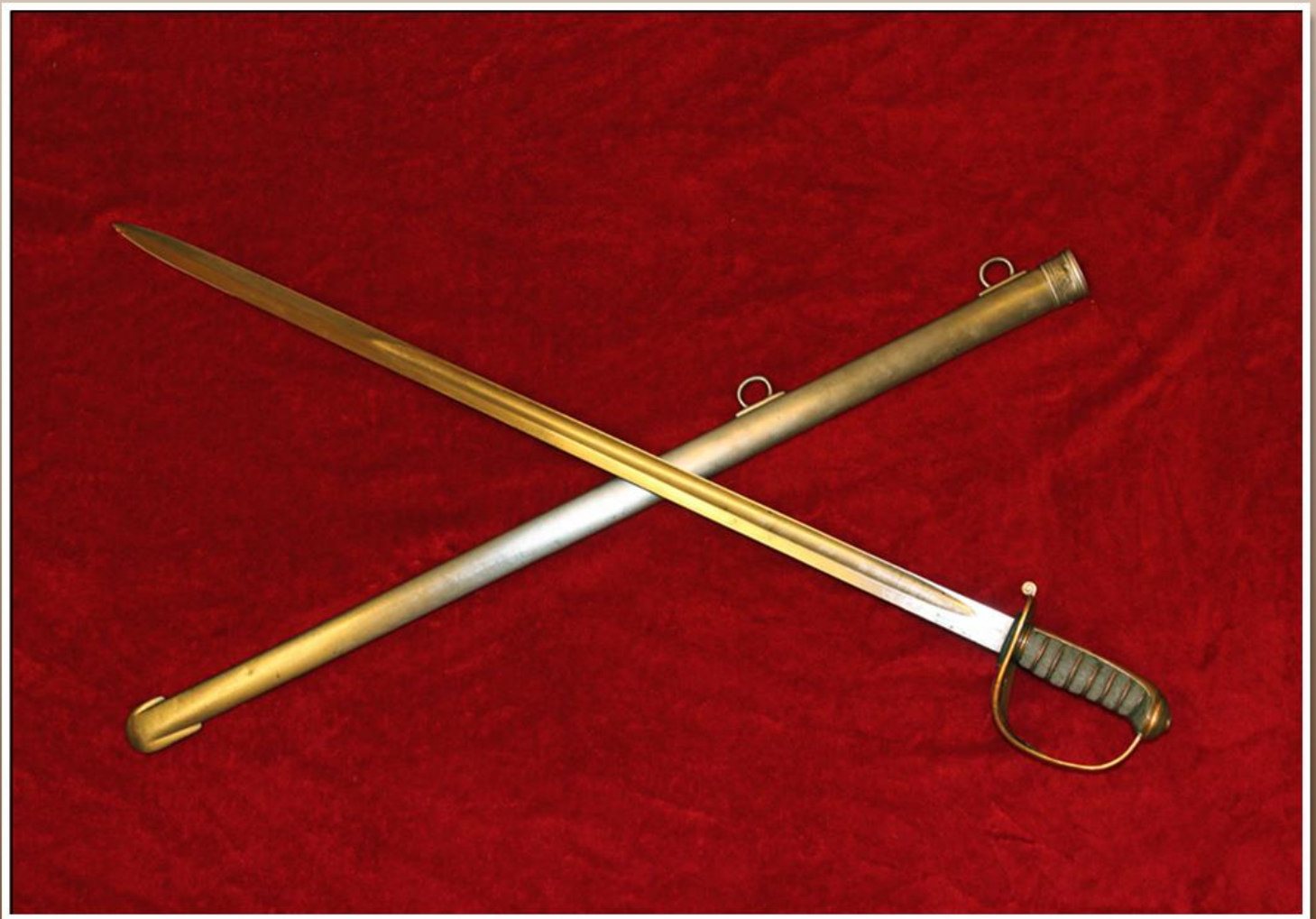


Estimating the Date of Manufacture for a British Sword

Simple steps for estimating the age of a
British Sword in the Regulation Era



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12 Ways to Date a British Sword

by

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Many collectors will have questions about the British swords in their care, such as who made the sword? Who was the owner? and when the sword was made? Determining the owner and age of a sword can lead to musings such as which military actions the sword may have survived.

