Some observations and notes regarding the forms and development of regulation British army officers' sword backpieces (backstraps) and associated components

S J Goodyear

This article is primarily intended as an attempt at a typology which may prove of use to fellow collectors and students. Note that I have generally avoided using detailed descriptions of the sword patterns illustrated and described herein, on the assumption that anyone reading an article concerning such a specific subject is likely to be fully aware of their nature.

Although the purpose and general form of the regulation British officers' military sword backpiece (often also referred to as a 'backstrap') remained constant throughout the 19th century, it nevertheless evolved in appearance and shape, usually for practical purposes, such that the final development varied quite significantly from its original incarnations. From 1821-22 onwards the majority of cavalry and infantry backpieces had some form of rudimentary thumb-rest at the front, becoming more frequently chequered (either in part, or later wholly) as the 19th century progressed. Note that, although tang-buttons were normally present, many examples exist wherein the end of the tang has been peened (riveted) flush with the top of the pommel, or even slightly inset within it and disguised with a decorated plug.

Most of the date ranges I have indicated below are *very* approximate, in particular the earlier ones, as there seem to be considerable time overlaps in the forms used, presumably being dependent not merely on regulations but also on individual makers' and buyers' preferences (and perhaps available parts in stock). Dating an individual example of a sword is often possible, to varying degrees of accuracy, by using any evidence present on the blade, e.g. the pattern's date of introduction and withdrawal, royal cypher, manufacturer's/retailer's name and address, serial number (if present) and the style of the etching itself. However, accurate dating of many examples is not always possible and therefore the form of the backpiece can sometimes give a hint as to a possible time-period.

Note that I have only recorded the forms which are most frequently encountered, but there are other less common variations, particularly for unique sword patterns belonging to specific regiments. Furthermore, there are many other individual swords which do not follow the trends I have detailed below, or 'mix and match' the features hereunder described, and this is therefore not an exhaustive study; in my view, to try and record every variant would be the work of a lifetime.

The difference in the angles of hilts (and thus backpieces) relative to the plane of the blade is also worthy of note. These can vary a great deal but, as a general rule, the earlier the sword then the greater the angle is likely to be (though there are exceptions to this). Swords made towards the end of the 19th and in the early 20th centuries tended to have grips that were more or less in line with the blade - cf. plates 1 & 2 (angled) and 3 & 4 (straight).

Also, I have never encountered an official reason given for the appearance of chequering on the backpiece in the latter half of the 19th century, arising presumably initially by preference, by either the manufacturer or the customer, and later by regulation. However, it seems a logical development in that it does seem to serve to lessen the likelihood of the grip twisting in the hand when in use, and improving grip to the thumb when thrusting on foot or charging on horseback. However, the purpose of chequering on the pommel seems less clear, unless it was for purely aesthetic purposes. One conclusion that might be drawn is that it may have been incorporated so that if the grip was deliberately shifted in the hand, and the pommel placed in the palm, then it would extend the user's reach by a couple of inches, perhaps particularly useful when on horseback and attempting to issue a *coup de grace* thrust to a prone enemy. This interpretation is possibly borne out by the fact that tang-buttons tend to be found less commonly on later cavalry swords than on examples of infantry and other dismounted corps of the same period (cf. plates 22-23 & 36-47); if the above supposition is correct then it may be that the chequering, *sans* button, may have lessened the likelihood of the pommel sliding from the palm, and also removed the possibility of the button causing discomfort by digging into the palm when used in this way.

The first section of this article applies to mainly to steel examples of regulation cavalry and other mounted corps swords; the evolution of the regulation patterns of infantry and dismounted corps swords from 1803-1895 follows a somewhat different path, and these are thus dealt with in the second section.

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Plate 1. Infantry (Foot guards), circa 1854.

Plate 2. Royal Artillery, circa 1855.

Plate 3. Infantry, circa 1905.

Plate 4. Universal cavalry, circa 1900.

1) Cavalry and Mounted Corps Swords

Type 1 – 1788 to 1796 – Light Cavalry

Narrow and tapered, smooth back, and often (but not always) with broad flat-topped teardrop shaped pommel with a small projecting point (or 'nib') at the narrow end, as may be observed on the two examples below. The thumb-rest (forward part of the backpiece) is plain. A ferrule is not always present. Note – heavy cavalry officers' swords of this era were of 'basket hilt' form and usually had no backpiece, the grips being near-cylindrical in section and entirely covered with shagreen or leather, and wire-bound. Note that officers' swords usually had ferrules but troopers' swords did not. However, there are many extant exceptions (see Plate 6).

Plate 5. Light cavalry officer, dated 1793.

Plate 6. Light cavalry trooper.

