



The Gunmakers of Oxford

Part 1

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Introduction

In 2011, we published a series of articles on provincial gunmakers and their marks *. Some of the research involved in this project led us to conclude that, in certain areas of the country, a distinctly local tradition of gunmaking had developed, which began as early as the mid 17th century, expanded in the 18th and 19th and, in a few cases, continued into the 20th century.

The London gunsmiths had always played a leading role in the development of the trade, largely because of the government's need for military firearms. This relationship became formalised over time with the emergence of the Board of Ordnance, based in the Tower of London, and the creation of the Gunmakers Company, ratified by Royal Charter in 1637.

When, towards the end of the 17th century, the Government's requirement for arms outgrew the London makers' production capacity, Birmingham became increasingly important as a secondary source of supply. This was essentially different from other areas of the country since gunmaking in Birmingham was part of a much larger upsurge in metalworking and manufacturing generally, eventually contributing to the growth of the Industrial Revolution in Britain. In addition, Birmingham and the Black Country may be regarded as different, not only because of the scale of the operations involved, but also the variety of specialisms which grew up e.g. lockmaking in West Bromwich and Willenhall.

However, in a few provincial towns and cities, the making of guns became a distinctly local activity, concentrated in a few family businesses. Often, the quality and innovative nature of their products suggests that this was much more than the mere retailing and repair of arms made in London or Birmingham. Also, the craft was handed down from father to son or nephew so that certain families came to be associated with the gun trade. Even where the direct family link was broken, continuity was maintained through the apprentice system. A particular example of this on-going tradition was in Oxford. In the first part of this study, we shall be examining gunmaking in Oxford from its beginnings before the English Civil War to the end of the 18th century.

* *The Crossed Sceptres & Crown Mark, Why The Tombstone?, and English Provincial Makers' Marks.*
Available to download via: <http://researchpress.blogspot.co.uk/p/library.html>



Gunmaking in Oxford

As early as 1620, Richard Meller, gunsmith of Oxford, is mentioned with others in a legal document. During the Civil War in the 1640s, when Charles I made his headquarters in Oxford, Harman Barne and 16 other gunmakers from London, including Jonadab Holloway, were producing weapons for Prince Rupert and the Royalist army. Both Barne and Holloway made very fine quality firearms, including breech-loaders and repeating guns and this tradition of quality and innovation was carried on by the Upton family.

Thanks to the research carried out by Dr John Cooper in the 1990s, we have a detailed picture of three generations of the Upton dynasty, who were engaged in the trade from the middle of the 17th century until 1718 when Edward Upton died (see *"The Uptons of Oxford – Gunmakers"* published in the catalogue of the London Park Lane Arms Fair 2008).

The first William Upton, originally recorded as a locksmith, was working in Oxford in 1647 and afterwards during the Commonwealth period. With the restoration of the monarchy, his business prospered and in 1665 he took his son, William, as one of his apprentices. William Senior died in 1678 and, in turn, William Junior took his sons, Edward and John, as apprentices in 1695 and 1697 respectively. William Junior died in 1704 and his son, Edward, in 1718 but Edward's business was carried on for some time by his widow, Susan (or Susanna) Upton, who continued to take on apprentices (see Appendix 1).

Examples of the Upton's work

At least 11 examples of the Upton's work are known to have survived; three pocket pistols (Figure 1), six holster pistols (two singles and two pairs, Figures 2 & 4), a breech loading pistol with a magazine primer (Figure 3) and a carbine with extending butt. Dr John Cooper's article in the London Park Lane fair catalogue of 2008 gives detailed descriptions of these pieces.



Figure 1



Figure 2



Figure 3



Figure 4



The Nicholes family

John Nicholes, the son of an Oxford innkeeper, was born in 1671 and apprenticed to William Upton Junior in 1687. He became a Freeman of Oxford in 1694 and his business evidently prospered since he was twice elected as Mayor of the city in 1719 and 1732. He died in 1750 aged 79.

He took his eldest son, also John, as an apprentice in 1718; another son, William, became a Fellow of Corpus Christi College. Like his father, John Nicholes Junior was elected as Mayor of Oxford in 1752 and died at the age of 82 in 1785. A memorial tablet listing various members of the Nicholes family can still be seen in the church of St Mary the Virgin in Oxford.

Examples of Nicholes's work



Figure 5



Figure 5 shows a pair of pistols signed by J Nicholes, Oxford and dating probably to the very early part of the 18th century (*Lot 404 Bonhams, 26 November 2008*). These are of small size and truncated form, with sidelocks and turn-off cannon barrels. They are fitted with small dog safety catches which engage at half cock and release automatically when the action is brought to full cock. The iron furniture is finely engraved with floral motifs and the style and quality of the work demonstrate a natural progression from the work of the Uptons.



