19th Century Mameluke Officers' Swords of the British Army

Some Notes and Observations



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Introduction

Much has already been written about the early 19th century origins of British army officers' mameluke swords, and it is not my intention to repeat that which is already so well-known and documented.

Neither do I intend to present this article as anything other than an attempt to collate what knowledge I can ascertain, at present, regarding these swords generally, and also the specific forms adopted by particular regiments, how much is actually 'known' about these, and how much is merely 'inferred'. In fact, my purpose here is to commence a discussion, not to end it with any absolute statements.

General Characteristics

Many of these swords follow a relatively standard form, consisting of a middle-eastern inspired hilt, usually with ivory (and occasionally horn or ebony) grip slabs on a metal core, and a crossguard with double langets. The blades also tend to be similar, frequently being flat-sided (i.e. un-fullered), and often with a modest yelman. However, though less commonly encountered, there are also examples with pipe back blades, although these seem mainly to be early in date, and usually have royal cyphers relating to George IV and William IV. Nevertheless, many other examples have features which vary from those detailed above.

Although some very early examples of these swords were clearly made for serious use, most later iterations were not, and were primarily intended for wear at formal events. This makes good practical sense, as they would have been far less of an encumbrance than a full-size service sword. This is particularly true for light cavalry who had no regulation light sword, unlike their 'heavy' counterparts who had regulation light dress swords (the pattern 1796, and, later, the pattern 1834 for Household Cavalry). See Plates 85 – 91.

Their dress function is also evident in their construction. The tangs tend to be very short, thin and weak, and terminate part-way into the grip, and are often held in place with a single small countersunk screw (Plates 1 & 2). I have disassembled many of these swords over the years and almost every one of them is constructed using this same method. It is also uncommon to find an example that has been officially and neatly service sharpened, which tends to indicate that they were never intended for serious use.

However, for all that, they are generally considered to be very attractive weapons, a fact that would not have been lost on a fashion-conscious cavalry officer!

Scabbards

The forms of these vary, perhaps more so than the swords themselves, some being relatively simple and others extremely elaborate. They may be found made of all-steel, all-brass, leather with gilt mounts, steel with gilt brass/gunmetal mounts, wood covered with sharkskin (or velvet) and with metal fittings, and in various other forms.

However, they are generally consistent in having top and middle mounts (or bands), and either a metal chape (sometimes with a lyre-shaped shoe) or a squared shoe.



Plate 1



Plate 2

Findings and Discussion

Perhaps the best place to start is here…

"On 25th April 1822, the first Dress Regulations for the Army *(Regulations for the Dress of General, Staff, and Regimental Officers*) were published by the Adjutant-General's Office, and [the] practice of carrying a 'mameluke-hilted' sword by officers of the cavalry received official sanction for the first time: the three existing lancer regiments - the 9th, 12th and 16th Lancers - were prescribed a 'mameluke-hilted' sword with a plain metal scabbard for dress wear and a velvet-covered scabbard for full dress."

“The Dress Regulations of 1826 ordered, in Full Dress, a ‘mameluke-hilted’ sword for officers of hussar regiments…”

(The British Cavalry Sword 1788 - 1912 by Richard Dellar, p111 & 113)

The documents referred to above are the only known official references to the authorities’ approval of the use of these swords. Yet even prior to 1822 the carrying of these swords by all manner of officers had been very common, and this continued throughout the century, with them being worn by officers of other lancer regiments, light dragoons, heavy cavalry, and even infantry.

Thus, the Regulations do not explain the huge number of extant examples of swords for officers of other regiments, or the enormous number of variant designs that may be encountered.

Another question is the issue of regimental patterns; how many official patterns were there, how consistent were the details of the design, and at what point were they introduced? It is worth noting that many British military mameluke sabres exist that have no regimental attribution etched on to the blade.

An initial case in point is illustrated below. All three swords have identically decorated crossguards, and the left-hand and centre examples in Plate 3 have the same form of scabbard, and an etched blade attribution to the 12th Lancers, yet the right-hand one, although having etched decoration of the blade, is not marked to a regiment.