The following are a selection of methods which can be applied for determining a British sword's date of manufacture, to varying degrees of precision. These methods are suitable from the early 18th century onwards.

Best results for determining a sword's production date are usually obtained by combining various dating methods.

The *Langham's British Sword Research* website has been specifically developed to support the dating of swords (amongst other requirements), and will be frequently referenced in this guide.



Swordresearch.org

Method 1 – The sword’s pattern

If you can determine the sword’s pattern, this will provide an approximate earliest year of manufacture. You cannot rely on the sequence of patterns to provide the latest date for manufacture, as many patterns continued to be made long after the pattern was succeeded in the sequence of patterns, for volunteer or reservist units, or just used by die-hard officers.

Help with identifying your sword’s pattern can be obtained from numerous reference books (See *Langham’s British Sword Research Website – ‘Books’* tab), or from a collectors’ forum such as the [International Antique Sword Collectors](#) Facebook group.

There are many subtle design changes for swords which will also help with dating, and can be learned from these same resources.



Figure 1 - Example book links on the LBSR website.

Method 2 – The reigning monarch

Many sword patterns' hilts incorporate the reigning monarch's cipher (or monogram) in their design, or as part of the blade's decoration. Caution should be applied to this method, as some swords with an extended service life were re-hilted to reflect changes in the reigning monarch's succession. Blade decorations are more likely to provide an accurate date range (although blade decoration can be changed too, but less frequently encountered). Monarch's monograms can vary, and be difficult to decipher, however the following diagrams may provide some guidance.

