



The Crossed Sceptres & Crown Mark

and its association with the gunmakers Ketland

by Brian Godwin & John Evans

Proof marks have always been important. Originally they provided the purchaser with a reasonable guarantee as to the origin and quality of the weapon offered for sale. Today of course proof marks, combined with other evidence, can assist the collector to establish something of the history of the item concerned. Sometimes the presence of the appropriate proof mark will help to determine whether the piece was actually made by the maker whose name appears on the piece or is merely a contemporary or later copy.

Over the years, leading writers on antique firearms have established a fairly comprehensive listing of the makers' marks and proof marks that are generally found on English firearms from the mid 17th through to the late 19th centuries. The London Gunmakers' proof and makers' marks have been documented, initially by Pollard and latterly, in greater detail, by Blackmore. Thus, when a piece is marked with the name and mark of a London gunmaker, together with the proof and view marks of the Gunmakers' Company, the collector can be reasonably certain of its origin.

In the case of Birmingham, the picture is less clear and considerably more complicated. The purpose of this article is to consider the existing evidence and to explore and clarify the extent to which collectors can rely on these marks to identify the origin of non-London or "provincial" items.

In 1926 Major Hugh Pollard published his book "*The History of Firearms*", the culmination of nine years research and the publication of specialised papers covering many aspects of firearms history. It remains one of the most respected of the early works documenting the history of small arms and has had a huge influence on the study of the subject ever since.

Pollard illustrates a selection of proof and makers' marks, including one showing crossed sceptres with a crown above, which he identifies as the, "*private proof mark of Ketland of Birmingham, which later developed into the Birmingham proofhouse mark*". Lower down on the same page the mark is shown again and is once more identified as, "*Birmingham private proof of Ketland, c.1780*". Pollard's assertion that this was an early Ketland proof mark was repeated in many publications, over the next eighty years, e.g., J.N. George (*English Pistols & Revolvers*, 1938), C. Harris (*History of the Birmingham Proof House*, 1946), A. Baron Englehardt (*The Story of European Proof Marks* (published in *Gun Digest* magazine, 1950s) and the lexicon of gun marks by E. Heer (*Der Neue Stockel*, 1982). Indeed, the attribution of the mark and its connection with Ketland still appear in publications as recently as 2005 and 2006.

Pollard's assertion about the link between Ketland and the crossed sceptres mark appears to be without any firm foundation. It has, and still is, causing confusion among students of antique firearms. His theory has never been challenged directly and has come to be regarded as "gospel" by collectors and students of antique firearms.

While the crossed sceptres mark, struck twice, one above the other, is often found on the barrels of Ketland firearms, it also appears on London-made and signed firearms of the 18th century and on the barrels of both Birmingham and provincially made firearms of the same period.

It is unclear why Pollard was so certain that this mark belonged to Ketland. In order to clarify the situation, it is necessary to look at the history of the mark in general and, in particular, its use on gun barrels produced in Birmingham. The main sources of information are Howard Blackmore's "*British Military Firearms 1650 - 1850*", published in 1961 and De Witt Bailey's "*Pattern Dates for British Ordnance Small Arms 1718 - 1783*", published in 1998. Two forthcoming publications, "*James Farmer and Samuel Galton - The Reality of Gunmaking for the Board of Ordnance in the Mid 18th Century*" by David Williams and "*The Ketland gunmakers*" by Joe Puleo will advance our knowledge of the subject.



The Crossed Sceptres & Crown mark

Howard Blackmore investigated the mark and included his findings in his definitive work *"British Military Firearms 1650-1850"*. First, Blackmore stated that, "The crossed sceptre mark, without the crown, was an old mark used by Anthony Harris, a cutler member of the Armourers' Company until 1620, when the Cutlers Company complained that it was too much like their mark of the Crossed Keys" (Minute Books of the Armourers Company, London - Blackmore 1961, page 265).

He also noted an early connection between the mark and the Ordnance in 1697 when Nicholas Allcock, Master Carver to the Ordnance, was paid for decorating the Small Arms Room of the Grand Storehouse at the Tower of London with, "8 Circular peices of Ornamt at ye bottom of ye Pyramids, Carved wth Crowns & Sceptres".

