

# English Provincial Gunmaking, 1680-1720, as Exemplified by Some Works of Henry Ellis of Doncaster

by ANTHONY D. DARLING

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The period from about 1680 to just after 1725 was an age of elegance for English gunmaking. As works of ornamental art and excellent armscraft, the firearms of this area are unchallenged by any made in England before (or, many students feel, after). Their style reflects the blending of pleasing design, tasteful appointments and high technical efficiency.<sup>1</sup>

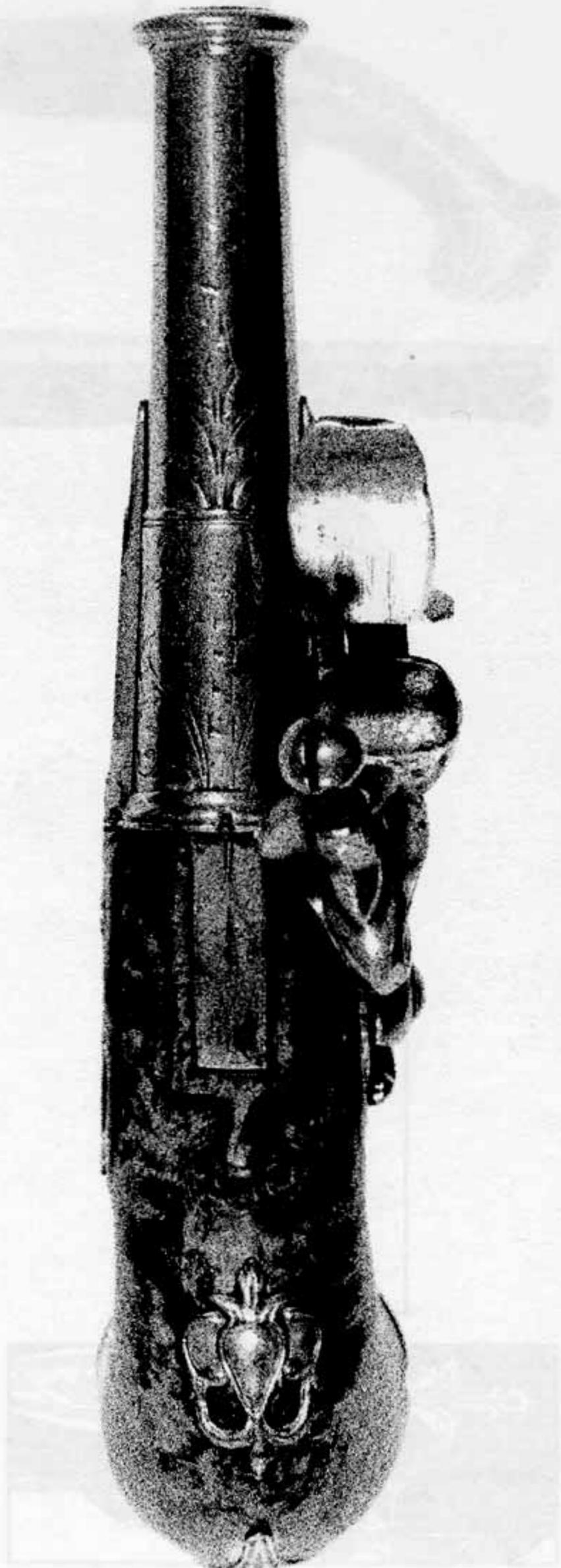
Prior to 1680, English gunmakers tended to emulate the work of their contemporaries in Holland to such a degree that the origins of unsigned arms of the third quarter of the seventeenth century are difficult to determine. English pistols of the 1660-80 period usually had straight-grained stocks with little carving except around the barrel tang and round-surfaced locks ending in a pronounced point at the tail. The flat lock, often attached by three screws and usually with a back- (or "dog") catch was standard on English firearms until c. 1650 when the round-surfaced lock began to make its appearance.<sup>2</sup> In the 1660-80 period, the lower edge of the plate was relatively straight. The sideplate had become standard but for the most part it was nothing more than a curved, tailed strap connecting the two lock screws—only occasionally was it pierced or engraved. The trigger guard was usually a nailed-on piece of sheet metal. The butt-cap, rounded in form by c. 1670, had long spurs running up either side of the grip.<sup>3</sup> During this period, the profile or angle of the butt began to drop somewhat, and in fact, it is interesting to compare the butt angle of pistols made