Figure 6



Figure 7



Figure 8

Figures 6-8 – A pair of silver mounted pistols (*Craig Ross collection*). These are of the more usual “Queen Anne” type with silver furniture by Charles Laughton which dates to between 1739 and 1752 (hence they are probably the work of John Nicholes Junior).



William Hawkes

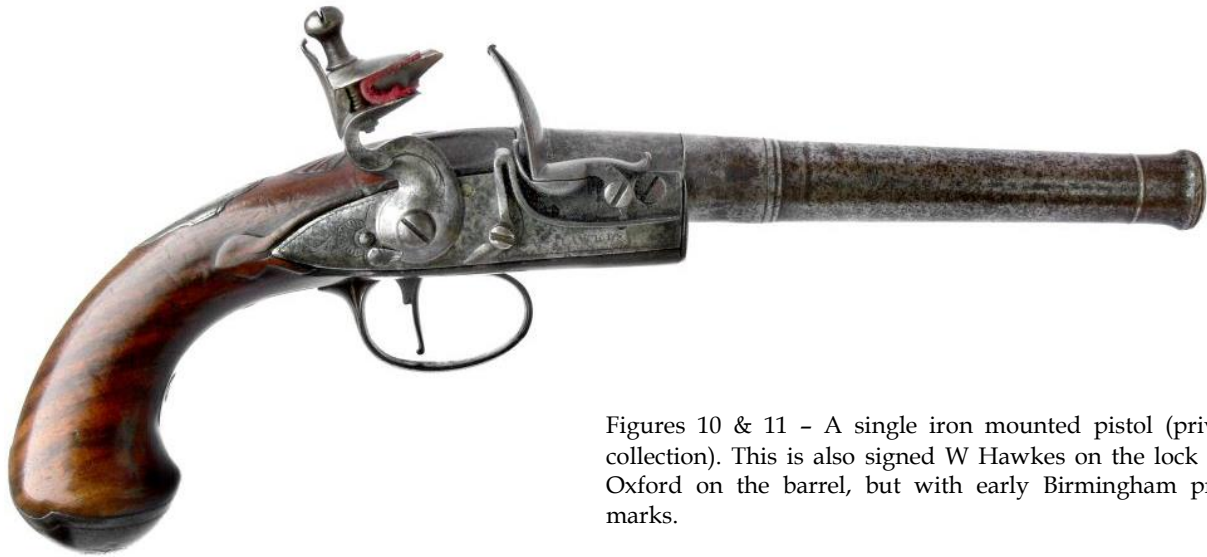
One of the apprentices bound to Susan Upton in 1721 was William Hawkes, the son of a pipemaker from Broadway in Worcestershire. He was made a freeman of Oxford, i.e. licensed to trade as a gunsmith, in 1729. Apart from a list of his apprentices (see Appendix 1) and a few examples of his work, little more has come to light regarding William Hawkes.

Examples of Hawkes's work

At least six pistols by William Hawkes are known to exist:



Figure 9 – A pair of silver mounted pistols (Lot 337, Bonhams 23 July 2008). These are signed W Hawkes on the locks and Oxford on the barrels; there are no details of any proof marks.



Figures 10 & 11 - A single iron mounted pistol (private collection). This is also signed W Hawkes on the lock and Oxford on the barrel, but with early Birmingham proof marks.



Fig. 11



Figure 12 - A single iron mounted pistol, signed W Hawkes on the lock and Oxford on the barrel, with no details of any proof marks, illustrated in "Pistols of the World" by Claude Blair (page 106, Plate 299).

All these four pieces demonstrate a distinct "house style". They are of truncated form with sidelocks instead of the more usual, all metal, "Queen Anne" format. The turn-off cannon barrels are rifled with six grooves. In addition, despite the fact that they were manufactured around 1740, they are fitted with dog safety catches (as on the John Nicholes pistols described previously). This was a fairly common feature on 17th century firearms which had largely disappeared by the middle of the 18th century. One can only surmise that perhaps William Hawkes had been taught to use this type of safety catch by a craftsman in Susan Upton's workshop who had originally learned his trade in the 17th century.



Figure 13 – Another example of Hawkes’s work is a pair, or rather a brace, of pistols in a more conventional “Queen Anne” style (*Lot 411, Bonhams 30 November 2006*). These were, in all probability, made towards the end of the Hawkes period.

William Emms

William Emms was born in 1713 in Evesham, Worcestershire and began his apprenticeship with William Hawkes in 1732 at the age of 19, rather later than was usually the case. While he presumably finished his apprenticeship in 1739, he was not made free until 1749, when he is recorded in the Oxford Journal of the time as trading at a shop in Broad Street. He died in 1764 and there is an account of the sale of his effects, including his stock, which was held in August of the same year. His apprentices included John Collis and another William Emms who may have been his nephew (See Appendix 1).

