

Heavy Cavalry Troopers 1796 Sword

PART I
by John D Morgan

This article examines the Regulation sword, fig. 1, as carried by troopers of the British heavy line cavalry after 1797. Manufacture and issue of the next pattern approved in 1821 was delayed and so the service life of the Pattern 1796 sword with the regular cavalry extended to at least 1832.

BACKGROUND

There was no general standardisation in British Cavalry swords before the year 1788, the equipping of a regiment being the responsibility of the commanding officer, funded by Government

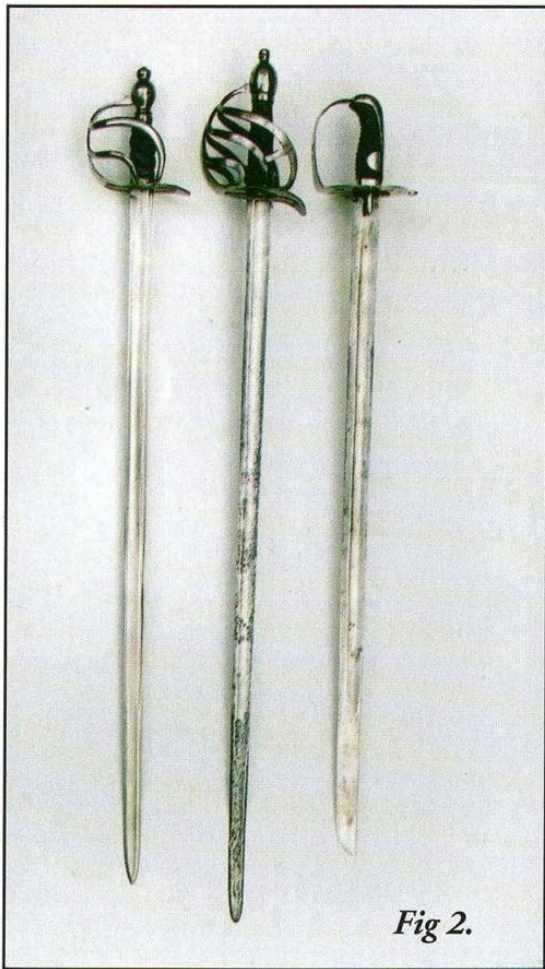


Fig 2.

Two late 18th century heavy cavalry swords and a pattern 1796 heavy cavalry sword for direct comparison. The trooper's sword type, left, is usually referred to as "c.1780" though might date a little earlier and was doubtless still in use after 1796. The bi-fullered thrusting blade with a cutting edge is 36ins long, scarce examples exist with 38ins long blades. The P1788 sword, centre, has the normal 38ins long blade for this pattern, this example being engraved on the back edge "R. SOLINGEN, 1782". Considered a cumbersome weapon and also designed primarily for pointing. The right hand P1796 sword is the one in fig.1 shown full length. The blade in this hatchet pointed form makes it very much a compromise weapon being heavy with a cutting edge but made straight for thrusting without a proper point.

allowances. Although some sword styles dominated there was little uniformity, in either design or quality, causing problems in replacement and repair on active service and inconsistency in peacetime training. In March 1788 a Board of

General Officers, constituted late in the previous year, recommended one pattern of sword for Heavy Cavalry and another for Light Cavalry (figs 2 & 3); these were not new designs but chosen from examples then in use. The Board's specification for the swords was generally followed but, if the reader refers to the study on Pattern 1788 Light Dragoon swords in "Classic Arms" Vol. 6 issues 3 and 4, it will be seen that numerous minor variations occurred in design and blade lengths. The Pattern 1788 Heavy Cavalry swords, on the other hand, appear to be fairly uniform and of a design already in use from at least 1782 as proved by the centre sword in fig.2, the pattern having been chosen from the various swords examined by the Board. The left hand sword in fig.2 is an example of another heavy cavalry sword of the time of which many more exist than the P1788. I am inclined to think that there were so many serviceable swords of this type in use, and possibly preferred by the regiments, that unnecessary replacement with the "true 1788" was avoided.

Any of the swords so far referred to would have seen service in the American War of Independence and the Flanders campaign of c.1793 to c.1795, and then gradually withdrawn from the regular cavalry after 1796.

Major John Gaspard Le Marchant, an officer better known as founder of the Royal Military Academy now at Sandhurst, is credited as being the instigator of the design and



Fig 1.

British heavy cavalry trooper's sword, pattern 1796. The iron guard is an almost circular disc pierced with eight holes. It is extended and bent up to form a knucklebow with sword knot slot near the pommel this example being engraved on the face with troop letter and sword number "B" over "33". The end fits under the pommel with a hole for the tang to pass through.

Note the langets under the guard riveted into two semi-circular rebated holes either side of the grip.

The wood grip is bound with cord, leather covered and fits into a plain iron ferrule at the base to prevent splitting. The combined backpiece and pommel has a rebated nib at the base to link it to the ferrule and a conical hole at the pommel for the blade tang to pass through and be riveted over. The broad fuller each side of the 35ins long blade finishes 7 and 1/2ins from the hatched point. The blade is stamped "DAWES BIRMM" on the back edge and "a crown" over "1" in the left hand fuller. The straight wrought iron scabbard has two loose rings on bands, narrow shoe, removable mouth piece and wood liners.

subsequent introduction of the new Pattern 1796 Light and Heavy cavalry swords. He was also responsible for other improvements in the British army that included training, equipment and equitation. Born in 1766, he entered the army in 1781 and lost his life in 1812 leading the successful charge of the Heavy Cavalry at Salamanca. His upbringing and distinguished military career are well documented in the book "Scientific Soldier" by R.H. Thoumaine and the following brief notes of his army service after 1793 are taken from that book.

Early in that year Britain was drawn into conflict with France by that country declaring war on England and Holland. The British Government reacted to the Dutch call for assistance and, although

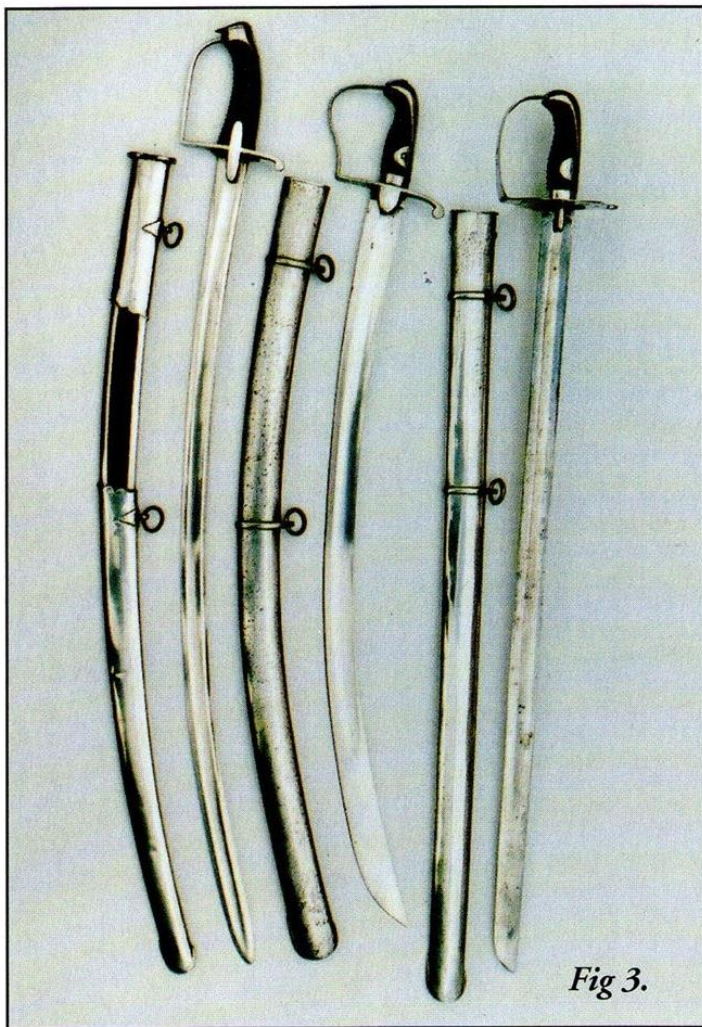


Fig 3.

Le Marchant's light cavalry design, with 33ins curved blade, is shown centre. This was a better weapon for use in the *mêlée* than the previous P1788 light dragoon sword, left, which had a less curved blade 36ins long. Le Marchant also advocated, unsuccessfully, that the heavy cavalry should be armed with the light cavalry sword instead of the P1796 heavy cavalry sword, right. The blade of the latter is 35ins long and the scabbard 35 and 3/4ins. The makers of these examples were Woolley, Reddell and Dawes respectively, the names being stamped on the back edge of the blades.

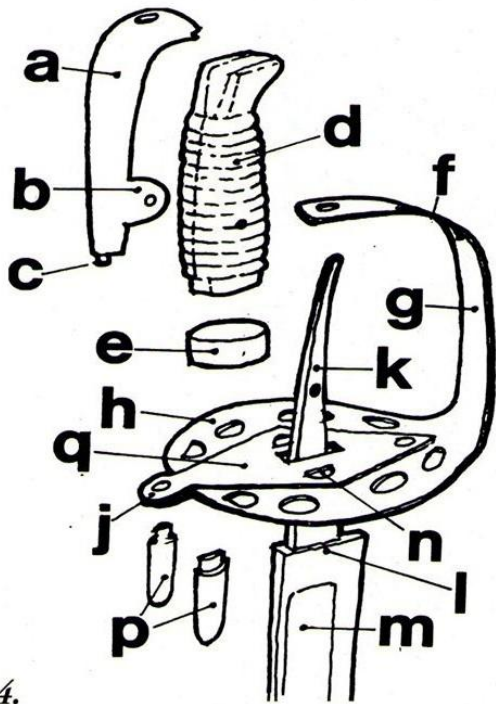


Fig 4.