Type 2 – 1796 to 1821

Broad back, sometimes faceted (i.e. incorporating decorative flattened areas). Usually, but not always, incorporating ears through which a rivet was passed to strengthen the hilt. For light cavalry, the ears are found in many forms but amongst the more common styles are: rounded, shield-shaped (i.e. slightly pointed), so-called 'comma-shaped', or in the form of a teardrop. Pommels were normally rounded, and usually either plain or exhibiting a continuation of the faceting on the back, if present. Note that heavy cavalry officers' examples mainly exhibit 'comma' ears, and also faceting.

Plate 7. Light cavalry. Plain backpiece with 'shield' ears.

Plate 8. Light cavalry. Faceted ferrule and backpiece with 'comma' ears.

Plate 9. Light cavalry. Faceted backpiece with 'teardrop' ears.

Plate 10. Light cavalry. Plain backpiece with no ears.

Plate 11. Heavy cavalry. Faceted backpiece with 'comma' ears.

Type 3 – circa 1805 to circa 1815

These might be deemed a sub-set of the Type 2 backpiece, being of a form generally similar to the light cavalry hilt, but are encountered commonly enough to warrant their own category. They often possess a pronounced angle relative to the blade, with elongated down-turned pommel. Other examples exist wherein the pommel wraps completely around and encases the end of the guard (plate 14). These backpieces are rarely found on regulation swords, being chiefly a matter of an officer's personal preference or unofficial regimental variations. They are most often encountered on light cavalry and light infantry officers' non-regulation sabres, and can be found made of steel, brass or gunmetal (a form of bronze).

Plate 12.

Plate 13.

Plate 14.

Type 4 – 1821/22 to circa 1835

Narrow tapered back and a slim elongated shallow 'stepped' pommel (see also plate 22). Plain thumb-rest. The tang button tends to sit asymmetrically, near the top-end of the pommel.

Plate 15. Light cavalry, circa 1825.

Plate 16 (cf. Plate 22).

Type 5 – circa 1835 to circa 1870

The back is generally wider than Type 4, and the pommel broader, rounder and deeper (plate 22). The pommel ‘steps’ are also usually more pronounced (‘steeper’) than Type 4 examples. Plain thumb-rest, and the tang button is beginning to move nearer to the centre of the pommel. Period of use is known to overlap with Type 6.

Plate 17. Heavy cavalry, circa 1835.

Plate 18. Light cavalry, circa 1840.

Plate 19. Heavy cavalry, circa 1850.

Plate 20. Royal Artillery circa 1850.

Plate 21. Heavy Cavalry circa 1840 (cf. Plate 15).

Plate 22. Types 4 and 5 pommels.

Type 6 – circa 1855 to circa 1895

Pommel is frequently, but not always, chequered for cavalry and some corps swords. The thumb-rest is usually chequered, and as the century progressed this feature often became longer to encompass more of the backpiece towards the pommel.

Plate 23. Light cavalry, circa 1865.

Plate 24. Heavy cavalry, circa 1870.

Plate 25. Heavy cavalry, circa 1860. Note stepped pommel and presence of tang button.

Type 7 – circa 1896 to present

Chequered backpiece and pommel. The area of the thumb rest is usually flattened to aid grip, the remainder of the back being rounded. Often found with no tang button, the peened end of the tang being incorporated into the chequering (Plate 26). However, examples exist wherein the peen was left visible, and was merely smoothed and polished (Plate 27). Royal Artillery officers' swords usually had a stepped pommel with tang nut, but examples of plain domed pommels are not uncommon (see Type D below). Note that cavalry officers adopted an entirely different form of hilt in 1912, but the Type 7 continued in use for artillery and some other corps officers' swords.

Plate 26.

Plate 27.

The cavalry arm of the Household Division was also an exception, as it retained a plain, unchequered backpiece for both officers (Type 5, with either a stepped or chequered brass pommel) and troopers (also Type 5, with plain domed pommel), a practice which continues into the present today (Plates 28 & 29).

Plate 28. 1st Life Guards officer's sword, circa 1840.

Plate 29. Royal Horse Guards trooper's sword, dated 1893.

Infantry and Dismounted Corps Swords

Type A – 1803 to 1822

Gilt brass/gunmetal, with lion's head pommel, the mane extending forwards towards the guard. The lion's head may be formed complete with mouth, or in a truncated form without the lower jaw (cf. plates 30 and 31). Note that this form of backpiece was likely already in informal use prior to 1803 but it was only officially adopted in that year.

Plate 30.

Plate 31.

Plate 32.

Type B1 – 1822 to circa 1845

Embossed ‘wave’ pattern and stepped pommel, often with prominent tang button.

Plate 33.

Plate 34.

Type B2 – circa 1830 to 1845

Effectively a lightweight version of Type B1 (see levee/picquet weight swords below), but encountered frequently enough to warrant its own entry. These are often leaner in form, and the tang peen is frequently found either flush with the pommel or recessed into it and covered with an ornate plug, the prominent button being absent.