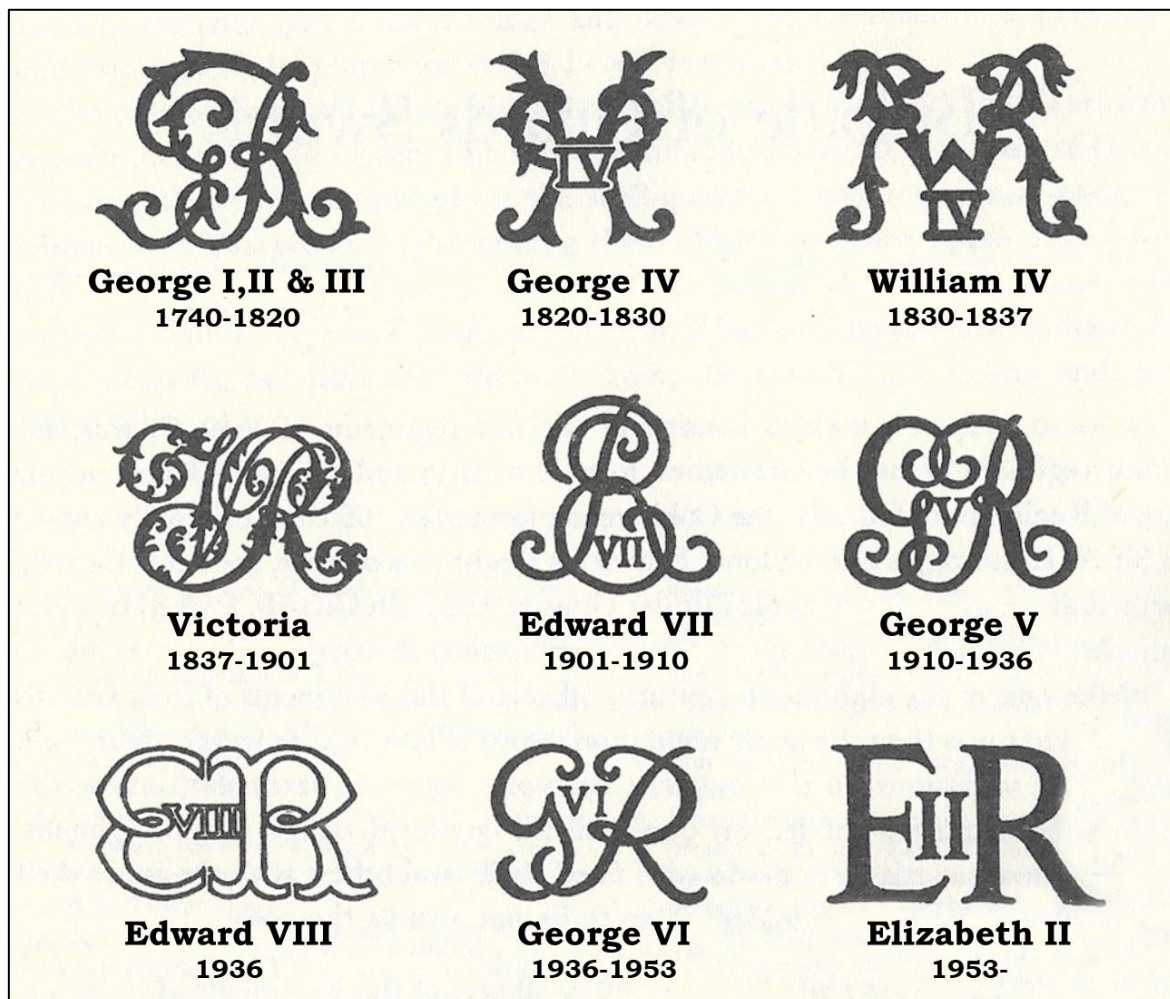


Figure 2 - Monarchs' royal cyphers and monograms

Method 3 – Battle Honours

Many officers' swords have regimental-specific decoration etched onto their blades. Sometimes, the regiments' battle honours are included within this design.

As battle honours are awarded by the monarch on a specific date (usually at some time considerably after the battle), their inclusion (or omission) on a sword can determine its production between a range of dates.

This method may also reveal the regiment of the sword's owner, if not explicitly expressed. If the regiment name does feature explicitly, then the frequent changes in regimental name can assist dating.



A list of battle honours and associated regiments can be found on *Langham's British Sword Research* website, under the 'Battle Honours' tab. This is a developing resource and far from complete at this time.



Figure 3 - Battle honours etched onto a sword blade

Method 4 – Cutlers (maker or retailer)

It is a common occurrence with officers' swords in particular, that the maker's or retailer's name and their location is etched onto the ricasso (or elsewhere on the sword blade).

Minor differences in the cutler's name, such as incorporation (the addition of 'Ltd. '), or when '& son' became '& sons' etc. or a change of premises can sometimes provide detailed date ranges for the sword's production or sale.

The most comprehensive and accurate list of makers and retailers of British swords can be found on the *Langham's British Sword Research* website under the 'Cutlers' tab.

It should be noted that embossers (etchers) were not infallible, and mistakes on etchings are regularly encountered.



Figure 4 - Example retailers' etchings

Method 5 – Serial numbers

Some makers or retailers added serial, or order numbers (usually on the spine of the blade) to their swords. Cutlers who provided serial numbers include Hawkes, Mole and Pillin etc., however research into these serial numbers is still underway.

Wilkinson (later Wilkinson Sword) are the best known for the adoption of serial numbers, which were added to most (except some trade and government-issued) blades from 1854 to until 2006.

The Wilkinson records survive and, with some exceptions, record not only the date of manufacture but also the original customer (and occasionally his regiment). These details can be supplied, for a fee, via armsresearch.co.uk. However, the information for many Wilkinson swords are freely available on *Langham's British Sword Research* website, under the 'Serial Numbers' tab.

If lucky, even the various stages of sword manufacture can be dated, almost to the day.