The parts of a P1796 heavy cavalry trooper's sword. a) Backpiece. b) Ears. c) Nib to locate into ferrule. d) Grip of wood, bound with cord and leather bound. e) Grip ferrule. f) Sword knot slot. g) Knucklebow. h) Disc guard. j) Quillon. k) Tang l) Blade shoulder. m) Blade fuller. n) Holes for langets. p) Langet. q) Strengthening plate, also provides rebate for riveting langets.

peacetime and neglect had drastically impaired the army, troops were despatched under the command of the Duke of York. Later that year Le Marchant sailed with his Regiment, the 2nd Dragoon Guards, to Ostend in readiness for the ensuing Flanders campaign. He had been promoted to Brigade Major and commanded one of the only two squadrons of that Regiment. Following a spell of inactivity at Ostend, Le Marchant's squadron became engaged in actions, together with the Allied Prussians and Austrians, against the French. Though rather appalled at the cruelty of the Austrian allies to defeated opponents and, incidentally, many of their swords had a notch in the back edge of the blade to inflict more body damage, he was nonetheless impressed by their standard of training.

He realised the superiority of the Austrian weapons and swordsmanship and thus studied the sabre training of the Austrian cavalry. He was also a proficient artist and became pre-occupied while on campaign with making drawings of the saddlery, accoutrements and arms of the Allies.

The British heavy cavalry swords then in use were regarded as badly balanced and cumbersome and even the 1788 Light Dragoon sword (fig.3, left) was not considered curved enough for its purpose. It is perhaps amusing to read his comments on an observation by an Austrian cavalry officer that "British swordplay,

though most entertaining, puts me in mind of someone chopping wood"! In addition, Le Marchant noted that the British horses suffered injuries from their own riders, and the Bays surgeon complained that some men's wounds he dressed could only have been self inflicted; indeed, Le Marchant saw a dragoon captain almost sever his foot in a *mêlée*.

From his written observations there is no doubt he considered both Heavy and Light cavalry should be equipped with a curved slashing sword and that a curved blade was of more use in the hand to hand combats following a charge.

Le Marchant was a thinking, professional soldier who, in addition to his observations on campaign, spent many hours at mounted sabre practice. His collaboration with the Birmingham sword maker Henry Osborne to design a curved bladed sword, which evolved as the Light Cavalry pattern 1796 (fig.3, centre), was therefore backed by sound practical experience. His design, submitted to a board of General Cavalry Officers in 1796 was approved in June of that year. Although the primary concern here is with the P1796 swords for the heavy cavalry, the light cavalry swords are briefly discussed and illustrated due to Le Marchant's assertion that both light and heavy cavalry should be armed with a "universal" curved bladed sabre. The Board did not take up any such proposal and instead recommended the curved blade only for light cavalry and the straight blade for the heavy cavalry. It is interesting to read that this was despite the Duke of York having ordered the prototype curved sword to be adopted experimentally in the Horse Guards where it was, by all accounts, well received.

INTRODUCTION OF THE NEW SWORD

The Board had obviously taken serious note of the criticisms of the P1788 heavy cavalry sword, with its "cumbersome fantastic handle" as Le Marchant described it, for they referred in their report to the present unmanageable weapon with its weighty hilt and long blade and accordingly recommended a shorter 35 ins blade for the new sword. No drawing is known to exist and it is probable the manufacturers had to work from a sealed pattern only. The description ignores the well known disc guard and other features, merely referring to the new method of construction of the hilt... "the rivet which fixes the back of the hilt, to the middle of the handle, must go through the

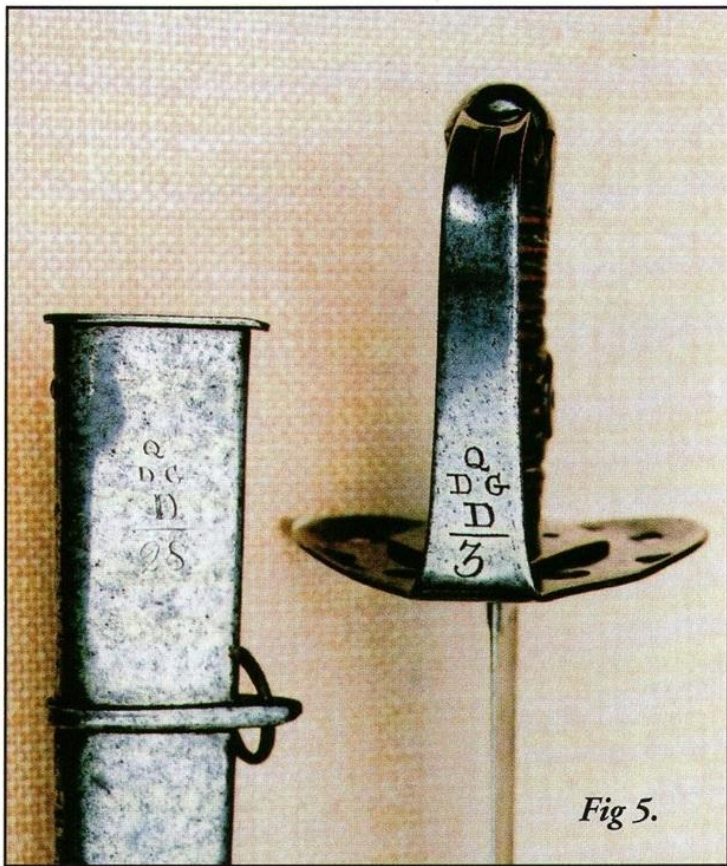


Fig 5.

This photograph illustrates typical regimental markings and shows how swords often end up in different scabbards. Both sword and scabbard are marked to the Queens Dragoon Guards. The sword is also engraved "QDG" and "D 3" on the knucklebow and stamped "WOOLLEY" on the blade back. The scabbard is engraved "QDG" and "D 28", and stamped "OSBORN & GUNBY BIRMM" on the inside face.

shank (tang) of the blade; and the back to be well riveted, near the guard. The shank of the blade to be large, and the top of the scabbard made to take off, for the easier repairing of same, as p.pattern sent herewith". (PRO. WO 3/29). The removable mouthpiece was another new feature. First issues of the P1796 heavy cavalry sword were in 1797 and probably to the 1st Dragoons (PRO,WO 3/31). A few weeks after the Board's recommendations were formalised an order for manufacture went, not surprisingly, to Osborn of Birmingham. At the same time, orders were given (PRO. WO 47/2561) to five London firms, Brunn, Prosser, Egg, Davies and Gill; the latter's name appearing in both London and Birmingham trade directories. However, the majority of subsequent swords were from Birmingham manufacturers who included Woolley, Gill, Craven, Woolley Deakin and Dutton, Dawes, Hadley, Osborn and Gunby, Reddell, etc. Examples do exist of trooper's swords with blades made by Runkel before 1808, though his name is more often found engraved on the officer's blades.

DESCRIPTION OF THE STANDARD PATTERN

How far Le Marchant can be considered

responsible for the form of the P 1796 heavy cavalry sword is uncertain and, in any case, it is an obvious copy of the Model 1769 Austrian heavy cavalry sword with which he would have been familiar in Flanders. The hilt construction for the Austrian sword, of ears to the backpiece riveted through grip and tang, became the significant new feature of both light and heavy cavalry British P1796 swords. The almost circular guard is found either flat with an upturned flanged rim or, flat without the rim or, slightly dished still without the rim. In my considered opinion, comparatively few of the rimmed type were manufactured, these probably only being among the first examples made. Eight semi-circular and round holes were formed in the guard with two further semi-circular rebated

holes each side of the grip into which the langets are riveted; the holes intended presumably to lighten the guard. The tapering sheet iron knucklebow is homogeneous with, and bent up from, the guard. It slots under the pommel of the rebated backpiece with a hole formed at the end for the tang to pass through and a slot for the sword knot. The shaped wood grip is drilled for the tang to pass through, bound with cord and covered with thin black or brown leather. Some swords had the wood grip grooved, in lieu of cord, then also leather covered in the same way. The standard blade length was 35 ins., by about 1 and 1/2ins wide and 5/16ins thick at the ricasso and single fullered to within about 7ins of the hatchet shaped tip.

Most P1796 blades have the maker's name on the back of the blade, stamped in upper case letters, and an ordnance stamp of crown over a number on the left side in the fuller near the hilt. The indentation of the inspection stamp is often very obvious from the other side indicating how thin the blade can be in the fuller.

The maker's name is also often engraved on the inside face of the scabbard near the mouth though not always matching the name on the blade. There would be several reasons for this; swords scabbarded by another maker, sword or scabbard lost or damaged in service, "shuffling" of swords and scabbards before disposal or more recently by collectors and dealers, etc. It is even considered that no more than a few, if any, of the large number of these swords in the Royal Armouries may still be with their original scabbards.

Troop numbers and letters and, occasionally, regimental markings appear on scabbards, on the outer face of hilt knucklebows and sometimes on the guard outer face and it is interesting to note, with reference to the preceding paragraph, that

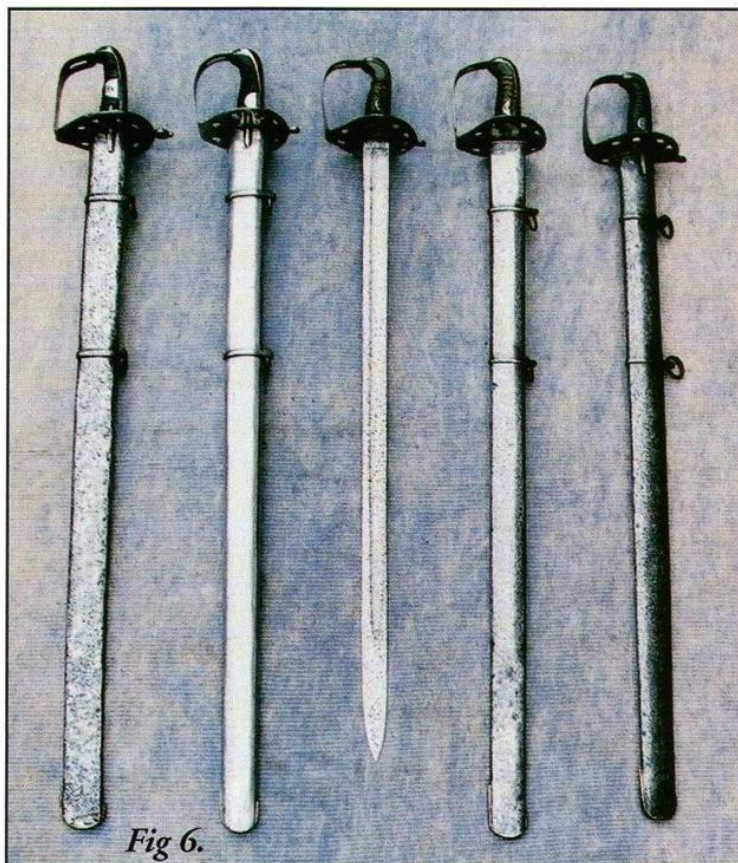


Fig 6.