Furthermore, this exact same form of guard can also be found on the Royal Scotch Fusiliers sword illustrated on page 24.

To further complicate matters, the scabbard of the right-hand sword in Plate 3 has its original scabbard that, according to Dellar Volume 1, is associated with a sword of the Wiltshire Hussars (Plate 4, lower) yet the sword itself exhibits no markings to indicate a regimental attribution.



Plate 3



Plate 4

So, what does this mean? I would surmise that there are number of possibilities (amongst others, no doubt):

1) The guard was a generic design that was used by one (or perhaps more than one) maker that the 12th settled on as their 'standard'.

2) There was no regimental standard for the 12th other than the scabbard, and these three officers just happened to use the same tailor whose supplier provided swords with this form of mameluke guard regardless of its intended use.

3) That the guards were standardised for the 12th but the maker(s) decide that as they had the moulds they would continue to produce them and fit them to other swords.

Plates 5 – 7 illustrate another example. Dellar Vol 1 has an example of a sword with an identical scabbard and guard, the blade of which is marked to the Warwickshire Yeomanry. Yet the blade of the example shown below, whilst being extensively etched, has no regimental markings on the blade at all, but has a pair of crossed lances which perhaps means it belonged to an officer of the lancers (however, see note on page 11).



Plate 5



Plate 6



Plate 7

Conclusion

So, where does this leave us in terms of regimental attribution?

- Is the form of the crossguard a reliable indicator?
- Is the form of the scabbard a sure sign?
- Is the presence of crossed lances a guarantee that the sword belonged to a lancer regiment (see note on page 11)?
- Should we rely solely on the regimental details of the blade etching to determine attribution?

I suspect that the only true measure is numbers. If regimentally marked swords of the *same form* exist in sufficient numbers then we are likely to have a 'pattern'. If not, then perhaps we just have a case of an officer ordering a generic mameluke sword from his tailor and asking for it to be etched to his regiment as a personal touch. This doth not a pattern make, in my opinion.

However, in the former category, I have observed enough extant examples of many of the following swords which, in conjunction with other sources, lead me to believe that they were indeed regimental patterns, even though there may have been minor variations between some of them (note the comment on page 8).

3rd Light Dragoons
5th Dragoon Guards
6th Dragoon Guards
7th Hussars
9th Lancers
10th Hussars
11th Hussars
12th Lancers
15th Hussars
16th Lancers
18th Hussars
19th Lancers

I would also say that nothing I have been able to discover thus far leads me to believe that any of the Yeomanry regiments had standard 'patterns' (as we now term them), but my hope is that new evidence will emerge that may prove otherwise.

To sum up, nothing conclusive has been ascertained here, other than some basic facts, and I therefore maintain a completely open mind. There may be other examples out there that would benefit this discussion and, if so, then I would urge anyone who owns one, or has evidence of their existence, to contact me in order to further the research into this subject.

The appendix includes many examples of these swords which may assist the reader in forming their own view.

Finally, this article would be even less complete without mention of perhaps the best-known British mameluke sword, the pattern 1831 general officers' sabre. These swords are very commonly encountered, and at least in their case there is no doubt about their attribution. They usually follow the same overall form as most of the other

swords detailed herein, but with the general officers' motif of a 'crossed sword and baton' incorporated into the decoration on the écusson of the crossguard, and also within the blade etching.

There are three main types of scabbard associated with these swords: early examples were of leather with gilt mounts, mid-Victorian ones were all-brass, and later 19th century examples were all steel. Examples of the former and latter may be seen in Plates 79 - 84. This sword remains the official pattern for British generals.

Acknowledgements

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I may be messaged via Facebook by joining the 'International Antique Sword Collectors' group.

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Appendix

3rd (King's Own) Light Dragoons



Plate 8



Plate 9



Plate 10

Note – these pictures are from three different examples, and the guards differ significantly in either the length of the quillons or the form of the finials (or both), yet the hilts and scabbards are otherwise nearly identical.

