

A Review of Thurkle Proof Discs.

By James Elstob, Independent
Researcher.

This article provides a summary of my research available at <https://swordresearch.org>. It should be noted that the disc reference numbers used on that site and in this article are arbitrarily assigned by me for the purpose of cataloguing and should not be considered to have any historic relevance.

A proof disc is a brass disc some 7 to 8 mm in diameter set within a recess, drilled or milled in the ricasso of a sword blade. A heated disc blank would be dropped into the prepared recess before being struck with a stamping tool. The pressure would deform the soft brass into the recess causing an interference fit and at the same time would impress the manufacturer's chosen design into the face of the brass.

Since the introduction of the proof disc there have been multiple transitions in the Thurkle dynasty and there are other sources available which examine the history and trading dates of Thurkle. In this article I aim to restrict myself to Thurkle's use of proof discs, though a brief overview of Thurkle business is required.

In 1845, when the proof disc was introduced, it was Benjamin Thurkle who was at the helm of the business and he was superseded, after his death in 1864, by his son, Edward Thurkle (senior). In 1889 Edward Thurkle became Edward Thurkle & Sons when Edward junior and George joined the business. Presumably, it was they who took over when Edward senior died in 1895, although their tenure was short-lived. A bankruptcy petition (1164 of 1897) was issued on 22nd September 1897ⁱ and an order made on 2nd November 1897ⁱⁱ. In 1899 the first

and final dividend was issuedⁱⁱⁱ, and the receiver discharged^{iv}.

According to a 1958 letter from J. R Gaunt & Son to Wilkinson's show-room manager, Gaunt took over the Thurkle business in 1897^v. Although the exact date, nature, and extent of Gaunt's 'takeover' is unclear, by 1900 they were trading from Thurkle's former premises at 5 Denmark Street, Soho, London and in 1901 were advertising as 'successors of Edward Thurkle'. They were also selling swords under the style of 'J. R. Gaunt, late Edward Thurkle'.

After the business was sold to Gaunt, George Thurkle set up an independent business, likely in 1900 and although this lasted until 1919, when the business was bought by Wilkinson, it seems this was a much less successful venture than Gaunt & Son, given the comparatively few examples known to exist.

From 47 known swords marked for an individual Thurkle, 38 are marked for Edward, 7 for Benjamin and 4 for George. This is in comparison to 32 swords marked for 'J. R. Gaunt & Sons, late Edward Thurkle'. This does not provide the whole picture as both Thurkle and Gaunt were known to sell swords to trade suppliers and these can be identified from their use of a known Thurkle proprietary proof disc.

090

Disc 090



This is the earliest known disc associated with Benjamin Thurkle. Identified from 12 examples, the design elements include the word Proved, around a star (6-pointed) and a dot separating the P and D. These are elements common to other probable Thurkle discs (#088 and #089). Two examples are found marked for 'B. Thurkle', with the remainder marked for various trade retailers. It is supposed this was a proprietary disc of Benjamin Thurkle.

Taking retailer and other dating evidence into account, known examples are likely to date no later than 1867. At least 8 are likely to date no later than 1861 and 1 is likely to pre-date 1851. One sword is dated from etching, to 1854; a further 3 are tentatively attributed to officers commissioned in 1853 (2) and 1855.

From 9 examples where the retailer etching can be seen, only 3 have the etching positioned on the ricasso, with the majority being etched on the blade proper. The trend of placing the name etching on the blade rather than the ricasso largely fell from fashion by the mid-1850s. For comparison, by the year 1850 Wilkinson's etching had migrated to the ricasso, though each cutler was undoubtedly different in this respect and etching both on and off the ricasso may have been used contemporaneously for several years.

From 8 gothic hilted infantry examples, 6 have the fold-down guard style with only 2 having a fixed guard, though 1 of those has had the folding section brazed into a fixed position, possibly having been retrofitted by the original owner in keeping with the trend for the fixed guard style. While this disc was almost certainly in use in the 1850s, there is no evidence of it being in use in the 1840s. If there was an earlier Thurkle design in use, it is yet to be identified.

There is no evidence to indicate that the design continued in use beyond Benjamin Thurkle's tenure, or that it continued at all into the 1860s. Whether it was directly replaced by another disc or whether there was some overlap is also unclear. If there was no overlap,

the changeover to the next disc likely occurred between before 1857.

088

Disc 088



The year of introduction of this disc will depend on whether there was any overlap with its predecessor. This design is identified from 13 examples, one sword is marked for John Moses of Portsea, which must have been ordered prior to his death around June 1857. Two examples are dated for 1861 and another is marked for retailer, Charles Kemp, at 41, London-Wall, a name and address combination only seemingly in use between 1862 and 1864.