Examples of Emms’s work



Figure 14



Figure 15



Figure 16

Figures 14-16 – A silver mounted boxlock pocket pistol (*private collection*). The action body is rounded with floral engraving and merges smoothly into the line of the turn-off barrel with the boat-shaped pan sitting clear of the breech. This is a form which became more common on high quality pocket pistols towards the end of the flintlock era in the 19th century. The action is signed “Wm Emms” and “Oxford” and, unusually, bears London proof marks. The silver furniture consists of a cast butt cap with a floral design and a small rococo thumb piece.



Figure 17 – A silver-mounted boxlock pistol (*Lot 277, Christies 30 September 2010*). This is very similar to the previous pistol but slightly larger and signed “Emms” with early Birmingham proof marks and a crowned “IH” mark. Since this is a Birmingham made action, it may be slightly later than the previous example and could possibly have been made by the second William Emms.



Figures 18-20
A silver mounted sporting gun, with a Spanish barrel by Valero, converted to percussion (pictures courtesy *The Lanes Armoury, Brighton*). The lock is fitted with a safety bolt, and is signed "W Emms Oxford". The silver furniture is of particularly high quality. Apart from the Spanish maker's marks, there is a single "V" mark on the barrel.





Figure 21 – A brass-barrelled blunderbuss (Lot 323, Wallis & Wallis 15 October 2013). This is described as signed “W Emms, Oxford”, with London proof marks and brass furniture comprising a trophy of arms sideplate, baluster ramrod pipes and trigger guard with acanthus finial.

An apparently similar piece was described in an article in the *Oxford Times* in December 1983. This was said to be on display in the Museum of Oxford at the time but enquiries by the authors have so far failed to locate it.

John Collis

John Collis was apprenticed to William Emms and completed his apprenticeship in 1764, the year in which William Emms died. Collis does not appear in the Oxford Freeman’s register but, according to local business directories, he was trading from 1782 to 1798. Curiously, there is no record of him taking on apprentices. He died in 1801 and his obituary appeared in the *Oxford Journal* on 13 June 1801. A John Collis (presumably his son) was named in an account of a trial in 1803 which concerned an affray involving gunmaker James Forrest (William Dupe, also a gunmaker, was named as living at the same address). As the seventh in a continuous succession of apprentices, starting with the first William Upton, John Collis may be regarded as the last in line of a long tradition of high quality local gunsmithing in Oxford; this is confirmed by some of the surviving examples of his work.

Examples of Collis’s work

A breech-loading sporting rifle, utilising a Ferguson-type mechanism, was sold by Greg Martin in the United States in 2006. This was signed “Collis” and “Oxford” but unfortunately no pictures were available.



Figure 22 – A boxlock pocket pistol (*private collection*), perhaps an early example of Collis's work. The action of the iron body is signed "Collis" and "Oxford" and bears unusual marks, comprising a P within an oval, a flower mark and an unusually struck mark.



Figures 23 -24 – An over and under double barrelled tap action pistol (*private collection*). This is an early example of the tap-action format. The action, including the tap, is finely engraved and the comb of the cock has a pronounced forward curl. This would suggest that it was made before 1800 despite the use of a folding trigger, which is usually a later feature. The breech is struck with Tower private proof marks. Overall, the pistol is of much better quality than most examples of its type which were made from 1800 onwards, usually in Birmingham.





Figures 25-27 – A pair of boxlock coaching pistols with silver wire inlay and fixed barrels (US sale). These pistols are of larger size than the usual boxlocks of the period and, as muzzle-loaders fitted with detachable ramrods, were possibly designed to be used with shot, rather like the Daykin pistols in the Keith Neal collection (see “Great British Gunmakers” by Neal & Back, p 123 and Plate 497).

For a list of other 17th and 18th century Oxford makers see Appendix 2



Conclusion

There is certainly enough evidence, both in terms of documents and surviving firearms to support the theory that gunmaking was well established in Oxford from the middle of the 17th century onwards. This was concentrated in a few family businesses in which the secrets of the craft were passed down from one generation to another or from the master to the apprentice. Many of their pieces display a continuously high standard of quality and innovation which continued through to the end of the 18th century. Thus, there was a single thread running through three generations of Uptons and, via the apprenticeship system, from William Hawkes, to William Emms, to John Collis. Equally, the Nicholes, father and son, maintained this high standard. Many of these Oxford guns, such as the breech-loaders and multi-barrelled weapons, were significantly different from the fairly standard products available from London and Birmingham.