A "quintet" of P1796 heavy cavalry trooper's swords, all with differing features which will be discussed in Part Two of this article.

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troop numbers and letters and, occasionally, regimental markings appear on scabbards, on the outer face of hilt knucklebows and sometimes on the guard outer face and it is interesting to note, with reference to the preceding paragraph, that



Fig 7.

although both the sword and scabbard in fig.5 are engraved to the Queens Dragoon Guards, they are also each marked to different troops.

The scabbards were made of sheet iron fitted with two strips of thin wood as liners. The metal was cut to size, folded, brazed along the join and formed to the correct shape by forcing in a mandrel. A strip of iron was brazed on to form a shoe and the two iron bands were loose rings slipped on and brazed in position. Finally the removable throat plate with its two attached "springs", which served to separate and hold in place the liners as well as lightly gripping the blade, was fitted and secured by two screws.

With the introduction of this pattern the shoulder belt arrangement with frog hook was abandoned in favour of a waist belt from which the sword was slung by two straps buckled to the scabbard loose rings. In addition a short strap, with stud fixed to the belt, was provided to suspend the sword at waist level for dismounted use. There were also two straps for attachment of the sabretache. (fig.7).

Detail from the painting "1815: The Captive Eagle" by James Prinsep Beadle of Corporal Styles of the Royal Dragoons passing through the ranks of Picton's Division with the Eagle captured during the charge of the Union Brigade at Waterloo. He is wearing the regulation pattern cavalry trooper's sword with its disc hilt and langets. Note that the shoulder belt arrangement with frog suspending the sword is now replaced by a waist belt from which the sword was slung by two straps buckled to the scabbard loose rings. In addition, a short strap with stud fixed to the belt was provided to suspend the sword at waist level for dismounted use. Note also the two suspension straps for the sabretache.

SANDSTONE BATTLESHIP

continued from page 21

In the hot sun the bomb proof casemates provided cool shade, and it seemed as if the normal routines of the Victorian garrison gunner had only been interrupted momentarily, judging from his kit on display in the first barrack room. (Fig.13) Perhaps he had gone out into the infantry 'banquette' to drill with his Snider-Enfield and bayonet against the practice stand? (Figs. 14 and 15) He was not on patrol on the parapet next to the 100 ton gun, overlooking the azure water of the Mediterranean, or pushing an ammunition trolley on its gun metal wheels in the dark of the magazine. No doubt, like all 'Tommy Atkins' everywhere he had found a quiet spot in the shade to smoke his pipe!

End notes

- [1] Vernon-Harcourt, L.F., *Achievements in Engineering*, p.257.
- [2] Keegan, J. & Wheatcroft, A., *Who's Who in Military History*, p.134.
- [3] Spiteri, S.C., *British Military Architecture in Malta*, p.411.
- [4] Hughes, Q., *Malta. A Guide to the Fortifications*, p.179.
- [5] Ibid.
- [6] Simmons, Sir L., *Memorandum on the Defences of Malta*, February 1878.
- [7] Spiteri, S.C., Op. cit., p.413.
- [8] Ibid., p.419.
- [9] Ibid., p.413 & p.419.
- [10] Hughes, Q., Op. cit., p.181.

[11] Fondazzjoni Wirt Artna, *Fort Rinella & The Armstrong 100 Ton Gun*, p.2.

[12] Spiteri, S.C., Op. cit., p.421.

[13] Ibid., p.417.

[14] Ibid., p.415.

[15] Hughes, Q., Op. cit., p.69.

[16] Spiteri, S.C., Op. cit., p.430.

[17] O'Callaghan & Clarke, *Report on the defences of Malta and Gibraltar*, 1886.

[18] Spiteri, S.C., Op. cit., p.433.

[19] Myatt, Major F., *The Illustrated Encyclopedia of 19th Century Firearms*, p.105.

[20] Spiteri, S.C., Op. cit., p.427.

[21] Skennerton, I.D., *A Treatise on the Snider*, p.127.

[22] Ibid., p.128.

[23] Ibid., p.130.

[24] Ibid., p.111.

[25] Ibid., p.108.

[26] Ibid., p.109.

[27] Ibid.,

[28] *Guns Review*, February 1987, pp. 101-103.

[29] *Guns, Weapons & Militaria*, Vol.1, No.8, June 1982, p.8.

[30] Ibid., p.9.

[31] Spiteri, S.C., Op. cit., p.418 & p.433.

[32] Fondazzjoni Wirt Artna, Op. cit., p.4.

[33] Fondazzjoni Wirt Arna, *Royal Malta Fencible Artillery*

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The British Heavy Cavalry Troopers Pattern 1796 Sword

PART II

by John D Morgan

Part one introduced and described the standard type of the well known Pattern 1796 sword for the British heavy cavalry trooper. We now continue to discuss the early issues and "official" alterations.

EARLY EXAMPLES

Figs. 8,9,10 and 11 illustrate what may be examples of the first issues. IX.1282 in the Royal Armouries collection, shown in fig.11 has no markings but does, very interestingly, have what may be the remains of a red wax seal on the grip. The other sword, fig. 8,9 and 10, is virtually identical apart from the sword knot slot in the knucklebow, which IX.1282 lacks, and which may be a later modification. It is also ordnance stamped on the blade with "crown" over "1" and with a stamped "B" on the back edge and stamped on the pommel with "M" over "53"; an unusual position on British swords. The "M" would suggest issue to a regiment with at least 12 troops and, if it can be established which heavy cavalry regiment consisted of 12 troops at around this time, the manufacturing date of these swords might be more accurately determined.

Other features of the sword distinguish it from the "standard" pattern;- the double langets, longer grip and taller pommel; the wide knucklebow secured at the pommel by a hooked end; the otherwise normal disc guard with an upturned flanged rim, rivets finished neatly flush, the grip backpiece located fully into the ferule rather than by the later rebated tab and the built up quillon with added nib.

The sword is as heavy as, but feels better balanced than, the standard types possibly due to the longer hilt; the double langets also provide a more positive grip.

The only three examples known to the author are, a) the one in his possession here described in detail, b) IX.1282 already referred to and which differs only in lacking sword knot slot

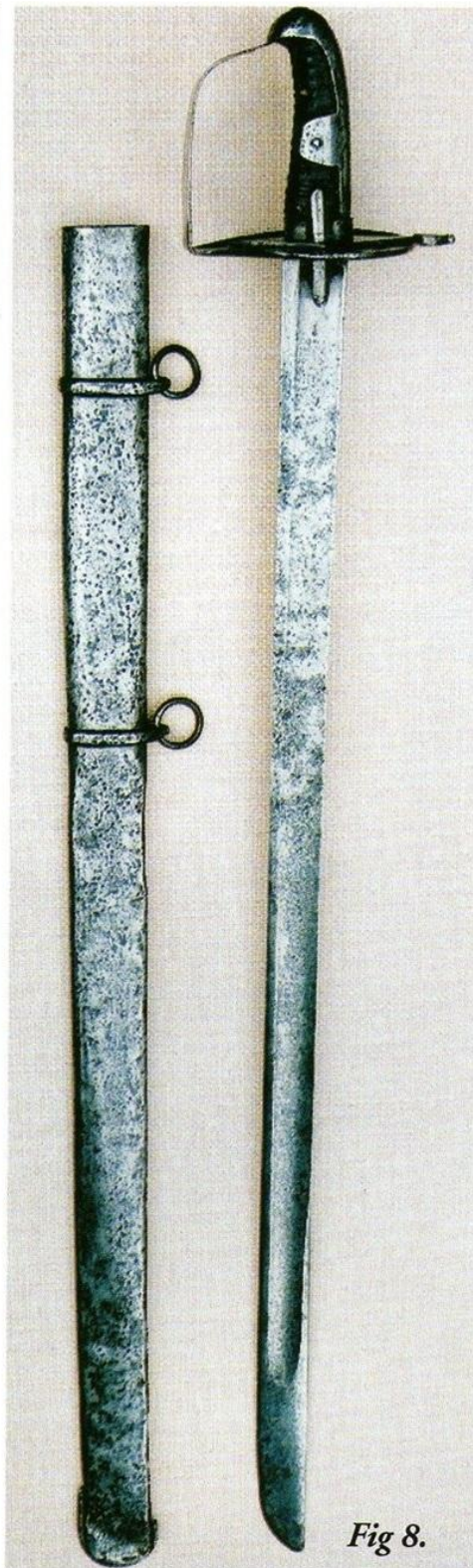


Fig 8.

British pattern 1796 heavy cavalry trooper's sword with upturned rim to the disc guard. This is an almost exact copy of the M1769 Austrian sword and is probably one of the first issues. The 35ins. long blade has a wide fuller each side finishing 5ins. from the hatchet point and is stamped with a "B" on the blade back edge close to the guard. Could this be an abbreviation for Bate? In the left hand fuller is the inspection stamp of "a crown" over "1". The pommel is engraved "M" over "53" and the 35 1/2 ins long scabbard is engraved "D70" on the inner face at the mouth.



Fig 9.

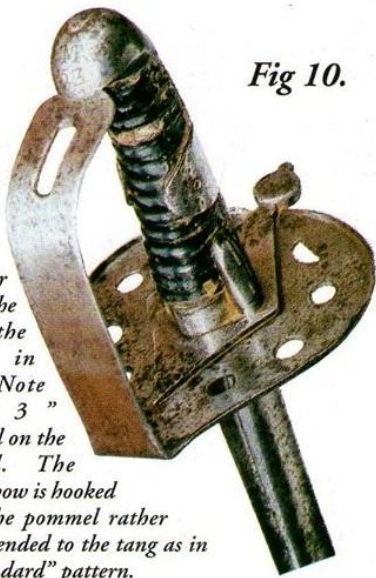
Detail of the hilt of the sword in fig.8. Note the sword knot slot, probably added later in service. The wood grip is bound with cord and leather covered.

and any markings and c) IX.968 also held by the Royal Armouries.