Plate 35.

Plate 36 (top view).

Plate 37.

Plate 38 (top view).

Type C – circa 1845 to 1895

Similar to Type B1 & B2, but generally more angled and usually slightly larger. A tang button is usually present. Note that there are exceptions, for example the form adopted by Wilkinson in the latter part of the 19th century, in which the grip and backpiece are much straighter and with little angle (plates 41 & 42). Many later versions of the standard Type C incorporated chequering into the thumb rest (plates 43 & 44).

Plate 39.

Plate 40 (top view).

Plate 41.

Plate 42 (top view).

Plate 43.

Plate 44 (top view).

Type D – 1895 to present

Straight back with chequering overall, but with plain domed pommel and annular fluting at the base. The area of the thumb rest is usually flattened (see Type 7 above).

Plate 45. Infantry.

Plate 46. RAMC.

Plate 47 (top view).

Plate 48 (top view).

Rifles Regiments, Foot guards and Royal Engineers

In 1827 Rifles officers dispensed with the Pattern 1822 infantry sword and adopted a new pattern. This was in steel, rather the brass/gunmetal of its predecessor, and initially utilised a Type 4 backpiece and later Types 5 and 6 with stepped pommel. The basic design of the guard remains in use today, although circa 1895 the form of the backpiece changed to a Type D.

Plate 49. Type 4, circa 1830.

Plate 50. Type 5, circa 1860.

Plate 51. Type 6, circa 1892.

Plate 52. Type 6 (top view).

Plate 53. Type D.

Plate 54. Type D (top view).

Foot guards officers were given a new sword in 1854, up to which point they had also carried the standard infantry patterns of 1822 and, later, 1845 (see plates 33-40). The hilt was in steel, and the backpiece was similar to Type 5 and Type 6 with stepped pommel, and the thumb-rest was usually chequered. A tang nut was generally present. This form of backpiece was also replaced by the Type D circa 1895.

Plate 55. Foot guards, circa 1854.

Plate 56. Foot guards, circa 1915.

In 1857 the Royal Engineers also adopted a new pattern, with a gilt brass or gunmetal hilt. Backpieces again generally followed the Type 6 cavalry form, with chequered thumb-rest and pommel. A tang nut is usually present. Not long after the introduction of the Pattern 1897 sword for infantry officers the Engineers lost their distinctive hilt, and circa 1900 were ordered to adopt the new infantry sword.

Two Royal Engineers swords. Plate 57 circa 1860, and plate 58 circa 1880.

NCO's Swords

Infantry sergeants who were required to carry swords usually carried a simplified version of the officers' pattern. Backpieces were very similar to the officers' form, but the blade and guard were invariably much plainer and the grip wires were often made using plain twisted brass or copper wires (Plate 59), though the more elaborate officers' wires may also be found (see General Notes below).

Plate 59.

General Notes

Ferrules

For officers these were usually decorated with annular fluting, as compared with those belonging to cavalry troopers' swords which were generally completely plain.

Plate 60. Cavalry officer's hilt.

Plate 61. Cavalry trooper's hilt.

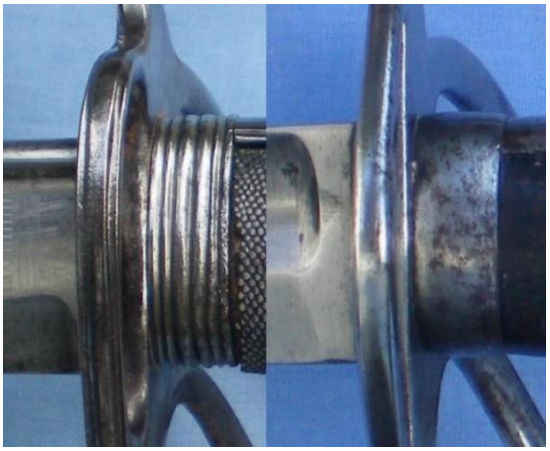

Plate 62. (close-up of ferrules)

Cap-Pommels

Many European and US swords dating from the periods discussed above incorporated cap-pommels, but it is extremely rare to find them on British swords. However, they were utilised on a small number of regulation and semi-regulation swords, such as for the Honourable Artillery Company and the 4th Royal Irish Dragoon Guards (plate 63), but I have observed others that are clearly one-off 'special order' swords, made to the specific preferences of a particular officer. Wilkinson referred to this form as a 'French' pommel.

Plate 63 (photo courtesy of Matt Easton).