5th Dragoon Guards



Plate 11



Plate 12

6th Dragoon Guards (The Carabiniers)



Plate 13

Note - One side of the blade in Plate 13 has an etched panel inscribed with 'Carabineers VI DG' [sic].



Plate 14

Another example marked to the same regiment, but with some minor differences in the details. (Note that the quillons are bent, and would likely have been straight *ab initio*).

7th (Queen's Own) Hussars



Plate 15



Plate 16



Plate 17

Note – the 7th Hussars were never lancers, so the presence of the etched crossed lances on this blade must be a purely decorative feature. Also, the photo in Plate 16 is from a different sword whose blade is etched to the same regiment, but it has been included to demonstrate consistency of form in the guard and its decoration.

9th Lancers



Plate 18



Plate 19



Plate 20

10th (Prince of Wales's Own) Hussars



Plate 21

Note the silver Prince of Wales' feathers on the guard.



Albert Edward, Prince of Wales, pictured in 1868, with his mameluke sword. He was appointed Colonel of the 10th Hussars on 16 April 1863.

Plate 22

11th (Prince Albert's Own) Hussars



Plate 23



Plate 24



Plate 25

Note the sphinx motif on the écusson, with the word ‘Egypt’ below. Not all examples of these swords have this feature (see below).

The scabbards of these 11th Hussars swords are of consistent form, being of steel with heavy brass mounts. However, the guards vary in style as illustrated in Plates 24 and 27.



Plate 26



Plate 27



Plate 28

Plates 29 and 30 are period photographs of two officers of the 11th Hussars carrying the above form of sword and scabbard and thereby help to demonstrate a consistency of form for the use of this particular pattern by the regiment.



Major Douglas, who was present at the Charge of the Light Brigade on October 25th, 1854.

Plate 29



Cornet John Yates in full dress uniform. He was not present at the 'Charge' due to illness.

Plate 30

12th (The Prince of Wales') Royal Lancers



Plate 31



Plate 32

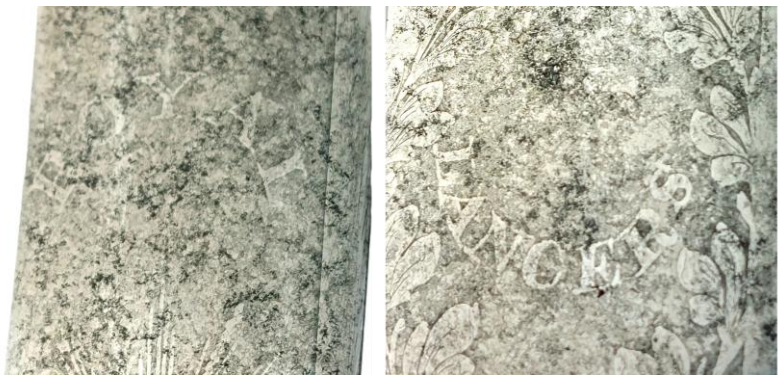

Plate 33

Note – the blade is marked ‘Royal Lancers’.

14th (King's) Hussars



Plate 34



Plate 35



Plate 36

15th (The King's) Hussars



Plate 37



Plate 38



Plate 39

16th (The Queen's) Lancers



Plate 40



Plate 41



Plate 42

17th (Duke of Cambridge's Own) Lancers



Plate 43



Plate 44



Plate 45

18th (Royal) Hussars



Plate 46



Plate 47



Plate 48

19th (Royal) Hussars



Plate 49



Plate 50



Plate 51

Note the elephant and howdah motif on the right-hand écusson, and the crescent on the left-hand side.

21st Royal Scotch Fusiliers



Plate 52



Plate 53



Plate 54

Lancashire Hussars



Plate 55



Plate 56



Plate 57

Note – this sword is nearly identical to the 11th Hussars example shown on page 15, other than the regimental etching, and the silver Tudor rose on the écussons. This is perhaps unsurprising as the Lancs modelled their uniforms after the 11th.