During the reign of Queen Anne (1702 - 1714), the old Rose & Crown proof mark previously stamped on all Board of Ordnance firearms, was replaced by the crossed sceptres and crown mark, and another mark consisting of the Royal Cypher with a crown above and a Broad Arrow beneath it. These two marks, struck together, were used from c1710 onward and were known later as the Kings Mark or Kings Proof (Bailey 1998, page 5) [Fig.1 below]. A bill in the War Office Records refers to "Punches With Crown and Sceptres for marking Barrels after proof" (WO51/250 p.251 - Blackmore 1961, page 265).



Figure 1 - The Kings Proof mark - consisting of both a proof mark and view mark.
Introduced during the reign of Queen Anne in the early 18th century,
it was used on all Ordnance made gun barrels

Finally, Blackmore actually hinted that Pollard was incorrect, when he stated that the crossed sceptre & crown mark "has caused much confusion in the past to firearms collectors and historians". This is reinforced by the fact that he did not repeat Pollard's error in the illustrations of "Barrel and Lock Marks" on pages 280-281.

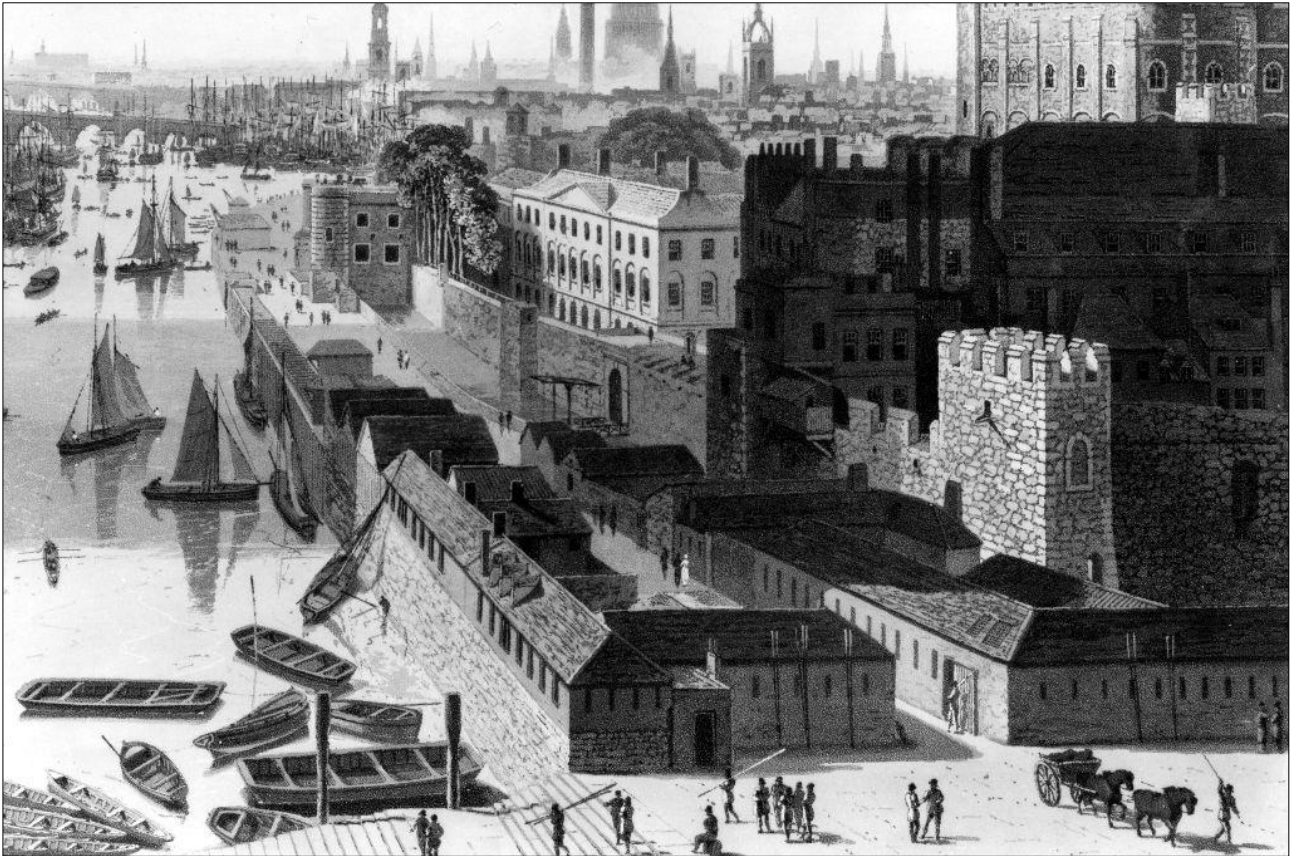


Figure 2 - Detail from a lithograph by Daniell, 1804,
showing the Board of Ordnance workshops and proof house on Tower Wharf, London

