



John Townson and His Pistol

~ extraordinary survivors

by Brian Godwin

The small flintlock pocket pistol that features in this article was once part of the collection of the late John Cooper, an authority on 17th century English pistols. The pistol is a magnificent example of the quintessentially English pistols that were produced during the middle decades of the 17th century and of which very few have survived. It was made by John Townson of London during the 1660s, a period when London was embroiled in a succession of the most dramatic and life changing events.



The information contained in this article has been taken from the research folders of the late John Cooper who investigated and researched the gunmaker John Townson over a three years period. Some restoration of the pistol was required and this was carried out in the most sympathetic and painstaking fashion which was typical of Cooper's meticulous work and representative of his fascination with the lives and work of English gunmakers of the 17th century.

John Townson's - the man

Little is known about John Townson's early life but it appears that he was born in Pennington in Lancashire sometime in the early 1630s. Growing up during a precarious time of civil unrest that culminated with the outbreak of English Civil Wars in 1642, the young John Townson was apprenticed in 1646 to the London Loriners Company (who made and sold bits, bridles, spurs, stirrups, saddle trees and the minor metal items of horse harnesses). After the completion of his seven year apprenticeship it is thought that Townson set up a shop in the early 1650s, but these were difficult times.

Since the end of the Civil Wars in 1652 the gunmakers of London had in general fallen on hard times as the Government contracts on which they relied so heavily had dried up, with the consequence that many simply left the trade. All foreigners were eyed with suspicion especially by those who held onto a very unstable Government. In 1655, all guns in London were seized under Cromwell's orders and stored in the Tower of London. Fear of foreigners had led to paranoia. Foreign gunmakers in particular were viewed with distrust and tight controls were imposed on



them. That fear was the driving force behind the newly formed London Gunmakers Company who in 1655 were at last able to enrol their Charter, giving them new powers and allowing them to set new rules. The Company clearly stated that “no forreigner, alien or stranger...” was to be employed.

One objective of the Company was to allow those with the proper training to become a member upon payment of a fine and the presentation of a “proof piece”. As a consequence of its Charter the authority and importance of the Gunmakers Company flourished, bringing with it a new demand for firearms and Ordnance work. John Townson was quick to see the potential in this and became an apprentice to the gunmaker William Fell. On April 1st 1658 Townson paid an admittance fee and was sworn into the Gunmakers Company. In October of that year he presented his proof piece.

The upheaval of the Civil War years and its aftermath had been devastating, particularly to the inhabitants of London. Its people had seen the execution of their king, Charles I in 1649, followed by a period of unstable rule, which was finally brought under control by Oliver Cromwell. The uncertainty of the times continued after Cromwell died in 1658 when once again disorder descended. Things did not settle down until the return of the exiled Prince Charles in May 1660 and the Restoration of the Monarchy.



On 29 May 1660 “all the world was in a merry mood” for the King Charles return to London, with some estimated 20,000 citizens turning out to see him.

Fortunately for the London Gunmakers Company, with the reinstatement of the King came the restoration of Royal Household appointments, including those concerning to weapons. Demand for high quality firearms from the Royal court brought a very welcome change in fortune for the gunmakers. Charles II also looked after the needs of his Army by increasing the supply of arms to the Ordnance. Once again the London gunmakers benefitted from this move and John Townson quickly received his first contract on 21st June 1660;

“snaphance musquetts repaired and made serviceable for ye supply of His Majesties fleete..... paid £4-0s-4d”.

However, in that same year the Gunmakers Company were unhappy with some of Townson’s work, as a pair of horse pistols found during a routine search of his workshop “were found to be very false wrote”. Not only had Townson tried to sell these pistols unproved but he had also removed the proof marks on three other items. For this he was fined 20 shillings. Despite this incident Townson continued to supply the Ordnance and in 1661 it was recorded that he had provided 16



matchlock muskets, 20 pairs of pistols, 1 carbine and numerous barrels for the like. His workshop (and most likely also his residence) address is given as “in ye Old Baylie”.

The following year he supplied 20 new flintlock muskets at 18 shillings each, part of an order for provisions sent to Jamaica. An order for 40 new matchlock muskets at 16 shillings each followed. The next two years brought orders for matchlock and flintlock muskets and well as pistols. John Townson’s business prospered but little did he know that devastation and destruction were waiting around the corner.

In 1665, bubonic plague arrived in England. It ravaged the population of London where, during September of that year, over 7,000 people a week perished.



Deaths from the plague continued well into the following year, when a terrifying and dramatic event helped to end it.



On the night of Sunday 2nd September 1666, a fire broke out in a bakers shop in Pudding Lane and spread rapidly west across the city. It continued burning for the next two days consuming over 13,000 houses together with many important buildings including St Pauls Cathedral. London was left a charred ruin and “ye Old Baylie,” along with John Townson’s residence and workshop, was destroyed.