IX.968, illustrated in "Swords and Daggers in the Tower of London", is stamped "B" on the blade back and "crown" over "1" on the right, or outside, face. It also lacks a sword knot slot. IX.968 may have belonged to Sgt. Shaw of the Lifeguards, the knuckleguard being retrospectively engraved to that effect in 1864. Lt. Col. Knollys recounts in his book that Shaw joined the 2nd Lifeguards in 1807 and that he was killed, and his sword broken at Waterloo; if IX.968 was his, then he may have been issued with it on enlistment in 1807 and subsequently replaced it with the standard pattern sometime prior to Waterloo. Possibly influenced by this provenance, Brian Robson infers in the revised edition of "Swords of the British Army" that the rimmed disc pattern of sword may have been a later variant for the Household Cavalry, the rim intended to retain the buff liner. This could be so, but this author is inclined to disagree as the three swords under discussion so closely resemble the Austrian M1769. Also, IX.1282 and IX.968 may not have been issued as, if they had, sword knot slots would surely have been added later in service to secure the knot in the correct

Fig 10.

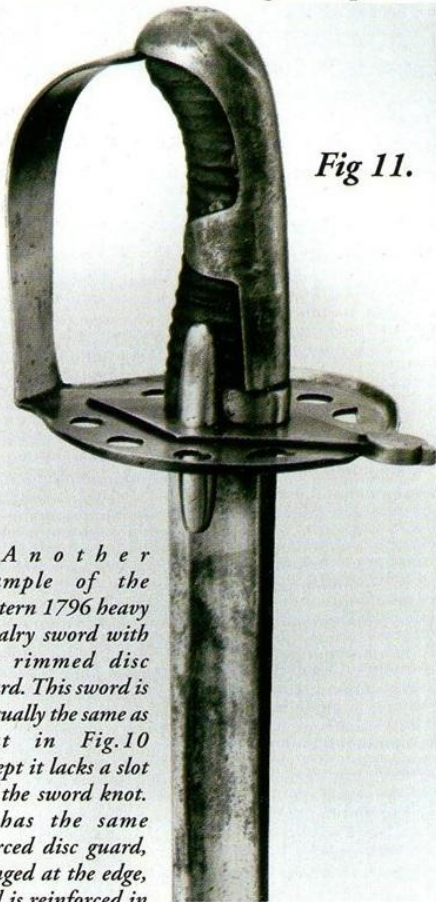
Another view of the hilt of the sword in fig.8. Note "M 53" engraved on the pommel. The knucklebow is hooked under the pommel rather than extended to the tang as in the "standard" pattern.



regulation manner as the standard pattern and as the third rimmed example. As previously mentioned, IX.1282 has what may be the remains of a red wax seal on the grip suggesting it to have been a sealed pattern.

These three surviving examples are

Fig 11.



Another example of the Pattern 1796 heavy cavalry sword with the rimmed disc guard. This sword is virtually the same as that in Fig.10 except it lacks a slot for the sword knot. It has the same pierced disc guard, flanged at the edge, and is reinforced in the centre with the usual diamond shaped plate, projecting to form a small terminal with an extra nib. Through the guard project two langets overlapping the grip, which is of wood bound with cord, covered with black leather and separated from the guard by a plain ferrule. The backpiece is in one with the cap pommel and has two semi-circular extensions, or ears, to enable it to be riveted through the grip and tang. Near one of these are what may be the remains of a red wax seal. The 35ins. long blade is straight with a broad fuller on each side to within 4ins. of the hatchet point

(c) The Board of Trustees of the Armouries, IX.1282.

almost exact copies of the M1769, having the same wide knucklebow as the M1769 hooked under the pommel, same double langets and same large quillon with nib and disc guard. The Austrian disc guards were either flat or slightly dished without a rim (fig.12) as in the "standard" British P1796, or flat with an upturned raised rim (fig.13). Most Austrian examples known to the author appear to be without the rim but one example clearly showing a rimmed disc guard is described and illustrated in the "Deutsches Waffnen Journal", of October 1972 in an article by the respected author Gerhard Seifert. This sword is described as the "Osterreichischer Kurassier - und Dragonier -

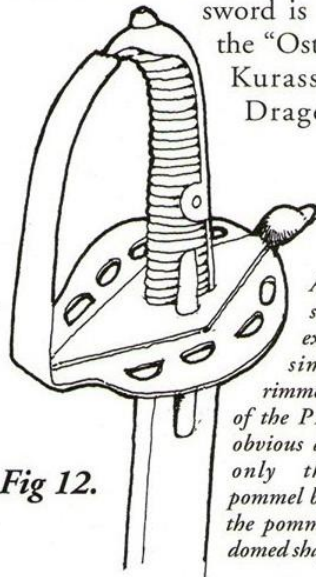


Fig 12.

the "Osterreichischer Kurassier - und Dragonier -

The Model 1769 heavy cavalry Austrian sword, sketch of a typical example. Note the similarity to the rimmed disc guard type of the P1796 sword, the obvious differences being only the prominent pommel button, scallop to the pommel edge and the domed shape to the quillon.

The Model 1769 variant. This differs to the example in fig.12. in having an upturned rimmed edged to the guard. Sketched from a photograph of an example illustrated in the "Deutsches Waffnen Journal, October 1972", whereabouts of the sword unfortunately not known.

Pallasch 1769" and has the normal blade for this pattern of about 32³/₄ins. long by 1¹/₂ins. wide and etched with the Austrian eagle, etc.

An important relevant sentence in the article translates literally thus: "the guard plate border is slightly upturned, though could be also a completely flat rim", meaning two types of guard were in use confirming that the Austrian swords were manufactured in at least two variations.

There does thus seem to be

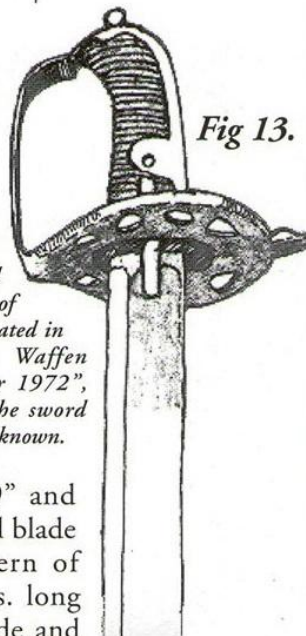


Fig 13.

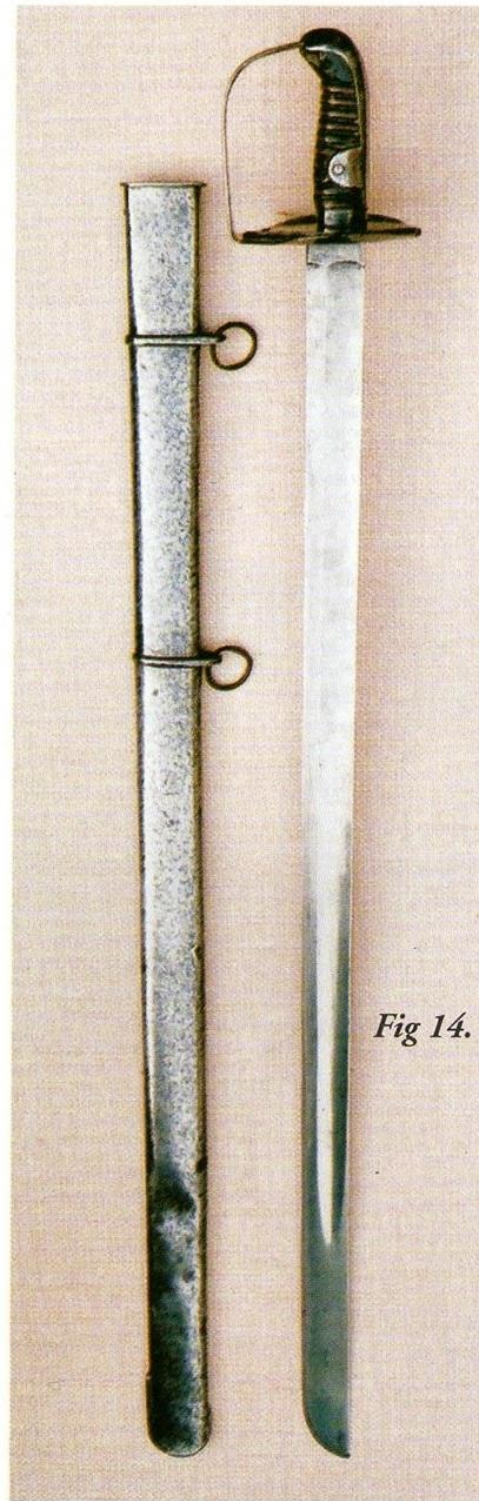


Fig 14.

Pattern 1796 sword marked to the Queens Dragoon Guards. This is the sword previously shown in fig.5 in Part One, and has a near perfect, 35ins. long hatchet pointed blade. As described in the text, the quillon has been removed; not an isolated case of this alteration to swords marked to this regiment. The langets have also been removed. The scabbard is 36ins. long.

convincing evidence that the British rimmed disc variation was the first type of the P1796 to be manufactured, the Austrian sword being in effect the "prototype". It is probable that comparatively few were made, although the numbering on the "M 53" example indicates at least one regiment being equipped with this type.

What appears to be a minor variant of this type passed through the Wallis & Wallis auction rooms in February

1990 (sale 343, lot 1045). The blade had been converted to a spear point and the otherwise identical hilt to the one in figs. 10 and 11 had langets below the guard only.

Anyway, for reasons of economy and faster production the "rimmed disc" design was obviously then simplified to the more familiar "standard pattern".

VARIANTS

A number of variations exist though these are generally modifications to the standard type, presumably with official approval. The parts usually affected by the

Detail of the hilt of the sword in fig.14. Note the wood grooved grip partly exposed by wear to the leather covering.