The Ordnance Proof House, London

From about 1751 the Ordnance proof house, which was situated on Tower Wharf [Fig.2 above] close to the Tower of London, started proving privately made civilian firearms. To differentiate between the Ordnance and civilian markings, the mark chosen for civilian or "Private Proof" was the crossed sceptres & crown, struck twice, one mark above the other - but without the Royal Cypher mark (Figure 3 below).



Figure 3 - Tower Private Proof marks -
the crossed sceptres and crown stamped twice -
used at the Tower of London proof house
from c1740 until c1810



This service had the added attraction of being available, at no extra cost, to “foreigners”, i.e., those gunmakers who did not work in London and were not bound by the membership rules of the London Gunmakers Company. As a consequence, the London Gunmakers Company lost revenue and eventually had to adjust its prices for proving arms.

The facility for the “Private Proof” of gun barrels at the Tower was available until about 1810, so the crossed sceptre & crown mark can be found on civilian firearms made until this date.

The Ordnance Proof House, Birmingham

After the reorganisation of the Board of Ordnance in the 1680s, the demand for military firearms was so high that it could not be met by the London gunmakers alone. The gunmakers of Birmingham responded eagerly to this opportunity. The first orders for muskets were obtained in 1689, by Sir Richard Newdigate, MP for Warwickshire. From this time on, Board of Ordnance firearms were produced in Birmingham and production increased dramatically during the 18th century.

In 1755, Board of Ordnance viewers were stationed at Birmingham to gauge and view barrels made by contractors to the Ordnance. Those that passed this test were then sent to London for proof, a nine day journey by road and canal. The contractor had to bear the transportation costs as well as the expense of any rejected barrels.

The American War of Independence (1775 - 1783) boosted further the demand for service arms and it became clear that the time consuming methods used in the proof of Birmingham-made barrels needed to be altered.

In 1777 the Ordnance in Birmingham established a warehouse to try to ease the selection process, but this caused the Ordnance viewers to become even more discriminating, which made the process even slower. In 1796 the Board of Ordnance decided that the only way to overcome the situation was to build a Proof House at Birmingham. The new Ordnance proof house was built next to the Birmingham & Fazeley Canal, between Lancaster Street and Staniforth Street, with the main entrance in Bagot Street (Figure 4).



Figure 4 – Corner stone from the Board of Ordnance proof house in Bagot Street, Birmingham (photo courtesy of David Williams)



While the Ordnance proof house was being built, an agreement was made with the gunmakers Galton, Ketland & Walker, Whately, Grice and Blair for their barrels to be proved at their own proof houses by the Ordnance viewers (The exact location of the private proof houses and to whom they belonged is not known. There is some evidence to suggest that one private proof house was situated close to Weaman Street). Presumably the proof mark used was the same crossed sceptres and crown mark as that used in London. It would seem therefore that it is not possible to distinguish between the Ordnance mark used in London and that used in Birmingham.

In 1798 the Ordnance proof house was opened. The author J. Morfitt commented in his 1802 book *Sketch of Birmingham* that “the explosions of which were very terrific to strangers” (*Pollard’s History of Firearms*, ed. Claude Blair, 1983, page 475). In 1808 a larger Proof House was built at the same address but “at a greater distance from the View Rooms” and in 1811 a new View Room was built.

So, from 1798 those gun barrels made by Birmingham gunmakers for Ordnance contracts were proved at the Ordnance proof house in Bagot Street. However, there is no evidence to suggest that a “Private Proof” service was available for civilian/commercial firearms, as it was in London.

The Ordnance proof house in Birmingham closed in 1818, because of the decline in demand for military firearms following the ending of the American and French Wars. But in 1839 George Lovell and James Gunner (the London Ordnance Storekeeper & Superintendent) went to Birmingham to set about re-opening the Ordnance proof house. In 1841 it was working once again and in 1864 it was reported to have a staff of between 60 and 70 persons.

