown, light brown as this one, originally black on the earlier MK1 swords or even painted as on a sand coloured example in the Dorset Yeomanry Museum.



Fig. 13. Pattern 1908 No.1, MK1\* sword strapped to a 1902 Pattern other ranks steel arch saddle which is dated 1910 and marked on the pommel to the 10th Hussars. It is secured in the frog sewn to the shoe-case which has seen a great deal of use. Apart from allowing more leg room when mounting the sword guard faces rearwards for the sword to be drawn in the way described in the instruction manual; it especially needs to be facing this way for return to the scabbard.

grip ferrules to be oil blacked. (figs. 1., 12b and 12c).

LoC. 23236, of May 1920, confirmed the orders given for previously painted swords and scabbards to be polished in the Ordnance Factories before issue to troops as peace equipment, but swords and scabbards held for mobilisation, or in general reserve, to retain the finish laid down in LoC. 17083.

### TRAINING AND SERVICE USE

This aspect should not be ignored but space allows but a few words. The Cavalry training-manuals cover both mounted and dismounted sword drill and the following extract encourages the "correct" use of the new sword in War... "In the charge against both Infantry and Cavalry each man should ride at his opponent at full speed with the fixed determination of running him through and killing him...hand and arm simply directing the point...the impetus being sufficient to drive the point home". The rider did have to avoid the risk of being unhorsed as he galloped on by letting his blade disengage itself as the body of the pierced adversary swung round.

On the Western Front the main Cavalry activities were at the beginning and end of the War. In 1914 they were invaluable in slowing

down the German advance from Mons. From then on they were held in reserve for the hoped for breakthrough which never came, they carried out invaluable reconnaissance work, had numerous minor and a few significant actions and many cavalymen spent some dismounted time in the trenches. The sword was carried for all mounted work and frequently used throughout the war, examples of two major actions being in March 1918 at Moreuil Wood where 70 Germans were killed by the sword by Canadian Cavalry and in the same month at Collezy where 100 were similarly killed by the 3DG. Though many men and horses were lost to machine gun fire it was often found that the effect of Cavalry charging with drawn swords "rattled the nerves" of the enemy gunners and upset their aim.

The P.1908 sword probably saw more continuous and extensive use in Palestine with the Yeomanry Cavalry and in Mesopotamia with the 7H, 13H and 14H; one significant action being the taking of the Austrian and Turkish guns at Huj by the Worcestershire Yeomanry with the sword.

The Australian Light Horse were armed with rifle and bayonet up to 1918 but in the latter stages issued with P.1908 swords with which, after only brief training, they were able

to overrun the Turks at Jenin in a swift and decisive shock attack.

### ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I am very grateful for the help and advice given by Mr Philip Lankester and Mr Steven Howe of the Royal Armouries, Mr H. Woodend and Staff of the Pattern Room, Mr Keith Miller of the N.A.M and by Mr Jean Binck.

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- "List of Changes in British War Material" ... Pattern Room, Nottingham.
- "List of Changes in British War Material, Vols I and II", compiled by I.D. Skennerton.
- "Cavalry Training, Vol I" ... HMSO. 1924.
- "Numerous records, specifications and drawings referred to in the text" ... MoD Pattern Room Library, Nottingham.
- "A History of the British Cavalry", Vols. V, VI and VIII ... Marquess of Anglesey, Leo Cooper.

Some additional information regarding the P 1908 I noted in the Royal Armouries library some years ago.

I already had Specifications from the MoD Pattern Room library, but found an interesting cover letter to these in the Leeds library from RASF to the WSC dated 4<sup>th</sup> November 1910.

(Royal Small Arms Factory, Enfield to Wilkinson Sword Company )

Included in the letter : -

...."will you please arrange to grease the tang of the sword, cavalry pattern 1908, before assembly"...

And,

Letter from Chief Inspector RSAF to WSC, dated 9<sup>th</sup> January 1915.

Instructions for painting of guards and scabbards and sample sent to Acton Works.

Painting Specification...Guard and scabbard cleaned after brazing, sand blasted and painted 3 coats of paint.

Pommel and capped ferrule....polished, sand blasted and oil blacked.

Ingredients for khaki paint flatting used : -

Lead, white.....1 lb.

Drivers, patent.....1/4 lb.

Ochre, Oxford yellow.....1/4 lb ground in oil.

Umber, Turkey burnt.....1 oz

Turps.....1/2 pint

3 coats of paint...the first two being smoothed off, a few drops of hard drying varnish being mixed with the paint used for the finishing coat.

There should be at least 6 hours interval between each coat.