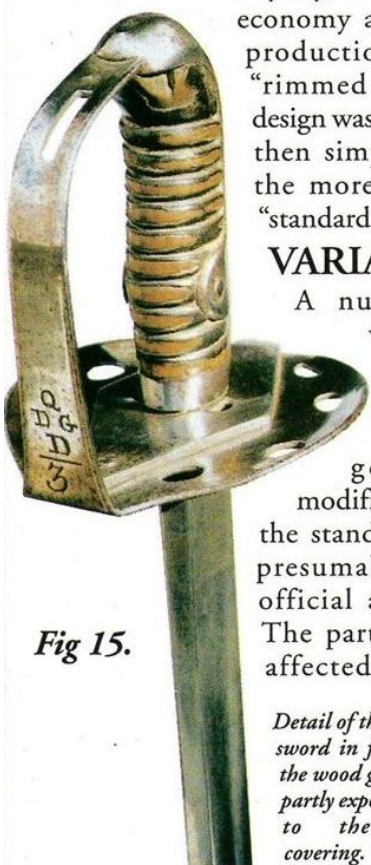


Fig 15.

alterations are the points of the hatchet tip blades, the perforated disc guard with its small quillon extension and the narrow langets riveted under the guard. I consider that all P1796 heavy cavalry trooper's swords were originally made with a full disc guard, langets and hatchet point. Although it has been suggested that the blades of later examples with the spear point were manufactured as a spear point, I do feel this unlikely as the blades would then surely have been made the full 35ins. length and not shortened as they usually appear to be. There resides in the Royal Armouries stores at Leeds an example, IX.3597, with a spear pointed blade $35\frac{3}{8}$ ths ins long. This slighter longer blade appears not to fit the standard scabbard, has an unusually short ricasso and no inspection marks. The existence of this sword does not alter my previously stated opinion and I have included mention of it here due to it being an interesting oddity.

My research shows that the basic, standard sword was altered in the following various ways, at least:-

1). Standard pattern swords modified by the removal of the langets only; the reason for removing the langets is uncertain unless perhaps the trapping of an opponent's blade could be more

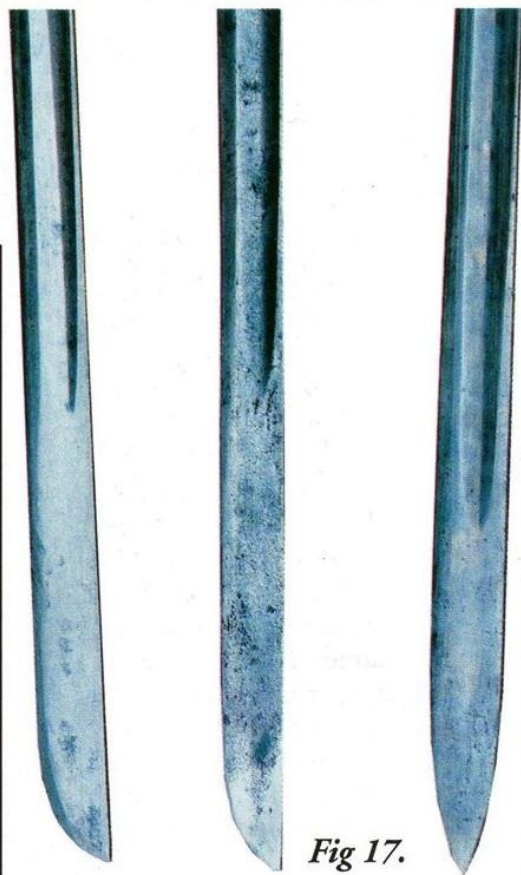


Fig 17.

Typical P1796 heavy cavalry trooper's sword blades. The left hand blade has a standard hatchet point. The centre example belongs to the sword in fig.1 and has been modified by grinding the back edge and making the hatchet point more acute to slightly improve its use for thrusting. I know of another with this minor alteration. The right hand blade is shortened to $33\frac{1}{2}$ ins. by converting to a spear point.

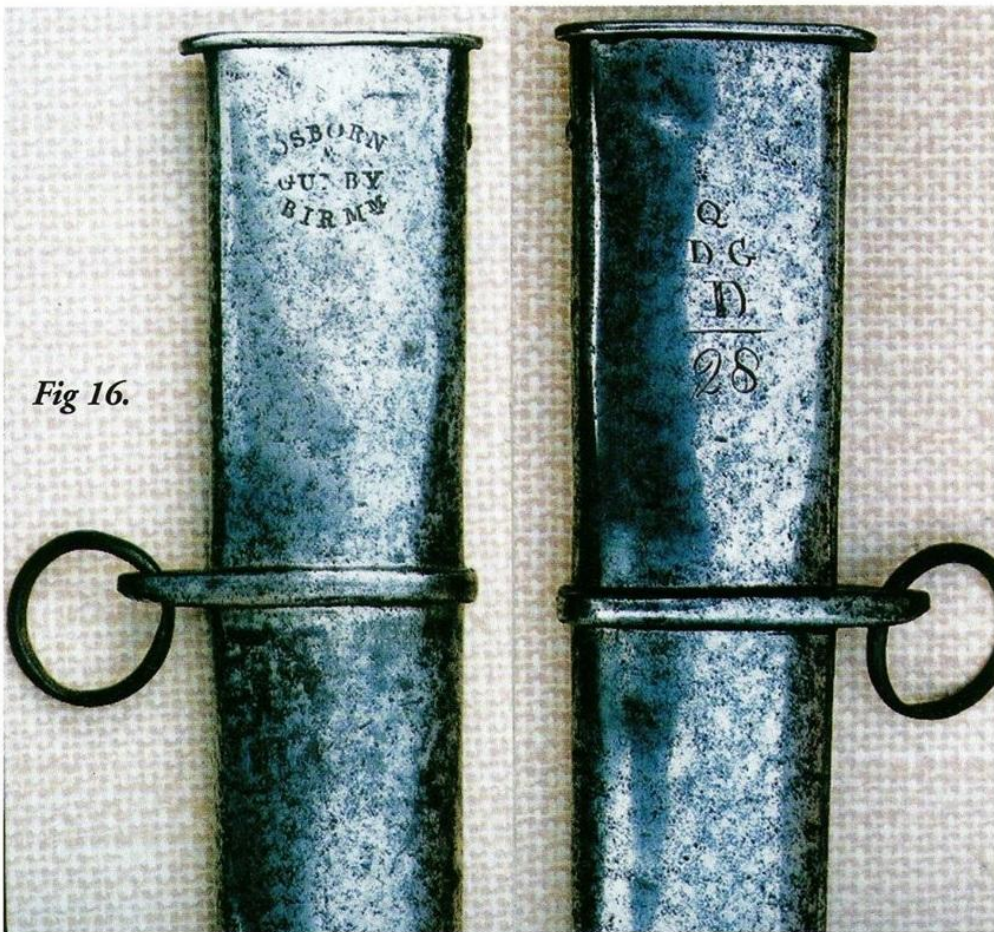
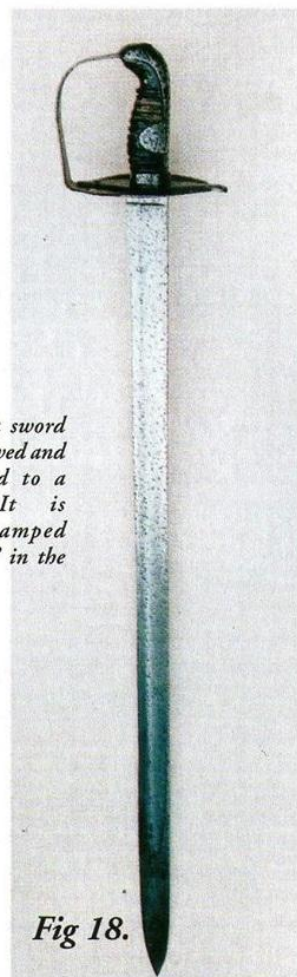


Fig 16.

Detail of the markings to the scabbard to the sword in figs. 5,14 and 15.



An example of a sword with langets removed and blade converted to a spear-point. It is ordnance stamped "crown" over "8" in the fuller.

Fig 18.



Fig 19.

Detail of hilt of sword in fig.18. Another example of a wood grooved grip, exposed where the leather covering is missing.

of a hindrance than a help. One is illustrated in figs. 14 and 15, though this example has been further altered by removal of the quillon which I assume to have been cut off intentionally to make the sword more comfortable to carry at the slope; it is not the sort of part to easily break off. I have only seen this alteration on swords marked to the Queens Dragoon Guards and the example illustrated is stamped thus on knucklebow and scabbard. It is in good

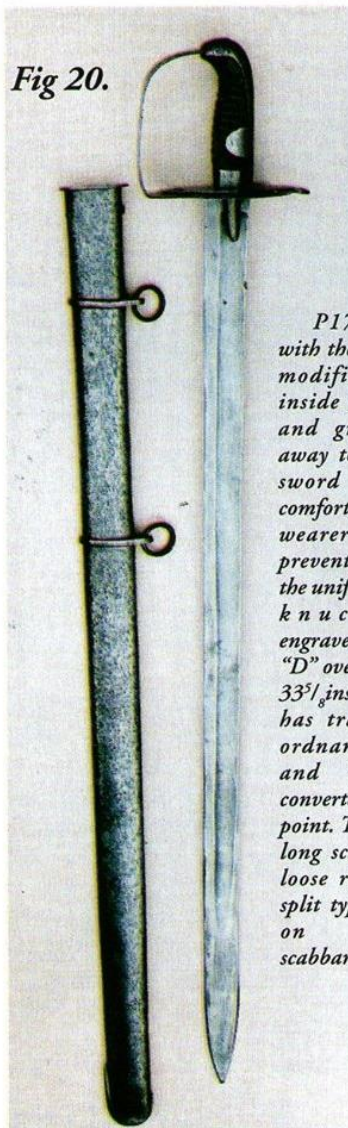


Fig 20.