Despite the enormous task involved in rebuilding London, which took in total some twenty years, John Townson’s business was in operation again within 15 months. In 1668 the Ordnance records show that Townson undertook the cleaning and repair of 50 matchlock muskets, 30



flintlock muskets and 81 pairs of pistols. He accomplished this in 6 months and undertook a similar order in the autumn of that year. The next few years were busy ones for Townson; four apprentices and various offices within the Gunmakers Company were taken on, including election to Steward in 1672. Helped by wars with Holland and France, orders from the Ordnance continued, with a variety of gun work being completed.

John Townson's younger brother, William, had also become a gunmaker, and was made free of the London Gunmakers Company in 1670. In 1676 John was elected Renter Warden of the Company. He took on another apprentice in the same year and in 1678 John and his brother William shared another Ordnance contract to refurbish a large number of guns. John dealt with 75 matchlock and 88 flintlock muskets, 3 carbines, 3 blunderbusses, 5 musketoons and 5 pairs of pistols, for which he was paid £41-11s-0d. William's share was considerably smaller and he was paid just £14. New firearms for the Ordnance were also supplied by Townson, confirming that he was a major contractor to the Government at this time. His position within the Gunmakers Company also reached a new level as he was appointed Upper Warden in 1678. Then in June 1679, at the height of his career and just a few months away from being made Master of the Company, John Townson died suddenly aged just 47 years. His will, written in September 1678, bequeathed his estate to his wife Agnes. No children from this marriage have been found and almost nothing is known of his private life, although he seems to have been a charitable man. The Church Wardens Accounts of St Sepulchres church London, record that while serving as church warden, John Townson made sure that monies were paid for the welfare of children in the parish. In December 1678 the Parish decided to allot £20 to the poor and of this it is recorded that John Townson contributed £5 from his own pocket, this being his Christmas gift to the needy of the parish.

The Pistol

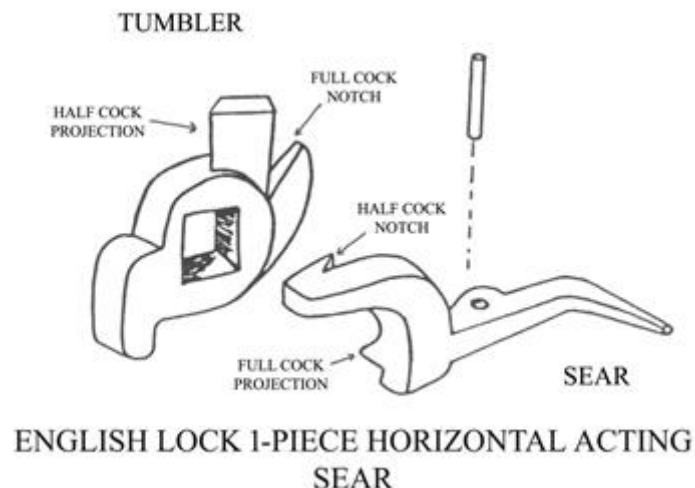
Despite a relatively short working life of just twenty years, John Townson produced a large amount of firearms of all types for the Ordnance. But as well as supplying the Ordnance he was also quite capable of producing civilian firearms of the highest quality, as the small pocket pistol featured in this article shows.

Incredibly, to date, it is the only known example of his entire output that exists! It is a product of the height of fashion for the 1660s. With the return from France of King Charles II in 1660 came an entourage of European craftsmen capable of producing the highest quality work. Among these craftsmen were French and Dutch gunmakers whose unique knowledge and skills breathed new life into their counterpart trades in London. To the gunmakers of London they introduced new designs, decorative techniques and mechanical excellence. The London gunmakers, eager to emulate the latest fashions introduced by these foreign craftsmen and thus seize some of the orders for civilian firearms for themselves, were quick to incorporate these "foreign" ideas. John Townson saw the potential of this, as this little pistol, with its tulip motifs, silver wire inlays and "French style" lock pictured here clearly demonstrates.



However, all is not what it seems. The "French lock" was a flintlock developed in France during the 1620s and its mechanical simplicity and reliability resulted in the general demise of both the matchlock and wheellock, making it the most popular form of flint using gunlock. By 1660, the "French lock" had ousted most of the older forms of gun ignition in northern Europe and continued as the main form of flintlock until the introduction of the percussion lock.

In England, a peculiar and very different form of flintlock had evolved during the 1630s. Known today as the "English Lock", it was a robust flint-using gunlock with a complicated arrangement of horizontally acting sears. By the mid-1640s, two main types of English Lock had developed, each with several variants. The lock of the subject pistol is constructed internally with a 1-piece horizontally acting sear that works entirely on the inside of the lockplate, engaging with projections on the tumbler to give half and full cock.