Figure 5 - Example of a serial number stamped into the spine of a sword blade

Method 6 – Marked ordnance

Many government issued swords (and rarely officers' swords, especially of Native Forces) are marked with an in-service date by the armourer of the receiving regiment. These dates are usually in the form of an apostrophe, followed by a two year date, or a month and date combination.

Often, there may be two or more such dates on a sword, usually accompanied by additional inspection stamps. This means the sword has been contractually refurbished, and re-issued, so the earliest date would indicate the date closest to the original production date.

A fuller explanation of such markings is shown on *Langham's British Sword Research* webpage under the 'Sword markings' tab.

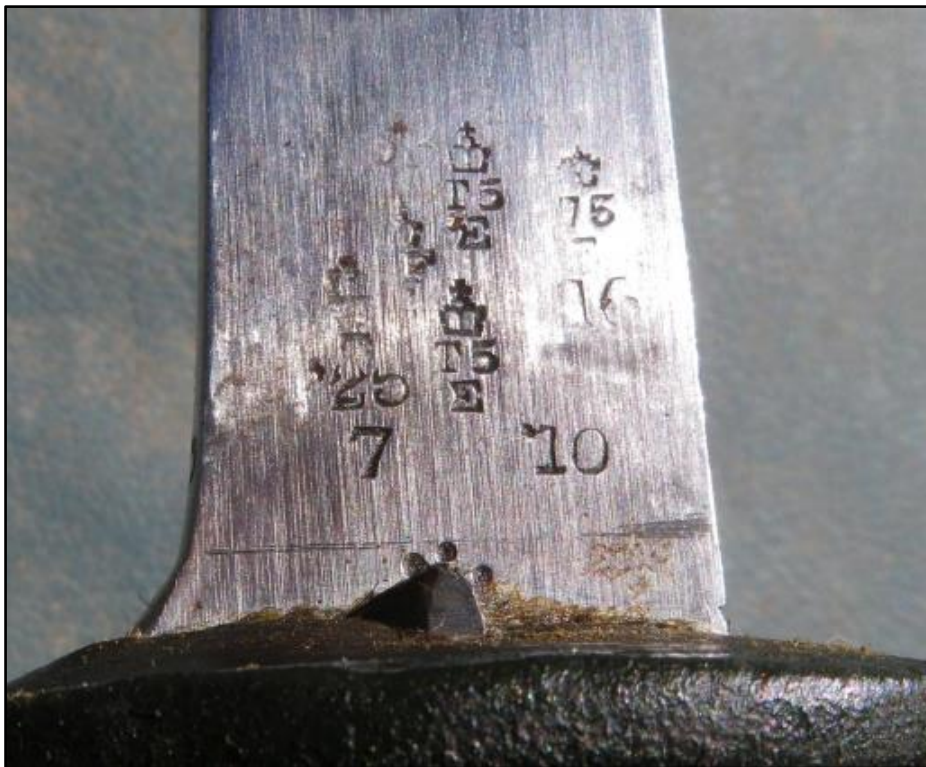


Figure 6 - Example government & regimental markings

Method 7 – Proof disks

From the mid-1840s, many officers' swords featured a proof disk (or slug) to demonstrate that the sword had been subject to proof tests comparable to those which government-issued swords endured. Whether this was the case for all makers, or sometimes just a marketing ploy is a matter for debate.

Although currently an inexact science, active research is underway to date and attribute these proof disks. The best available resource is *Langham's British Sword Research* web page, under the 'Proof marks' tab. This is a live research portal and is continually updated, with research led by James Elstob.



Figure 7 - Example proof disk links on the LBSR website.

Method 8 – Royal crowns

Many decorated swords will include a Royal Crown motif, respecting the reigning monarch at the time of production. Luckily, the designs used for these insignia changed (a little) over time, allowing this to occasionally assist dating where the monarch's cypher is missing (the cypher is a far more accurate method).

Using crown designs is a low-accuracy method, but on occasion, and when combined with other features (such as a change in blade design) they can be used to improve the overall dating accuracy.

Crown designs can vary greatly, depending upon the artist, but the images below are stylised examples based on designs found on actual swords.