Grips

The light cavalry pattern of 1788 and the infantry pattern of 1803 (along with their immediate stylistic antecedents) generally had grips which became swollen towards the blade, forming a 'belly' that gave the hand a firm grasp, and assisted orientation. This trend continued until the later patterns of 1821 and 1822 that had a less distinctive belly. Towards the end of the 19th century, grips lost much of this contouring. It is also worthy of note that, as the 19th century progressed, the downturn of the grip adjacent to the pommel became less and less pronounced, although it still remained at an angle. A study of the examples above illustrates all of these developments.

At the end of the 18th century, grip covering was generally either of sharkskin or leather for cavalry, and sharkskin for infantry (although exceptions inevitably existed). From 1821/22 sharkskin became virtually ubiquitous, although ray skin was used on occasion albeit to a much lesser extent.

Mention must also be made of the Patent Solid Tang/Hilt, which was a 'top of the line' option for those officers who could afford it. Introduced in the early 1850s, these employed slab grips made of synthetic material (perhaps gutta percha, or later either dermatine or gryphonite) which were fixed to the full-width tang using two narrow steel pins and then bound with wire (Plates 64-68). Production of this form of hilt continued into at least the 1920s.

Plate 64. Light Cavalry. (Plates 64-68 courtesy of Chris Scott)

Plate 65. Infantry

Plate 66. Royal Artillery

Plate 67. Infantry

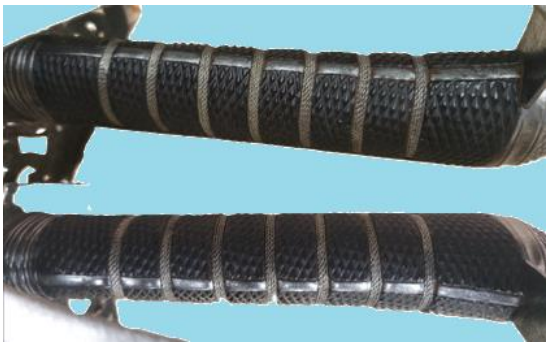

Plate 68. Underside of Patent grip

Tang Buttons/Nuts

The primary purpose of these was to enable the hilt to be secured to the blade. This was generally done in one of two ways:

i) The heated tip of the tang was passed through the hole in the centre of the button and hammered over (peened) in order to form a solid 'riveted' connection.

ii) The end of the tang was threaded, as was the interior of the nut hole, and the nut was then tightened on to the tang.

It is not always possible to determine which method was used on a particular sword. Generally speaking the earlier the sword the more likely it is to have been peened, but I have encountered many exceptions. However, the vast majority of late Victorian and 20th century officers' swords had a screwed nut. It is worth noting that, in the 1870s at least, Wilkinson referred to the tang nut as a 'title' or 'pivot'.

Grip Wires

Early wires were generally very basic in form, often being merely two strands of plain wire twisted together. For some early regulation swords, and particularly with the introduction of the pattern 1796 cavalry officers' swords, the use of three parallel double-twisted wires became common, the inner one often being made from thicker wire strands than the outer ones. Silver was a common material for the wires, but copper was also used. With the introduction of the cavalry patterns of 1821 and infantry patterns of 1803 and 1822 the inner wire often became 'twisted and wrapped', i.e. consisting of a double twisted wire which was then completely covered with much narrower wire that was wound tightly and closely around it at 90 degrees.

Silver and copper continued to be used throughout much of the 19th century, but with the development of nickel silver (an alloy of copper and nickel, also known as German silver), which was introduced to Britain circa 1830, this material began to be used as it looked similar to solid silver but was cheaper. When large-scale silver plating became possible during the 1840s this too began to feature and is very commonly found on later 19th century swords and beyond.

Plates 69-71 illustrate some of the variations that may be encountered.

Plate 69.

Plate 70.

Plate 71.

Shagreen

Opinions vary as to which species of fish was used for shagreen grip covering, however evidence suggests that the type of sharkskin used later in the 20th century, certainly by Wilkinson at least, came from the Kitefin Shark (*Dalatius licha*), also known, inter alia, as 'Darkie Charlie' (doubtless a rather unsavoury term to modern ears). Note that, from personal experience with this exact material (obtained from Wilkinson's supplier in the 1980s), I can attest that it is a perfect match to historical examples from the late 1700s onwards.

Dress Sword Variants

Lightweight versions of many standard patterns exist, and these swords are variously referred to as picquet weight or levee swords. They resembled the officer's full-size service weapon and were intended to be worn when the bulkier and heavier service sword was not required. Examples of these non-standard swords have not been included above as, when compared to regulation examples, they are invariably narrower and lighter in every respect except length. Four example swords are illustrated below for comparison; the upper one in each picture is the standard pattern, and the lower one its equivalent levee version.

Plate 72. Pattern 1845 Infantry.

Plate 73. Pattern 1845 Hilts

Plate 74. Pattern 1854/92/95 Foot guards.

Sword and Scabbard Components

*Note that the combination of hanging ring and band was sometimes referred to as a ‘locket'.