



Why The Tombstone?

Unusual Marks on Birmingham Guns

by John Evans & Brian Godwin

In *"The Crossed Sceptres & Crown Mark"* [RPL001] we drew attention to the proof marks on English firearms made outside London and the developments which led to the establishment of the Birmingham Proof House in 1813, with its familiar "V" and "BPC" marks under crossed sceptres. In the course of compiling material for the article we came across several other types of marks, usually struck close to the proof marks. These are discussed in more detail below.

"Tombstone" Marks

Some arms proved in Birmingham after 1813 show additional stamps which take the form of "tombstone" shaped impressions with a variety of numbers and symbols enclosed therein.



a) pocket pistol -
T.Bolton, Birmingham



b) pocket pistol -
Ketland



c) travelling pistol -
George Farmer, Cardiff



d) holster pistol -
W. Ketland



e) pocket pistol -
McLaughlin, Edinburgh



f) pocket pistol -
Constable, Philadelphia (USA)

Figures 1a-f: Examples of the tombstone mark



During this investigation the numbers 1, 2, 3 and 5 have been found. No “tombstone” mark containing the numeral 4 has yet been found but it is logical that there may well be such a mark and that numbers in excess of 5 also exist (see end note *).

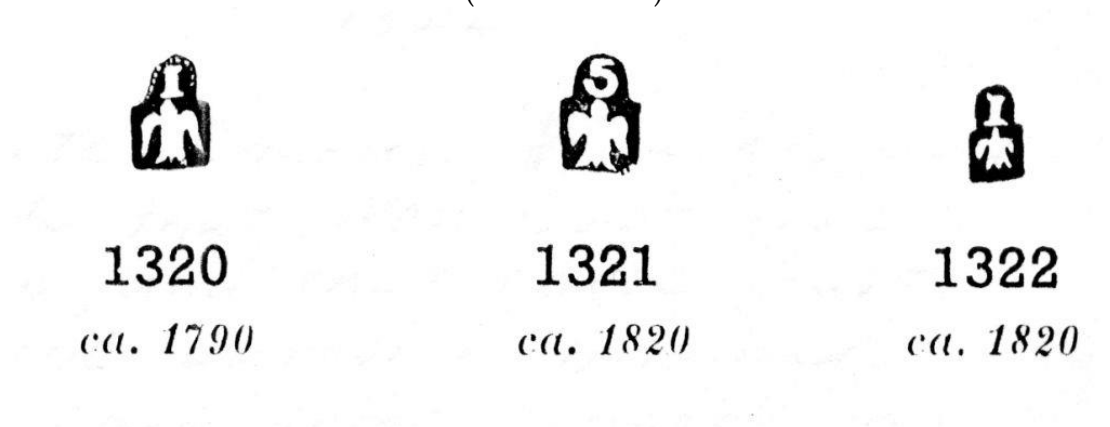


Figure 2: Tombstone marks recorded in Johann Stöckel's 1938 book, "*Haandskydevaabens Bedømmelse*"

The symbols found so far can be identified as a bird, a fleur-de-lys and a lion passant. Both the bird and fleur-de-lys have been found with the number 1.

The significance of the marks is unclear. A possible explanation might be that a barrel maker (or a group of barrel makers) marked their barrels in this way before supplying individual gunmakers or retailers. Given the positioning of the marks, it appears likely that this was done at the same time as the proof marks were struck (quite possibly by the Proof House staff).

In his 1926 book "*History of Firearms*", Major Hugh Pollard includes two examples of the “tombstone” mark among the seventy drawings of barrel markings illustrated. One is shown upside down, the caption reading “Birmingham weapons c1780”, while the other is attributed to the gunmaker, Dupe. Despite exhaustive research the authors have found no evidence that the “tombstone” mark is unique to Dupe. In fact, William Dupe is recorded as working in London in the late 18th century and later in Oxford between 1810 and 1830 (*Dictionary of London Gunmakers* – Blackmore 1986; *English Gunmakers* – Bailey & Nie 1978). Like so many gunmakers of the period, it is likely that Dupe obtained his barrels from Birmingham, already proved and struck with the “tombstone” mark. Pollard therefore presumably assumed, wrongly, that this was Dupe's own mark. As with the allocation of the crossed sceptres and crown mark to Ketland, the attribution of the “tombstone” mark to Dupe has been perpetuated in countless publications ever since.

Flintlocks Only

So far, the “tombstone” mark has only been found on flintlock firearms and no percussion arms with the mark were noted apart from two conversions from flintlock. This very superficial survey would suggest therefore that the “tombstone” mark was used during the period 1813 to about 1830, when the last flintlock firearms were being produced. “Tombstone” marks have been found on pocket pistols, tap-action pistols, travelling and duelling pistols and blunderbusses; all flintlock firearms and all stamped with the post 1813 proof marks of the Birmingham Proof Company.