P1796 sword with the disc guard modified on the inside by cutting and grinding it away to make the sword more comfortable for the wearer and to prevent fraying of the uniform. Face of knucklebow engraved "B2" over "D" over "16". The 33 1/2 ins. long blade has traces of an ordnance stamp and has been converted to a spear point. The 35 1/2 ins. long scabbard has loose rings of the split type, unusual on trooper's scabbards.

order with near perfect blade, but the leather grip is rather worn from use, possibly due to many drill, guard and ceremonial duties. I have seen other QDG marked swords still with their quillons, but yet two more without. In response to an enquiry to the Queens Dragoon Guards museum 12 years ago it was confirmed that none of the P1796 swords there were without their quillons.

2). Another common modification found to an otherwise standard sword (i.e. -unaltered hilt) is the grinding of the blade to form a spear point; for example IX.1272 currently on display in the War Gallery at Leeds. This alteration is said to have originated shortly before Waterloo when the heavy cavalry were ordered to grind the backs of their blades, presumably to penetrate the French Cuirassier's armour. Fig.17 illustrates three blades; one with a standard hatchet tip, another with hatchet tip ground more acutely with the back edge also ground and the third example with a spear point.

3). In addition to grinding to a point some spear pointed swords also have the langets removed as with the sword in fig.18 and 19 and examples in the Royal Armouries.

4). The hilts of many P1796 swords have been altered by cutting and grinding away the inner side of the disc, obviously to make the

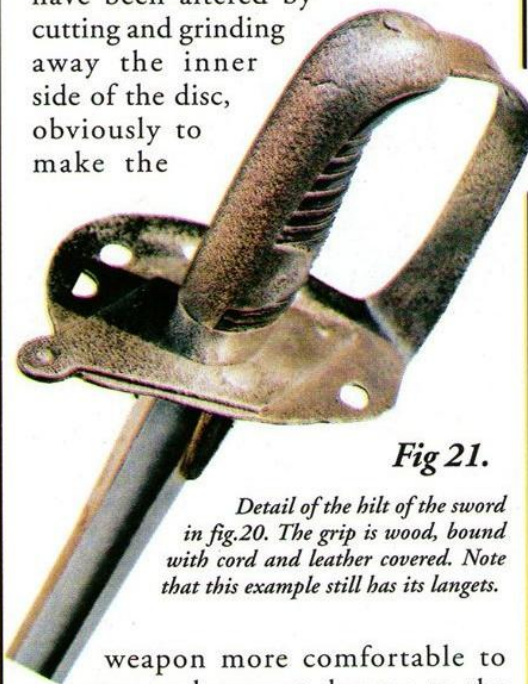


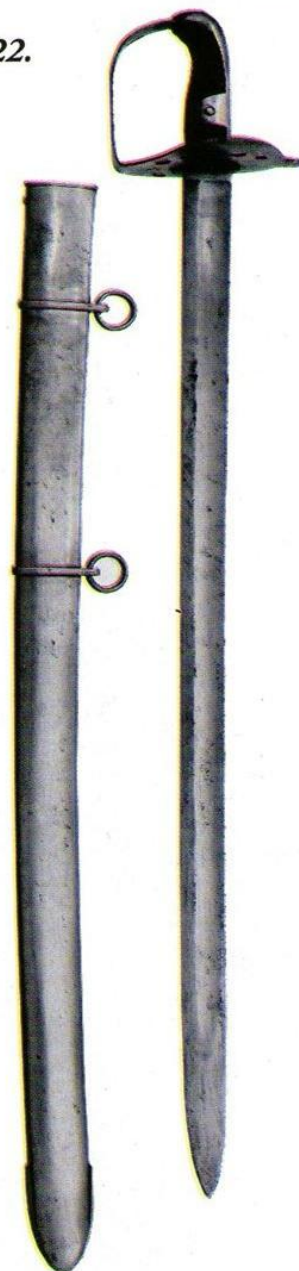
Fig 21.

Detail of the hilt of the sword in fig.20. The grip is wood, bound with cord and leather covered. Note that this example still has its langets.

weapon more comfortable to wear and prevent damage to the clothing. This problem had become apparent soon after the early issues; a surviving bill dated December 1797 confirms the cutting of 364 hilts of the 2nd Dragoon Guards (Robson 2nd edition, page 34, note 24).

Figs.20 and 21 illustrate an example

Fig 22.



Another example of a disc guard modified to the inner side and with a spear pointed blade 33 1/2 ins. long. This example has had the langets removed. The 35 1/2 ins. long scabbard is interesting, as although the pointed chape matches the form of the blade the scabbard is too long and curved for this sword. The symmetrical shoe is an unusual feature. Blades of the type associated with the "Celtic" hilt and those of the recently publicised "Osborn" blades have been tried as a possible fit without success. The scabbard does have the basic appearance of a P1796 scabbard and has trooper's type bands and throatplate, so was it perhaps made for a prototype 35ins. P1796 blade with a slight curve and spear point?

(c) The Board of Trustees of the Armouries, IX.252.

of this modified disc guard, still with its langets and mounted on a spear point blade, and examples of this alteration exist with the langets removed as well, as,

5). Another modification encountered is the combination of a cut away inner disc together with the removal of the langets. There are several such swords held by the Royal Armouries, for example IX.252 illustrated in fig.22.

The British Heavy Cavalry Troopers Pattern 1796 Sword

PART III by John D Morgan

We now continue our look at the various forms in which Pattern 1796 swords are found before going on to discuss the sword in its service use.

Other permutations of the alterations so far examined may well exist and I would certainly have expected to see a cut down disc guard on an unaltered hatchet blade. Although hilts underwent this alteration some years before blades were first pointed, I do not recall ever having seen one, although they may well have been converted to spear points later.

I once examined an otherwise "normal" P1796 sword with an original fishskin covered wire bound grip, but this may have been a "one-off". Examples of yet another type of variant sword exist, also with wire bound fishskin covered grips; see fig.23. These swords are lighter than usual with spear point blades, disc guard with quillon and usual holes, but with no provision for langets. The knucklebow bends in a smooth curve from guard to pommel and the scabbard has officer's type

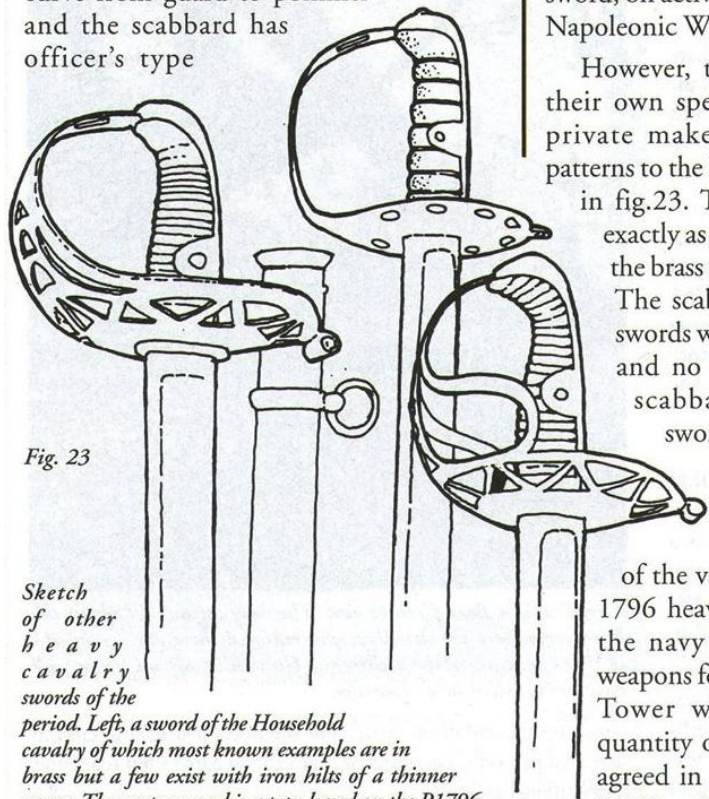
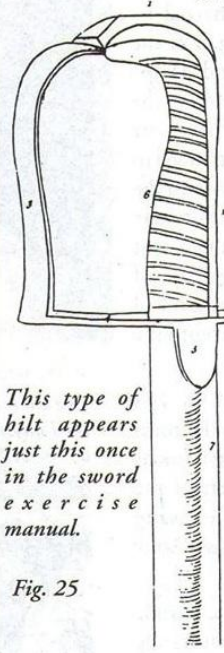


Fig. 23

Sketch of other heavy cavalry swords of the period. Left, a sword of the Household cavalry of which most known examples are in brass but a few exist with iron hilts of a thinner gauge. The centre sword is a type based on the P1796 heavy cavalry sword but exact identification is uncertain. The right hand sword is another Household cavalry example very similar to the left hand sketch though with side bars to the guard.

bands for the loose rings. This variant has not yet been positively identified but some suggest they were issued to Household or Line Cavalry non commissioned officers or else the special purchase of a yeomanry regiment. Surprisingly, regulation P1796 swords appear to have had some limited use with the yeomanry as one, etched to a yeomanry officer, passed through the Wallis & Wallis auction rooms some years ago. I know of another, in a private collection, engraved W Y C . F . 1 2 . suggesting issue to an entire yeomanry unit.



This type of hilt appears just this once in the sword exercise manual.

Fig. 25

line cavalry pattern 1796 heavy cavalry sword, on active service at least, during the Napoleonic Wars.

However, they were still purchasing their own special pattern swords from private makers and their equivalent patterns to the P1796 swords are illustrated in fig.23. The blades and grips were exactly as those of the line cavalry but the brass and iron hilts were different. The scabbards for the brass hilted swords were of brass with frog hooks and no bands or loose rings; the scabbards for the iron hilted swords being as those of the line cavalry.