The sword of Brigadier General Hugh Halkett, circa 1815



Plate 58



Plate 59



Plate 60

Note the cypher of George III on the blade.

Westmoreland & Cumberland Yeomanry



Plate 61



Plate 62



Plate 63

Unattributable, but likely for a Yeomanry light cavalry officer

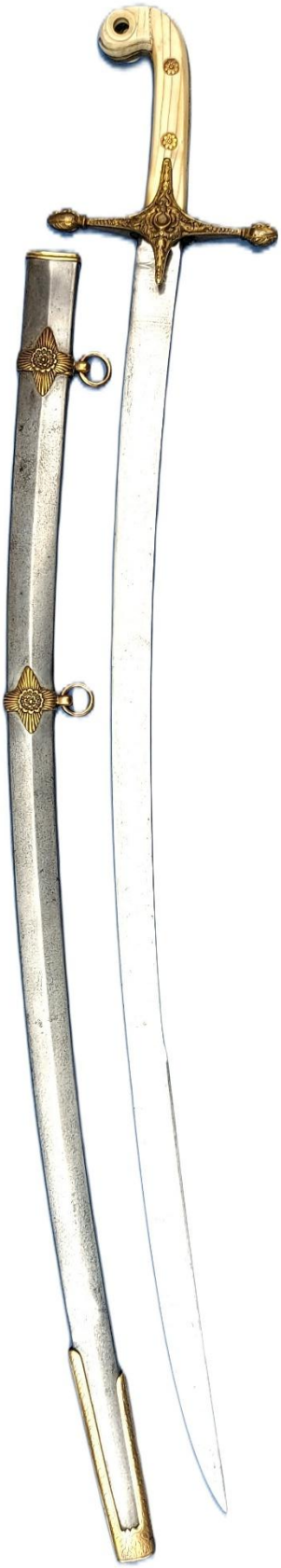

Plate 64



Plate 65



Plate 66

Note – the scabbard is identical to an example known to be for the Wiltshire Yeomanry.

Unattributable pipe-back variant with gilt hilt



Plate 67



Plate 68



Plate 69

Note – the blade has a faded etched panel containing the cypher of William IV (1830-1837). Steel scabbard.

Another unattributable pipe-back variant with gilt hilt



Plate 70



Plate 71



Plate 72

Note – etched panel containing the cypher of William IV. Brass scabbard.

Unattributable pipe-back variant – steel hilt



Plate 73



Plate 74

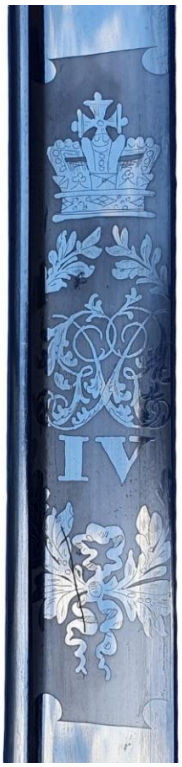

Plate 75

Note the George IV cypher on the blade (1820-1830).

Unattributable variant with fullered blade



Plate 76



Plate 77



Plate 78

Note - this is a very early example of a Wilkinson, c1850.

Pattern 1831 General Officers' Swords



Plate 79



Plate 80



Plate 81

Note – an early Victorian example (c1840), with 'VR' cypher and crossed sword and baton.



Plate 82



Plate 83



Plate 84

Note – another example, with the cypher of George V (1910-1936).

Pattern 1796 Heavy Cavalry Dress Sword



Plate 85



Plate 86



Plate 87

This is an early Georgian example, with crowned GR cypher.

Pattern 1834 Household Cavalry Dress Sword (Type 1)



Plate 88



Plate 89

The blade is completely plain, with not even a maker/retailer name.

Pattern 1834 Household Cavalry Dress Sword (Type 2)



Plate 90



Plate 91

Another example with a different form of guard, with a straight 'cut-off' appearance at the base, and in this case folding (although some of these types were fixed, or absent the inner guard). Note the lightweight blade; many other examples of this variant have the same full-width blade as that in Plate 88.