The exterior of the lockplate is engraved with strawberry leaves and flowers, a popular theme of engraved decoration for mid-17th century English firearms. The lock is just 7cm (2¾ inches) in length, making it one of the smallest English Locks known. A tiny dog-catch is mounted behind the cock, which holds the cock quite securely between the half and full cock position. Outwardly, the overall form and style of the lock, with its rounded surface and leafy engraving is reminiscent of the designs shown in the pattern book published by the French gunmakers Thuraine and le Hollandois in 1660. These pattern books had a huge influence on the design and decoration of firearms for the next two decades. The French designs promoted the use of pierced and chiselled scrolling to the lock components and the covering of these surfaces with engraved foliage. A small pierced volute to the frizzen foot is typically French in its concept.

The pistol is 20.3cm (8 inches) in length and would fit comfortably in a pocket of the large outer coat that was worn by fashionable gentlemen during the 1660s.

The barrel is just 10.5cm (4¼ inches) long and the calibre is 10mm. It unscrews for loading, but is retained by a silver ringed link so that the detached barrel cannot be lost. As the barrel is unscrewed for loading and becomes free of the threaded breech, it can be swung 180° to the left so that it is clear of the powder chamber, yet it is still retained by the captive ring holder that moves with it.



The breech section is octagonal and then becomes sixteen sided. The detachable section of the barrel is part round, becoming octagonal in form and then tapers towards a pronounced ring at the muzzle. At some time in the distant past this section of barrel has been repaired. The breech section that remains attached to the stock is engraved with strawberry leaves and flowers on the right and left flats; the left flat is stamped with the proof and view marks of the London Gunmakers Company. On the upper flat of the breech is the signature, *John Townson*, engraved in script.



The stock is walnut and has a simple profile carving around the barrel tang, lockplate and trigger plate.



The butt is fitted with an engraved and pierced silver cap, which has short spurs, each fixed by a silver nail. Underneath the silver cap is a plain brass cap which is held by a central screw. It is thought that a piece of red cloth was originally sandwiched between the two caps thus making a striking background for the outer silver cap.



On the underside of the stock is a long engraved trigger plate, slotted for the distinctive acorn-shaped button trigger, which has no guard.

The butt cap, barrel tang and the flat area on the opposite side from the lock are outlined in silver wire. Four tulip motifs, one on each side of the stock and two down the back of the stock, have also been created in silver wire.



The decoration on the back of the stock too, has a pattern of scrolls and circles and the enclosed areas of the silver wire are darkened to highlight the design.

In conclusion, John Townson's pistol is quite remarkable. It appears to embrace all the latest fashions of 1660s gunmaking including what appears to be a "French lock". However, Townson has cleverly built his lock as an English Lock, a mechanism he had been making since the 1650s and which came as second nature to English gunmakers like Townson. It was strong and reliable and according to the records of the time, was still the most common form of flintlock used on British military firearms.



The engraved decoration, found on the lock, trigger plate and barrel of the pistol, although borrowing some what from the stylised leaf and flower designs suggested by the French pattern books, is in fact very English in its theme. Instead of using the "French" acanthus leaf and flower, Townson preferred to use the strawberry leaf and flower, a motif used on English firearms since the 1640s.

The tulip motifs seen in the inlay of the stock was replicating a decorative symbol that had been particularly popular in England since the 1630s. "Tulipmania" continued in England throughout the 17th century and the tulip symbol continued to be used as a form of decoration on all manner of objects.



John Townson continued to supply muskets to the Ordnance until his death in 1679. He was buried at St Sepulchre without Newgate on 6th June 1679.

The account of John Townson's journey from the Lancashire countryside to the city of London, the turmoil of the Civil War, the Plague of 1665 and the Great Fire of London in 1666, is not only fascinating but is also a story of survival. The fact that only one firearm made by John Townson appears to have survived is equally incredible. His story and his pistol were rediscovered and brought to life by a man of equal talent, the late John Cooper, and the full version of this was originally published in 2 articles for Guns Review magazine in 1996.

J.S.Cooper, *John Townson - Gunmaker of London; Part 1, the Man and his times*

J.S.Cooper, *John Townson - Gunmaker of London; Part 2, a Flintlock Pocket Pistol*

Authors Note

The accounts of John Townson's supply of firearms to the Ordnance quoted here all refer to flintlock muskets as "snaphances". In England, the term "snaphance" was used throughout the 17th century and the earlier part of the 18th century, long after the archaic English snaphance lock ceased to be in common use. In England "Snaphance" meant any spark-producing snapping gunlock on the flint and steel principle until the end of the 17th century but the use of this term in contemporary documents still seems to confuse many students of early firearms and has led to incorrect interpretations.