Lastly, the intention later was to convert some of the vast stock of 34,000 Pattern 1796 heavy cavalry swords in store, the navy being seriously short of weapons following the 1841 fire at the Tower which destroyed a large quantity of cutlasses. The Admiralty agreed in 1845 to the conversion of 8,000 to 10,000 of the P1796 swords, though available information does suggest that only comparatively few were converted. I understand the

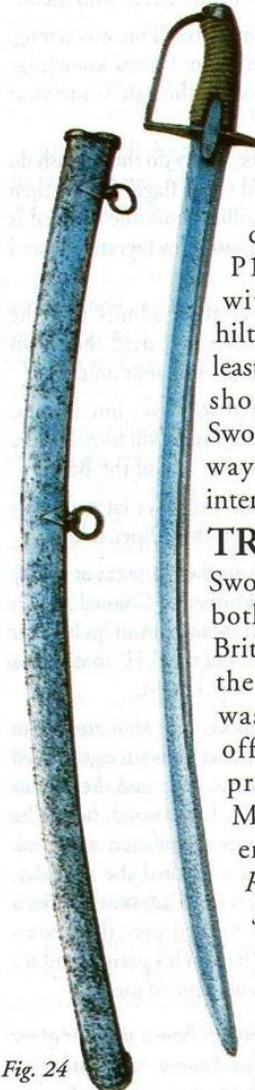


Fig. 24

This P1788 light dragoon sword variation with its 32 and 1/2ins. long blade appears almost identical to the swords pictured in the sword exercise manual.

conversion entailed shortening the blades and refurbishing with new hilts. However, drastically shortened P1796 swords, still with their original hilts, do exist; and at least one with scabbard shortened to suit. Swords altered in this way may have been intended for naval use.

TRAINING

Sword instruction for both light and heavy British cavalry during the Napoleonic wars was based on the official manual produced by Le Marchant and entitled "Rules and Regulations for the Sword Exercise for the Cavalry, 1796". The woodcut prints used to illustrate it are of a trooper at mounted and dismounted exercise with a P1788 light dragoon sword. Le Marchant provided "old" swords for drill purposes and one of these was presumably

the weapon to hand for the artist's sitter (Fig.24). A type of P1796 light cavalry sword is also illustrated in plate 6 of the manual (Fig.25) but this strangely lacks the new feature introduced by Le Marchant, and copied from the Austrians, of ear projections to the backpiece. The backpiece in this drawing is of faceted officer's style and the grip appears to be wire bound. Le Marchant and Henry Osborn, a prominent Birmingham sword maker, had combined their expertise to design a new, lighter sword. Careful calculations were made as to the weight of handle and blade, the hilt being "stripped of all superfluous weight". The hilt was matched with a "not exaggerated"

curve to the blade, as the sword was still regarded as having a thrusting role, and described as stirrup style of (gilt!) metal; I suggest this prototype sword may be the one illustrated in plate 6 of the manual. One can only assume Le Marchant's primary concern was with a lighter, better balanced weapon, the stronger "Austrian" hilt construction being added later as a feature of both the new light and heavy cavalry sword patterns. He submitted this new sword to the C-in-C early in 1796 together with a memorial (since disappeared) entitled "A plan for Constructing and Mounting in a different manner the Swords of the Cavalry". This "construction" being presumably the method of riveting tightly together the backpiece through the grip and tang as described earlier in the article.

The new light and heavy cavalry swords were introduced during 1796. The light cavalry sword with its recommended blade length of 32 and 1/2 in. to 33 ins. could be considered one of the finest cutting weapons ever forged for the British cavalry, while the heavy cavalry sword on the other hand was point heavy and lacked balance. The first impression of 1,000 copies of the sword training manual sold out in six weeks and received enthusiastic support from the King. It is of interest to mention here that Le Marchant's manual was used officially for the American cavalry c.1800, being initially purchased from Britain, then printed in Boston in 1802 and subsequently revised and republished in Baltimore in 1812. Of further interest a "rival" work based on the system developed by Colonel Herries of the British Army was published in Philadelphia in 1811.

Le Marchant worked under great pressure, in the saddle eight hours a day, training the light and heavy regular cavalry, and the yeomanry, in the art of horsemanship and swordplay. In 1797 Britain stood in dire peril, with the daily expectation of an invasion from France and Le Marchant's orders were to train as many men as he could in as short a time as possible.

The recruit was first drilled on foot, facing a wall on which were drawn two 2 foot diameter circles. Three diagonal lines divided the circles equally to represent the six "offensive" cuts against cavalry described in the manual. There were also eight "defensive" guards and against infantry there were three movements, the point, parry and cut; to parry a bayonet the back of the sword blade must be used.

These sword movements were executed by word of command, first on foot then

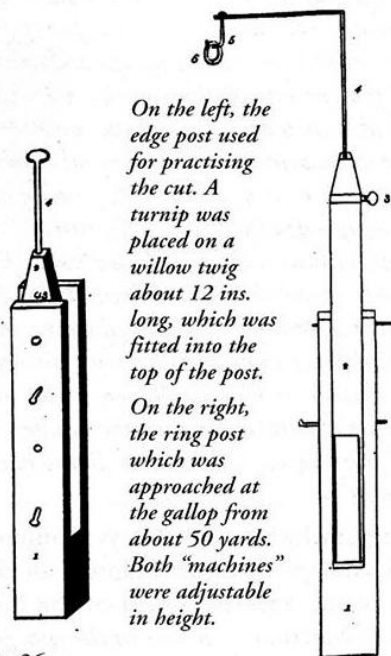


Fig. 26

On the left, the edge post used for practising the cut. A turnip was placed on a willow twig about 12 ins. long, which was fitted into the top of the post. On the right, the ring post which was approached at the gallop from about 50 yards. Both "machines" were adjustable in height.

mounted at a walking pace before progressing to faster gaits. Despite the leather sword knot being omitted from the drawings, great importance was attached in training to its correct use. It was always to be loosened in readiness when the dragoon mounted and looped around the wrist thought not too tightly. The exercise movements were meant to be more than just drill and the men were put in particular situations, for example the one of charging in a narrow pass lined by infantry.

As Le Marchant wrote... "It obliges them to think for themselves, and to act independently of each other; which on service, are inestimable qualities". An essential part of the training was equestration and the acquiring of a firm seat. Other exercises included leaning over to slash turnips on willow

sticks and thrusting through metal rings on "ring posts", the rings reducing from 4 ins. diameter to the size of a crown as the rider's dexterity improved (Fig.26).

The light and heavy cavalry were trained to the same manual and, although the heavy cavalry sword was point heavy, with practice and brute force the heavy cavalryman could use it skilfully to lethal effect. There was really no need for separate manuals as the same cuts and defences were common to both (Fig.27) with just the one significant difference of the "front give point" for light cavalry, which is illustrated in the manual by figures on foot and mounted. In this movement the elbow is drawn back and the hand held higher holding the blade in a flat horizontal position above the peak of the helmet where it can be steadied, the hand to be "darted" in the direction of the rider's proper front to the full extent of the arm.

The charge was normally undertaken by light cavalry with the point forward as the first blow delivered is a cut from left to right. Heavy cavalry differed in that they charged with the point outstretched and depended on the momentum of the horse to break the formation they were attacking and, for this reason, Le Marchant had considered it little mattered what type of sword the heavy cavalry carried in the charge, and that a lighter sword with a curved blade was of more use in the mêlée and "desultory encounters" that followed.

THE SWORD IN SERVICE

Some 117 years later 2nd Lt. George S. Patton, who had studied the evolution of

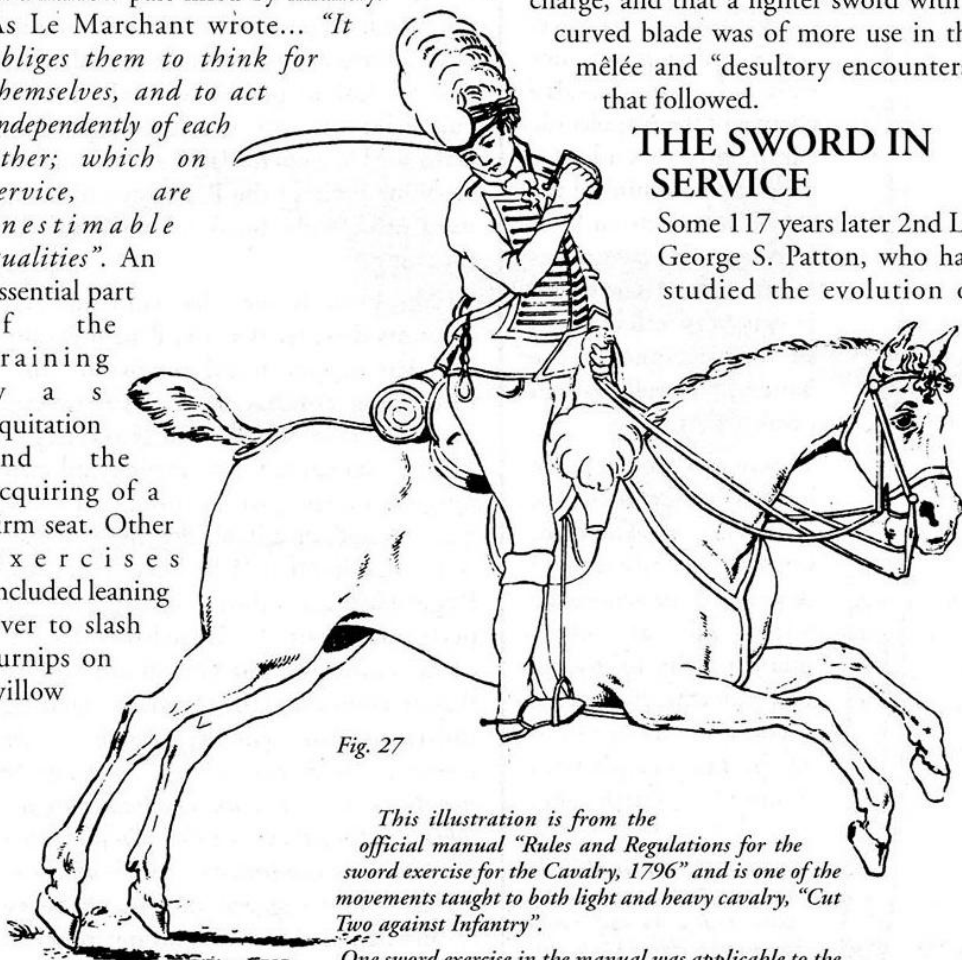


Fig. 27

This illustration is from the official manual "Rules and Regulations for the sword exercise for the Cavalry, 1796" and is one of the movements taught to both light and heavy cavalry, "Cut Two against Infantry".