The Birmingham Proof Company

In 1813 the Proof House of the Birmingham Proof Company was established by an Act of Parliament and built in Banbury Street. It was set up to prove all privately made firearms (that is non-Ordnance firearms) and it still operates on the same site today. The proof marks used from 1813 until 1904 were the crossed sceptres and crown mark, incorporating the letters BPC (Birmingham Proof Company), together with the crossed sceptres over a V (View) (Figure 5 below).



Figure 5 – Proof marks of the Birmingham Proof Company – used from 1813 until 1904



What was the real source of the BPC mark?

Why were the crossed sceptres and crown used as the Birmingham proof mark? The most likely explanation for this is suggested in an issue of *Aris's Birmingham Gazette*, dated 11th October 1813. This reported the ceremony for the laying of the foundation stone of the new proof house. The article also states that “*the barrels of all guns manufactured in Birmingham must be full Tower proof, by which persons may use such firearms with the greatest safety*” (K.Dunham, *The Gun Trade of Birmingham*, 1955, page 11).

It would seem therefore that the Guardians of the Birmingham Proof House chose to copy the crossed sceptres and crown mark as used by the Tower private proof mark (crossed sceptres & crown stamped twice) but to identify it as Birmingham-made by including the letters BPC & V. Perhaps the established reputation of the crossed sceptres and crown mark instilled a guarantee of quality and reliability that the Birmingham gunmakers were keen to exploit.

Conclusions

Clearly the crossed sceptres and crown mark cannot logically be attributed to Ketland. So why did Pollard come to this conclusion? Ketlands appear to have produced a huge quantity of firearms over the period 1766-1810, well before the opening of the Birmingham Proof Company House in 1813. They established outlets in both London and Philadelphia and their barrel production alone must have been considerable. It is likely that they submitted many of their arms to the Tower proof house, prior to the opening of the Birmingham proof house. In this case, many of their barrels would have been stamped with the double crossed sceptres and crown mark.

A probable explanation is that Pollard attributed the mark to Ketland because of the sheer number of crossed sceptres and crown marks (Tower “Private Proof”) that he had found on the barrels of either Birmingham or provincially made firearms, many of which were signed by Ketland. It seems therefore, to be a case of identity by association. Unfortunately the problem is not as straightforward as this and there is a possibility that Ketland (and/or others) may have used forged punches to copy the Private Proof of the Ordnance, for their own gain. Another mark consisting only of crossed sceptres (without a Crown) is known, but this may be a counterfeit mark struck on imported barrels, with intent to deceive.

It is strongly suggested that the crossed sceptres and crown mark on firearms of Birmingham or provincial manufacturers should not automatically be ascribed to Ketland or cited as his early proof mark. Where a firearm is found with the mark struck twice, as described, then it is fairly certain that it was submitted for private proof by the Ordnance, probably at the Tower Proof House in London.

One of the few marks that can be attributed to Ketland is the crowned TK mark for Thomas Ketland, found on pieces marked Ketland & Co. [Fig.6 below]. This is a maker's mark, usually found in conjunction with the early Birmingham crowned P and V marks.



Figure 6 - The makers mark, TK under a crown, thought to be the makers' mark of Thomas Ketland. Shown here from a pistol by Isaac Pratt



As stated above, the Board of Ordnance proof house used the crossed sceptres mark struck once for Government arms (together with the Royal Cypher as detailed above), and struck twice for the proof of private arms. It is suggested that this might have been the inspiration for the Guardians' new mark in 1813. What seems fairly certain is that Major Pollard's original assumption, i.e., that the crossed sceptres mark adopted by the Guardians of the Birmingham Proof House was based on an earlier Ketland mark, is not supported by any of the existing evidence.

Further Research

There is still a great deal of information to be uncovered about proof marks in Birmingham, prior to the establishment of the 1813 proof house in Banbury Street. The most common proof mark encountered on early Birmingham arms is the Crowned P and V within an oval (Figs 7a-d below).



a) pistol by Warren, c1740



b) pistol by Heath, c1750



c) pistol by Richards, c1760



d) pistol by Ketland, c1780

Figures 7a-d - Some examples of 18th century Birmingham private proof house marks as yet unidentified