After Collis's time, in the 19th century, it seems likely that the city's gunmakers whose premises were mainly on the High Street, were finishing, repairing and retailing guns rather than making them from scratch. This was typical of the development and eventual decline of the British provincial gun trade in the 19th and early 20th centuries. We shall examine this later period more fully in a second article.

Appendix 1 – Oxford Apprentices

William Upton Senior's apprentices

- 1647 Thomas Wythers
- 1648 William Johnson
- 1654 Nicholas Snooke
- 1656 Richard Lifooley and Peter Gubb
- 1658 Thomas White
- 1665 William Upton Junior (his son) Free in 1672
- 1671 William Sleymaker (turned over to William Upton Junior in 1672)

William Upton Junior's apprentices

- 1672 William Sleymaker (turned over from William Upton Senior)
- 1676 Richard Smith
- 1687 John Nicholes: Free in 1694
- 1691 James Walker: Free in 1704, will proved in 1740
- 1695 Edward Upton, second son of William Junior: Free in 1704
- 1697 John Upton, third son of William Junior: Free in 1706

Edward Upton's apprentices

- 1705 William Fiddler (see below) and John Sellwood: both Free in 1713
- 1711 William Gibbons
- 1718 Lawrence Faulkner

Susan (Susanna) Upton's apprentices

- 1721 William Hawkes for 7 years: Free in 1729
- 1726 Thomas Mills

William Hawkes's apprentices

- 1732 William Emms for 7 years
- 1744 John Turner for 7 years: Free in 1754, will proved in 1767
- 1749 William Evans free in 1749
- 1750 John Page: Premium paid £31.10s: Free in 1759. John Page is recorded as "gunsmith of Oxford" in 1790 when his son becomes Freeman of Oxford
- 1756 Benjamin Harris: Free in 1768 (the record is marked "service so it is not clear whether or not he served an apprenticeship as a gunmaker)
- 1752 Samuel Worth: Free in 1759

William Emms's apprentices

- 1752 Philip Brickland
- 1757 John Collis: finished 1764
- 1763 William Emms (nephew?) turned over to Robert Utterbury of Warwick in 1764 after his uncle's death.



Appendix 2

Other 17th century gunmakers in Oxford

- 1620 Richard Meller, mentioned in a bond
- 1662 Edward Wise, mentioned in a lease
- 1670 Stephen Wells, recorded as “gunsmith of Oxford” in 1670 when his son became a Freeman of Oxford
- 1676 Ralph Aris, apprenticed to Edward Wise, gunsmith
- 1677 Richard Weller, recorded as “gunsmith of Oxford” when his son became a Freeman of Oxford
 - 1686 Thomas Ward, apprenticed to Stephen Wells, gunsmith, Free in 1686

Other 18th century gunmakers in Oxford

- Thomas Paviour (sometimes spelt Pavyor/Pavior) apprenticed to John Nicholes Senior, gunsmith, free in 1706. He is recorded as “gunsmith of Oxford” in 1729 when his son was apprenticed to a farrier.
- William Pavier of Oxford, gunsmith (son of above?), takes apprentice, Richard Inott in 1744, premium paid £10
- William Paviour, gunsmith, will proved in 1750
- John Smith, apprenticed to John Nicholes Senior, gunsmith, free in 1726
- James Walker, gunsmith St Michaels, Oxford, will proved 1740
- Richard Sadler, apprenticed to William Sadler (possibly his father), free in 1734
- John Davies, free in 1767 (but had been allowed to enrol James Thompson as an apprentice in 1766)
- Martin Brown, apprenticed to J Barnett, gunsmith, free in 1773
- Davis Thompson apprenticed to John Nicholes, gunsmith, 1738
- Thomas Pawlin, apprenticed to John Nicholes, gunsmith, 1744
- William Fidler, gunsmith, mentioned in assignment for Mortgage dated 1750
- John Turner, gunsmith of Oxford mentioned in probate inventory dated 1767
- Thomas Sawyer, gunsmith, and his wife Diana, mentioned in bonds and deeds dated 1774, 1775 and 1776
- Thomas Barnett, gunsmith, will proved in 1771
- Thomas Pawlin, apprenticed to John Nicholes Junior, gunsmith, free in 1774
- Richard Clift, recorded as “gunsmith of Oxford” in 1796 when his son became a Freeman of Oxford
- Martin Brown, gunsmith, (eldest son of Martin Brown gunsmith), free in 1799

Sources

- *English Gunmakers*, by D.W.Bailey & D.Nie, London 1978
- *A Dictionary of London Gunmakers 1350 – 1850*, by Howard Blackmore, London 1986
- *British Gunmakers Volume 2*, by Nigel Brown, Shrewsbury 2005
- *Craft Guilds – a History of the County of Oxford*, Volume 4, 1979

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