There are only 2 known examples featuring the gothic infantry hilt, one has a fold-down guard and the other a fixed guard. The latter features no connecting bar in the fixed section, giving it a somewhat early appearance. 2 are marked for volunteer artillery or rifles units which only came into being in 1859.

When this disc fell from use is unconfirmed but where retailer evidence is available, it mostly indicates manufacture prior to 1870. Two examples with this disc are marked for Benjamin Thurkle and no examples are yet found marked for Edward Thurkle. There is no evidence this disc continued in use after Benjamin's death in 1864, or of any overlap

with the succeeding disc although, neither of these possibilities can be ruled out. If there was no overlap, a change occurring around 1864 would fit both the dating evidence for this disc and its successor. It could be that the change in discs may have been deliberately effected, in order to reflect the change from Benjamin to Edward.

089

Disc 089



One of the most prolific Thurkle discs, this is the earliest design known to feature on blades marked for Edward Thurkle, who is the only sword-cutler named in association with this disc. The remainder are marked for retailers.

Some 66 examples were considered and from 24 gothic-hilted infantry examples, it is noteworthy that the majority have the fixed guard style hilt. Only 5 are found to have the fold-down style guard. This would suggest the disc was in use early-mid 1860s, although there is no definitive cut-off date for his feature.

Those swords with plausible dating evidence are attributed to the years: 1870 (x2), 1871, 1873, 1877, 1879 and 1881. From 48 swords where there is retailer dating evidence, 34 must date after 1860 and 15 of those must date after 1870. One of these, marked for J. Daniels & Co., must date from at least 1882 when Daniels was incorporated. The

remainder could date anywhere between 1845 to 1900 but there is no evidence to indicate the disc was still in use after 1882.

Of the infantry or rifles swords with this disc, none are found with a 'Fox' blade, introduced in 1892. In the case of the Royal Artillery or Cavalry swords, where the change to the 1892 blade would not apply, there are no examples found with an 1895 backpiece. There are 3 examples of infantry swords with 1895/97 hilts, but as they each have 1845 'Wilkinson style' blades, they have almost certainly been re-hilted from the 1822 gothic infantry hilt.

Disc #089 was likely superseded by disc #003. There is no evidence of an overlap but once again it cannot be ruled out.

003

Disc 003



Identified from 36 examples, Edward Thurkle is again the only sword-cutler named in association with this disc, featuring in at least 13 cases (36%) and it is generally accepted that this is his proprietary disc. Disc 003 represents a shift from the 'Proved around star' style and is the first confirmed 'T' disc used by Thurkle.

Where there is retailer dating evidence, it tends to date the swords to post 1872 but there is no evidence to suggest it was in ever in use during the 1870s. Precisely when it was

introduced is unknown but as we know, the preceding disc #089 was in use until at least 1882. There is nothing to detract from the possibility that disc #003 directly superseded #089 with no overlap.

Use of this disc spanned the changes from the 1845 to the 1892 blade and to both the 1895 and 1897 pattern hilts, though there are surprisingly few 1897 pattern swords found with this disc. One such example is found to be dated for 1897.

It seems likely this design was the one in use when Edward Thurkle & Sons closed their doors however, the scarcity of 1897 infantry patterns (only 2 from a pool of 39 swords) is a little surprising considering that Thurkle were not declared bankrupt until the final quarter of 1897. Perhaps Edward Thurkle & Sons' producing low numbers of 1897 pattern swords is a symptom of the problems leading to their bankruptcy.

There are no confirmed examples of this disc found after 1897 or with any cypher other than Victoria's.

075

Disc 075



Although unconfirmed, this disc is assumed to have been introduced by J. R. Gaunt & Son when they took over Thurkle, apparently in 1897. It can be differentiated from 003 by the

absence of a dot. There is a greater gap between the letters P and D.

From 30 examples identified, there are: 1 Victorian, 10 Edwardian, and 12 marked for George V. The remainder are not clear but there are no confirmed GRVI examples found with disc #075.

Most are known to feature Thurkle's 5-digit serial numbering, which appears to have been introduced around the same time. The serial number range is assumed to begin at 10000 and disc #075 is found on examples from 10147 to 17406.

Although one of the earliest known swords in the series (10279) is marked only for 'Edw. Thurkle', with no mention of Gaunt, it falls only 14 in series prior to one (10293) dated 1902, so definitely within the Gaunt era. Another sword (11558) also marked only to 'Edw. Thurkle, but rather than indicating these 2 swords pre-date the Gaunt era, it is supposed there was a deliberate decision to etch them in that fashion, omitting reference to Gaunt.