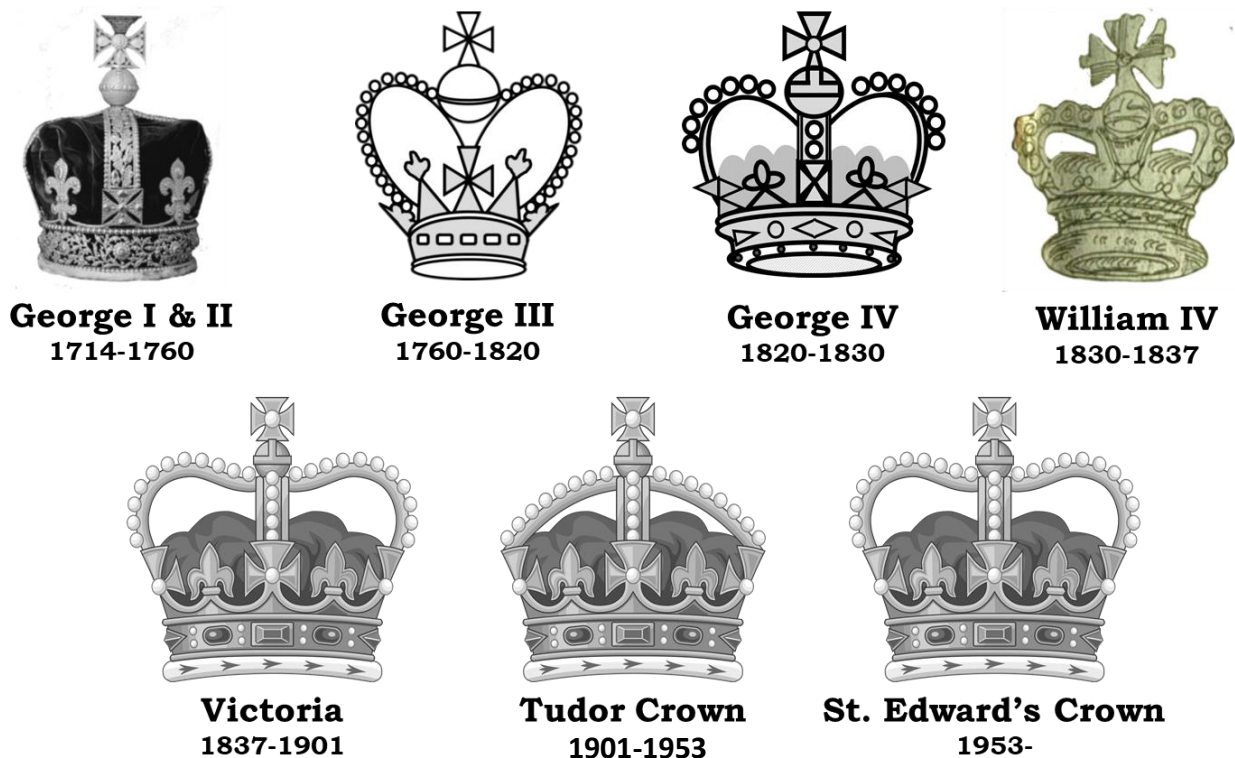


Figure 8 - Illustrative royal crown designs found on swords

It should be noted that the Tudor Crown was introduced into the Royal Cypher by Edward VII in August 1901 (a year prior to his coronation). This was the first time that the crown design was officially mandated.

By contrast, up to half a dozen different crown designs can be found within Queen Victoria's Royal Cypher, some depicting foreign crowns, and some similar to the Tudor Crown, although the crown design based upon St. Edward's Crown is most common.

Even though empirical evidence suggests that the Tudor Crown found on swords first dates to the very end of the 19th century, for Victorian swords the Royal Monogram is a more reliable dating tool than the crown design.

Method 10 – Royal coats of arms (escutcheons)

Similar to changes in the Royal Crown, the Royal Coat of Arms also changed across time, and can be frequently depicted on decorated sword blades.