List Of Examples Found

During the period 1813 to 1828, over one and a half million gun barrels were proved at the Birmingham Proof House (Clive Harris – *A History of the Birmingham Proof House*, 1946). It is not surprising therefore, that examples of the “tombstone” mark are reasonably common. These are not limited to the work of one maker or retailer and a summary of the marks found during the investigation so far is given below, together with details of the gunmakers’ names. The list includes several provincial and five London gunmakers:

Mark A. A bird under number “1” (Figure 3)

- H Nock, London: F/L pocket pistol (dealer catalogue)
- S Brunn, London: F/L pocket pistol (private collection)
- S Brummitt, Nottingham: F/L blunderbuss (National Trust)
- Spencer, London: F/L pocket pistol (private collection)
- T Moxham, London: F/L duelling pistol (Glendenning 1951, pp.84 – 89)
- Ketland: F/L holster pistol (private collection)
- Gourlay, Glasgow: F/L pocket pistol (Lawrence sale 28/10/2010)
- Troughton, Preston: F/L tap action pistol, brass frame (dealer catalogue)
- Constable, Philadelphia: F/L pocket pistol (private collection)
- McLaughlin: F/L pocket pistol (private collection)
- Wilson, Birmingham: carriage pistols (dealer catalogue)
- Higham, Warrington: F/L pocket pistol with spring bayonet (dealer)
- Allport, Birmingham: Paget type carbine (private collection)
- G Farmer, Cardiff: F/L travelling pistol (dealer)
- Smith, London: F/L pocket pistol (dealer)
- T Conway, Manchester: F/L pocket pistol (National Trust)
- Mabson & Labron, Birmingham: F/L pocket pistol (private collection)
- T Ketland: F/L pistol (private collection)



Figure 3a **Mark A** -
Pocket pistol by Samuel Brunn, London
(active c1795 – 1820)





Figure 3b **Mark A** -
Blunderbuss by Samuel Brummitt, Nottingham
(active 1810-1828)
(Courtesy Caulke Abbey - National Trust)



Figure 3c **Mark A** -
Pocket pistol by Thomas Conway, Manchester
(active c1803 -1852)
(Courtesy Tatton Park - National Trust)





Figure 3d **Mark A** -
Paget-type carbine by Allport, Birmingham
(Courtesy Barry Chisnall)



Figure 3e **Mark A** -
Export quality pistol by T. Ketland
(1766 - 1816)
(Courtesy Joe Puleo)





Mark B. A fleur-de-lys under number "1" (Figure 4)

- W Ketland & Co: London; pair of F/L duelling pistols (private collection)
- T Bolton, Birmingham: F/L pocket pistol (private collection)



Figure 4 **Mark B** -
Pair of cased duelling pistols by Ketland & Co
(Courtesy Tony Morgan)

Mark C. A lion passant under number "2" (Figure 5)

- Ketland: F/L pocket pistol (private collection)
- Harcourt, Norwich: pair brass F/L blunderbuss pistols (dealer)



Figure 5 **Mark C** -
One of a pair of blunderbuss pistols by
Harcourt, Norwich
(Courtesy Richard Smith)





Mark D. A lion passant under number "3" (Figure 6)

- C B Fisher, London: F/L pocket pistol (John Burgoyne collection)
- G Farmer, Cardiff: F/L pocket pistol (St. Fagans, National Museum of Wales)
- Gillet, Bristol: F/L pocket pistol (Glendenning 1951, pp.80 - 82)



Figure 6 **Mark D** -
Pair of pocket pistols by Cornelius Bird Fisher
(1802 - 1824)
(Courtesy John Burgoyne)



Additional makers with “tombstone” marks (exact type not specified)

Some “tombstone” marks could not be categorised as they were damaged, poorly struck or obliterated by dirt (Figure 7).



Figure 7
An obliterated tombstone mark -
an unsigned flintlock pocket pistol

Conclusions

Do the marks indicate that a consortium of barrel makers was operating as contractors to the trade at the time that the Birmingham gunmakers established their own proof house? The authors could find no documentary evidence to support such a theory but there are, for instance, hints of similar activities mentioned in the records of the Parliamentary Select Committee on Small Arms of 1854 (private correspondence with David Harding). This document notes that the Board of Ordnance considered it to be advantageous to be supplied by “barrel and lock contractors.....as they are now” (*Report of the Parliamentary Select Committee on Small Arms 1854*, page 418).

No firm conclusions can be drawn at this stage but the authors intend to add any further “sightings” to the lists and would welcome contributions (with photographs if possible) from readers. Please contact; enquiries@briangodwin.co.uk

In the next and last part of this investigation of non-London or “provincial” proof marks, we shall look at various makers’ marks, sometimes referred to as “Birmingham private proofs”.

In the course of this study, the following are just a few of the individuals and organisations that were consulted; The Birmingham Proof House; De Witt Bailey, Bill Harding; Jim Gooding, David Harding, Stuart Mowbray, Joe Puleo, David Williams; Craig Ross; John Burgoyne; Bob Freeman; John Rees; Richard Smith, Tony Morgan, Jeff Pennington; Paul Lederer; The Birmingham Record Office; The National Trust; The National Museum of Wales Folk Museum.



The authors would like to express their thanks to all those who have helped and provided photographs including the numerous names that are not listed above.

Among the hundreds of publications searched and consulted during this study the following should be noted; *Observations on the Manufacture of Firearms 1829*; *Report of the Parliamentary Select Committee on Small Arms 1854*; *Experts on Guns & Shooting* by G.T. Teasdale-Buckell 1900; *The Gun* by W.W. Greener 1910; *History of the Birmingham Gun Trade* by D.W. Young 1936 (unpublished thesis); *The History of the Birmingham Proof House* by Clive Harris 1948; *The Gun Trade of Birmingham* by K. Dunham 1955; *Armourers Marks* by D. Hawtrey Gyngell 1959; *Small Arms Makers* by R. Gardner 1963; *English Gunmakers* by D. Bailey & D. Nie 1978; *Der Neue Stockel* by E.Heer 1979.

- * Since this article was published an example of the “Tombstone 4” mark has been found - this on a brass barrelled F/L pocket pistol - the number 4 beneath a bird

Authors Note: The tombstone marks discussed here should not be confused with the well known mark, the Tombstone Fox, often found on the trade guns of the Hudson’s Bay Company and other Northwest guns - see *Trade Guns of the Hudson Bay Company* by S.J. Gooding, Canada 2003