It is evident that Gaunt were very keen to trade on the reputation of Thurkle, with their swords continuing to be marked, 'late Edward Thurkle', into the reign of George VI. Robert Wilkinson-Latham, formerly of Wilkinson Sword, addresses this issue, stating "...maybe at one moment they [Gaunt] decided that trading on the Thurkle name was better for business!!! Maybe it was from tailoring customers who didn't want Gaunt on the blade but E Thurkle??? I doubt we will know the answer."^{vi}

Gaunt's serial numbering helps to estimate when this disc fell out of use. The highest confirmed serial number found in conjunction with #075 is 17408, is on a sword dated for 1924, but by serial number 17829 Gaunt appears to have switched to disc #159. The exact year of the change, and whether there was any overlap, remains unclear although it certainly occurred before 1836 as 17829 is marked for George V.

Disc 159



Identified on 7 examples, all marked for 'J. R. Gaunt & Son Limited Late Edward Thurkle London & Birmingham'.

Robert Wilkinson-Latham has said, "Gaunts abandoned making their own swords shortly after WW1 ended and any they sold after that date they ordered from Wilkinsons and in the late 1920's/1930's from Solingen, acting purely as a retailer."

Evidence shows however, that at least some Gaunt swords, dating to shortly after WW1, are known to feature proof disc #075.

I am also unaware of any sword marked for Gaunt featuring any of the known Wilkinson proof discs.

If Wilkinson-Latham is correct, then either

1. Gaunt & Co. continued to stamp their own discs into Wilkinson made blades.
2. Wilkinson-made swords, sold to Gaunt, were not marked with Gaunt's name, making them impossible to identify.
3. Wilkinson used an as yet unknown proprietary disc in swords sold to Gaunt, or

4. There are Wilkinson-made, and proofed blades, marked for Gaunt, waiting to be identified.

Points 1 and 2 seem very unlikely and only point 3 seems remotely plausible. Is it possible that by 'shortly after WW1', Wilkinson-Latham meant as late as the instruction of disc #159, some point after 1924? If so, it might follow that #159 reflects the change from Gaunt making their own blades, to Gaunt sourcing finished swords from an external supplier. We should then consider, is disc #159 a proprietary Gaunt disc made for them by Wilkinson?

However, we must also consider the possibility that Wilkinson-Latham was mistaken. He makes no reference to the source of his information and it is therefore difficult to assess fully.

The highest known Gaunt serial number (18519), features disc #159 and is also one of only 2 known Gaunt swords marked for George VI. The serial number of the other is not known.

Gaunt continued in business until 1991, although when they sold their last sword is unknown nor whether they continued to use this proof disc #159 until the last.

No example of a Gaunt blade has yet been identified with an Elizabeth II cypher.

Non-proprietary discs

During the several periods of Thurkle, and Gaunt, operations, other non-proprietary discs are found interspersed with those mentioned already.

A Gaunt sword, numbered 16739, is described to have a disc with 'PROVED over a capital H and what looks like a 4-blade propellor'. This description would only fit discs #025 or its clone #199. These are yet to be attributed to any specific manufacturer.

Disc 025



Number 18227 has a disc which does not appear a match for any of the above, although the source image is poor, and the design is indistinct. It seems to use the spelling 'PROOVED' which upon current knowledge is unique to disc #140, believed to belong to a German supplier, which may account for the unusual spelling.

Disc 140



Swords marked for B. Thurkle are found with the proof discs #013 (approx. 1853-1865) and #018, the latter possibly dating to 1859. It is suspected that more examples of swords with #013 & #018, marked for retailers were also sold via Thurkle, as indicated by identical etching styles to known Thurkle blades. However, neither of these discs are likely to be Thurkle's proprietary discs. Both are found

associated with both Pillin and Thurkle and are supposed to belong to different Solingen cutlers who supplied various British cutlers.

Disc 018



Disc 013



George Thurkle

George Thurkle does not appear to have utilised his own proprietary proof disc, or if he did it has yet to be identified. His name is found on swords with discs #133 and #134 which are thought to be German imports. His name also features on a single example of #089 although the latter was likely made in the 1880s but refurbished and re-etched in 1919.

Disc 133



Disc 037



Disc 134



The same can be said of disc #087 which is similar to #088. Only 2 swords with this disc are identified and both are marked for retailers however, one of those is Silver & Co., notably a firm which was later supplied by both Edward Thurkle and J. R. Gaunt.