One sword exercise in the manual was applicable to the light cavalry only; that being the movement of "Front Give Point".

mounted swordsmanship through the ages, expressed a slightly different but reasoned view. He considered the charge should never end in a mêlée but that the spirit of offence in the attackers must be dominant and the troopers must continue at the gallop from one kill onto the next. The British cavalry at this time did often attack with such enthusiasm but then had the unfortunate habit of galloping on too far, out of control. Patton advocated the point for most situations; whether the enemy were lancers, sword wielding cavalry or infantry. He could see the sense in using a massed charge to

break up an enemy but vital for there to be a *"glittering line of levelled steel, more menacing than a similar charge where the combatants sit erect and wildly wag their swords at each other"*.

He would doubtless therefore have agreed with the decision of the Board of General Cavalry Officers in 1796 to retain a straight pointing sword for the heavy cavalry; with of course a spear point! However, many eyewitness reports confirm that it was not unusual for cavalry charges of the Napoleonic campaigns to end in a mêlée and, despite all the criticism the pattern 1796 heavy cavalry sword has received, there is no doubt it was very effective in such situations in the hands of a well trained cavalry man.

Sergeant Morris, being in the front square of the 73rd Foot at Waterloo, was able to leave a vivid description of actions he witnessed at close quarters, the following being an extract from his account of an encounter of the Life Guards with French cuirassiers

A typical officer's example of the Pattern 1796 heavy cavalry sword with a 34 and 5/8ins long hatchet tipped blade. The grip is leather covered and wire bound.

showing that the P1796 sword could be a formidable weapon... *"it was a fair fight, and the French were fairly beaten and driven off. I noticed one of the Guards, who was attacked by two cuirassiers at the same time; he bravely maintained the unequal combat for a minute or two, when he disposed of one of them by a deadly thrust to the throat. His combat with the other one lasted about five minutes, when the Guardsman struck his opponent a slashing backhanded stroke, and sent his helmet some distance with his head still in it. The horse galloped away, the headless rider sitting erect in the saddle, the blood spurting out of the arteries like so many fountains"*.

Sergeant Ewart of the Greys recounted his exploit involving the capture of the Eagle of the 45th Regiment of the line, again at Waterloo... *"it was in the charge I took the Eagle from the enemy; he and I had a hard contest for it; he made a thrust at my groin, I parried it off and cut him down through the head. After this a Lancer came at me; I threw the lance down by my right side, and cut him through the chin and upwards through the teeth. Next a footsoldier fired at me, and then charged me with his bayonet, which I also had the good luck to parry and then cut him down through the head; thus ended the contest"*.

In the book "Shaw the Life Guardsman" by Lt. Col. Knollys, several incidents are described where Shaw and his comrades "split" French heads. They seemed to be able to deal adequately with the French cuirassiers despite the longer pointed thrusting blades of the latter and the various accounts indicate the P1796 sword being used effectively both for cutting and thrusting.

The, possibly one sided, contemporary accounts do infer that the British cavalry had the upper hand when in close individual combat and, if so, several questions arise. Was the British training of a higher standard, did the French find their longer swords a disadvantage at close quarters and unsuitable for the cut and, were they hampered by their cuirasses? Regarding any shortcomings in the performance of the British cavalry, an officer in the 2nd Life Guards did observe that, in addition to the handicap of having shorter swords than the French, *"...the custom in the British Service is to carry the swords in a very bad manner whilst charging; while the French carried theirs in a manner less fatiguing and better for either attack or defence"*. This suggests the British heavy cavalry held their sword arms outstretched too early in the charge!

The blade for the regulation P1796

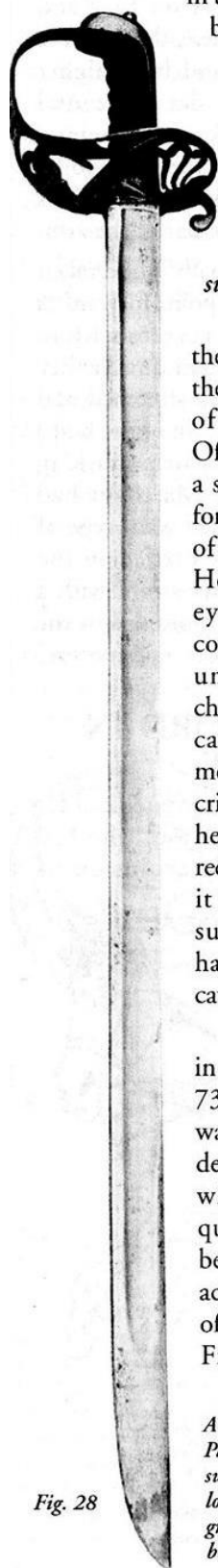
heavy cavalry officer's sword was the same form as that of the trooper's swords (fig.28) and many were thus similarly converted to a spear point, in addition, some officers carried swords with curved blades of varying design; Le Marchant appears to have been no exception. In appreciation of his work the Board of Ordnance had presented him with a richly ornamented sabre (ie: curved blade) and Henry Osborn sent him another in his best workmanship. When he embarked on his last campaign in the Peninsular as commander of the Heavy Brigade *"he put Henry Osborn's sword in his trunk"* and later in action near Alaejos he *"took a troop of the 3rd Dragoons, scattered the enemy, cutting down two with Henry Osborn's sword"*.

Many of the variant heavy cavalry officer's blades in use during the second decade of the 19th century, and for which no regulations are known, were of curved form, the curvature mostly only slight. These blades were about 34 and 1/2ins. long and generally with a pipeback and a pronounced cutting back edge at the point (fig.29), though some just had a length of the pipeback from the point given an edge instead. This latter form of blade was used in the Pattern 1821 heavy cavalry officer's sword though with lengths varying between 34 and 1/2 ins. and 36 ins.

The next sword for the heavy cavalry trooper, the Pattern 1821, did not begin to replace the P1796 until about 1832. As described in the caption to fig.29, the slightly curved spear pointed blade of the P1821 heavy cavalry trooper's sword (and that of the P1821 for the light cavalry), was very different to that of the P1796 heavy cavalry trooper's sword. The P1821 trooper's blades thus obviously evolved from the blade form of the variant officer's swords and the subsequent P1821 officer's swords for heavy and light cavalry, albeit fullered rather than flat and without the pipeback.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I am very much indebted to Mr Philip Lankester of the Royal Armouries, Leeds, for providing information on swords held by the Royal Armouries and to Mr Stephen Howe, also at Leeds, for his help. Thanks also to Mr Herbert Woodend and the Library staff at the Pattern Room, Nottingham. I am also grateful for helpful advice and comments from Messrs Jean Binck, Tim Pickles, David Critchley and Rick Wagner in the preparation of Part Three of this article and, some 12 years ago, from Mr G. S. Gill of the Queen's Dragoon Guards museum. In thanking all the foregoing I must stress that I alone am



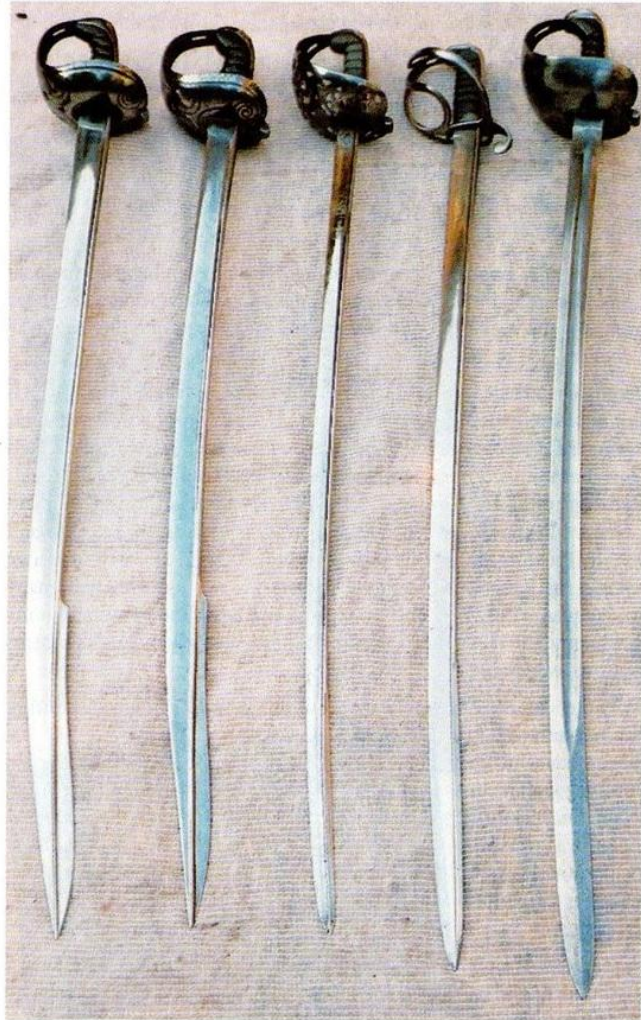


Fig. 29

The next regulation sword for the heavy cavalry trooper, the P1821, is on the right. Its bowl guard, though plainer, must have been based on the hilts of the two swords on the far left. The grips to those swords are wire bound, the left hand grip being fishskin covered and the other leather covered. No regulation is known to exist for this type which were used by some heavy cavalry officers as a preferred alternative to the regulation pattern 1796 sword in fig.28. It was an early move towards a slightly curved blade for the heavy cavalry. This form of pipeback blade, though without the pronounced back edge, became the blade type for the regulation P1821 heavy and light cavalry officer's swords (third and fourth from the left) with lengths varying between 34 and 1/2ins. and 36ins. The officer's P1821 sword blade form had thus gradually evolved whereas the P1796 and P1821 trooper's swords could not have differed more. The shape of the slightly curved 36 and 1/8th ins long blade of the P1821 heavy cavalry trooper's sword was therefore based on that of the P1821 officer's swords, though fullered rather than flat and without a pipeback.

responsible for any errors.

Lastly, anyone writing about British cavalry swords is indebted to the pioneering work of Brian Robson and, in this instance, the PRO references he provides in "Swords of the British Army" have also been invaluable.

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