Escutcheons do not quite align to changes in monarchs, which makes them a useful source of information for dating sword manufacture when used in combination with other dating methods. Escutcheon variations are shown below, note the subtle change of crown design in 1816.

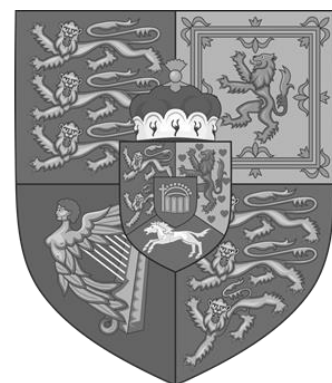
It should be noted that many ERII swords do seem to retain the figurehead on the harp, even though it had changed.



1707-1714



1714-1801



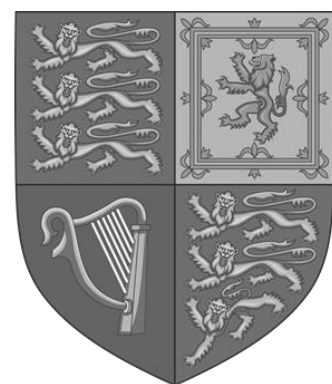
1801-1816



1816-1837



1837-1952



1952-

Figure 9 - Illustrative royal escutcheons found on some swords

Method 11 – Identifying the original owner

It may be possible to identify the original owner of a sword. This is sometimes possible through any of the following opportunities:

1. The officer's name may be etched onto the blade.
2. The sword may have a serial number with an associated register.
3. (Most common) There may be initials etched onto the blade.
4. There may be a family coat of arms etched onto the blade.
5. Some presentation swords include an inscription providing the name and context for the sword's origin.

Jay Cassidy has written an informative guide about tracing potential sword owners, which can be found here:

<https://vexedcassidy.medium.com/a-beginners-guide-to-identifying-the-original-owner-of-a-19th-century-british-officers-sabre-c402dbc69d78>

Normally, when an original owner is traced, the sword will pre-date their initial commission into their first regiment by a few weeks. Obviously this is not a hard and fast rule, as swords may be replaced during the service of an officer (particularly if transferring to a different corps), but it can frequently be a reliable guide.



Figure 10 - Example of the owner's name etched onto the sword blade

Method 12 – Backstrap Style

New research has been written up by Steve Goodyear concerning the evolution of the metal backstraps used on the hilts of British Swords.

His guide can be accessed on the British Sword Research site below.



<https://swordresearch.org/SwordSearch/Documents/Backpieces-201023.pdf>

Putting it all together – When was my sword made?

Having run through the methods which are relevant to your sword, you should end up with a number of date ranges, each defined by a start date and end date.

You could draw out these date ranges as a bar chart to determine the definitive date range for your sword, or, you can take the latest start date amongst your ranges and the earliest end date to get a range for your sword.

Example:

- Pattern: P1897 (1897+)
- Monarch: ERVII (1901-1910)
- Battle Honours: N/a
- Cutler: George & William Arnold, 67 Willow Walk (1875-1904)
- Serial No.: N/a
- Markings: N/a
- Crown: Tudor (1902-1953)
- Escutcheon: N/a
- Proof disk: Not sure

	Pattern	Monarch	Honours	Cutler	Serial	Markings	Crown	Escutcheon	Proof
	p1897	ERVII	X	George & William Almond	X	X	1902+	X	?
1897	1			1					
1898	1			1					
1899	1			1					
1900	1			1					
1901	1	1		1					
1902	1	1		1			1		
1903	1	1		1			1		
1904	1	1		1			1		
1905	1	1					1		
1906	1	1					1		
1907	1	1					1		
1908	1	1					1		
1909	1	1					1		
1910	1	1					1		
1911	1						1		
1912	1						1		
1913	1						1		
1914	1						1		
1915	1						1		

This sword dates to between 1902 and 1904 = 1903 ± 1 year.