One of these is marked to a unit formed in 1860 and attributed to an officer only active for a few years^{vii}. If this disc is a Thurkle proprietary design, it is probably Benjamin's, although its use may feasibly fall between discs #088 and #089 and it might have continued in use after Edward senior took over the firm.

It may be a copycat disc used by another cutler and entirely unrelated to Thurkle.

Possible Thurkle Discs

It is possible that Thurkle used other discs, and several discs are known to feature the similar designs to those above.

Although I have yet to find any evidence to support any use by Thurkle, disc #037 is strikingly similar to #090, so that it is easy to imagine it is from the same manufacturer. With only 4 known examples of this disc, it is difficult to identify an age range however, based upon retailer trading dates, it must have been in use after 1853, but it is unlikely to have continued in use beyond the early 1860s. If it is a Thurkle disc it would almost certainly belong to Benjamin Thurkle.

Disc 087



Disc #177 a disc very similar in design to both #075 and #003, featuring 'proved' around a central T. Similar to the former, and unlike the latter, #177 has no dot at the 6 o'clock position. It is possible to differentiate #177 and #075, from the position of the letters in the word 'proved'.

In #177 the letters P and D of Proved are almost entirely above the foot of the central T. In #075 more than half of the letters P and D are positioned below the foot of the central T.

Disc 177



#177 is identified from a single example of an 1895 pattern infantry officer's sword. The blade must date after 1892 but prior to introduction of the 1897 hilt. This places its manufacture during the period of Edward Thurkle & Sons. It may well be a short-lived Thurkle disc, but there is currently no evidence that it has any link to Thurkle whatsoever.

In addition to #177, there are several other discs known to feature the letter T but notably the letter T is of a different style in each.

The following discs #092, #076 and #193 are examples of this and once again there is no known evidence to link these to the Thurkle business.

Disc 092



Disc 076



Disc 193



No Article about Thurkle Proof discs would be complete without reference to the infamous 'T dot' discs known to feature on modern replica swords. There are likely several tools which have given rise to these; 2 of these are shown below (differentiated from each other through a slight difference in positioning of the dot).

Disc 038



Disc 086



Summary

There are at least 6 distinct discs which are likely to have been used exclusively by Thurkle, or their direct successors, Gaunt.




Table 1 depicts the likely order of use of the known Thurkle/Gaunt proprietary discs, set out with my proposed dates for their use. These dates are a best guess based upon there being no overlap in the use of any two discs however, this may prove not be the case; there is particular uncertainty from 1845 to the introduction of disc #089. Regardless, the table offers a rough guideline.

There may be other discs used exclusively by Thurkle, such as #037, #087 or #177 and there may be more we are not yet aware of.

Thurkle/Gaunt and the separate business of George Thurkle, almost certainly retailed swords featuring blades which they had not made themselves. Such blades might have discs impressed with the manufacturers own proof design, but it is equally possible that Thurkle/Gaunt purchased blades without discs and were left to fit one with their own design.

A proof disc may therefore indicate the manufacturer of a blade, but it is just as likely that it can only indicate the firm who fitted and finished it, ready to be sold to the end user.

Table 1

Disc #	Image	Estimated date range	Manufacturer	Comment
090		1845 – 1857	Benjamin Thurkle 1834 - 1864	May extend until as late as 1867.
088		1857 – 1864		May extend several years at either end, 1855 – 1867.
089		1864 – 1882	Edward Thurkle 1864 - 1889	May begin as late as 1870. May extend several years beyond 1882 but not beyond 1891.
003		1882 – 1897	Edward Thurkle & Sons 1889 - 1997	May begin several years either way of 1882.
075		1897 – 1925	J. R. Gaunt & Son 1997 - 1991	May extend several years beyond 1925.
159		1925 – 1936+		The start and end dates are uncertain.

Notes

ⁱ London Gazette, Issue 26901, 19 October 1897, p. 5768.

ⁱⁱ London Gazette, Issue 26907, 05 November 1897, p. 6118.

ⁱⁱⁱ London Gazette, Issue 27022, 11 November 1898, p. 6662.

^{iv} London Gazette, Issue 27107, 11 August 1899, p. 5100.

^v J. R. Gaunt to Wilkinson & Son, 28th February 1958, in Sword Forum International <<http://www.swordforum.com/vb4/showthread.php?93894-Edward-Thurkle-Trading-dates>> [Accessed 16 April 2023]

^{vi} Ibid.

^{vii} Jay Cassidy, text correspondence, (15 April 2022).