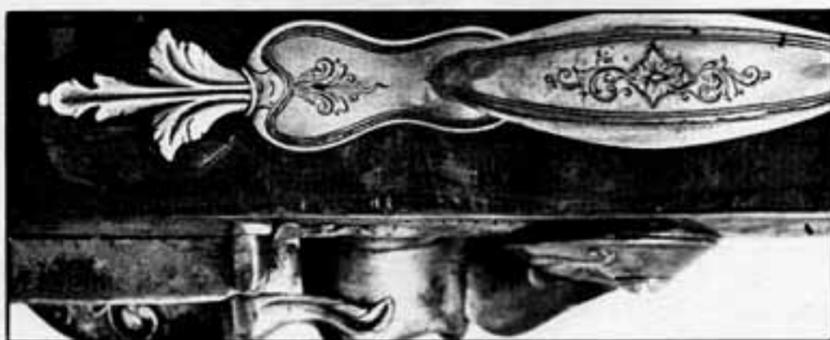
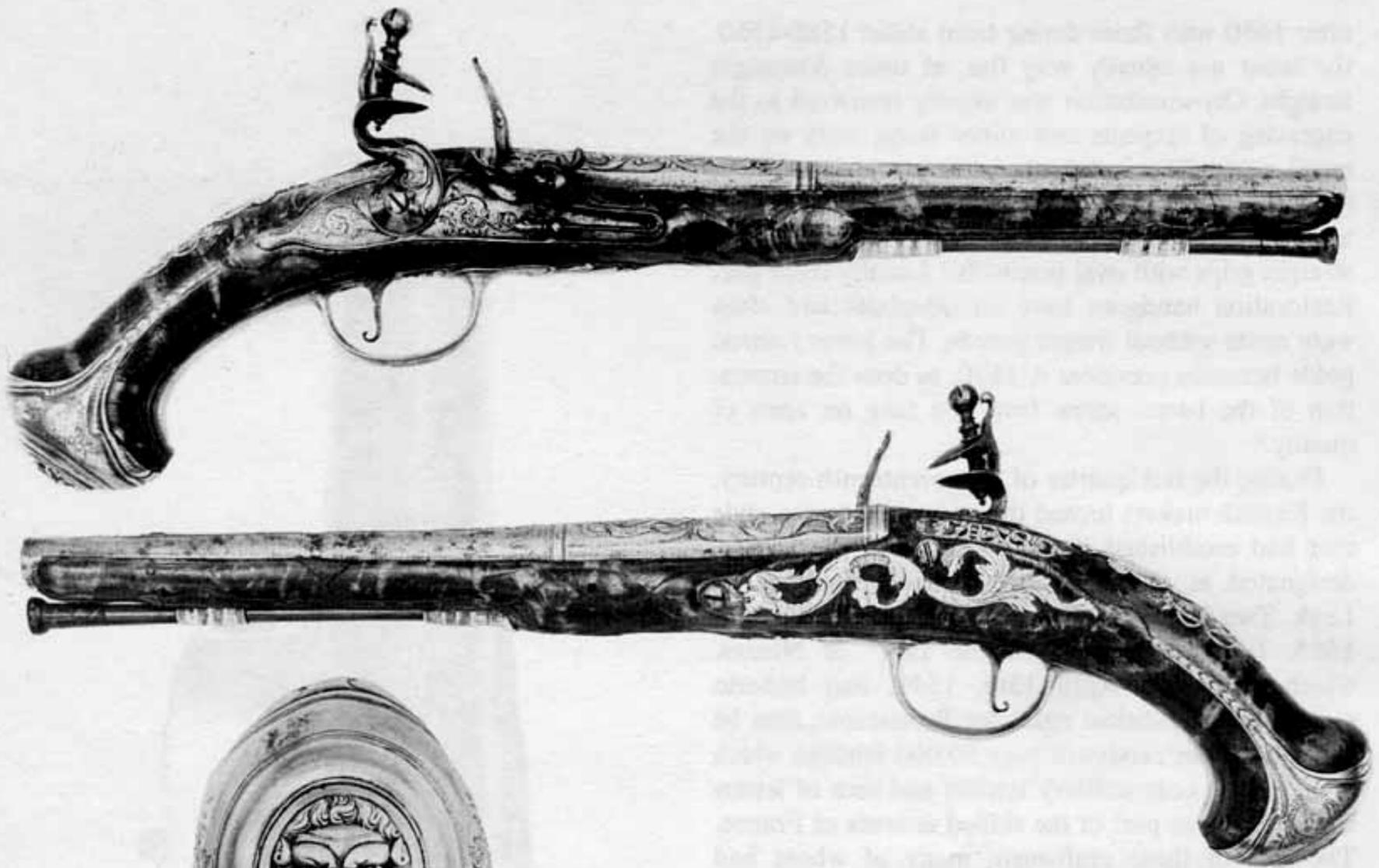
after 1650 with those dating from about 1580-1650: the latter are usually very flat, at times downright straight. Ornamentation was usually restricted to the engraving of serpents and minor floral work on the metal parts. These characteristics are in contrast to most English pistols made prior to 1660 which, as a rule, have flat locks of snaphaunce form and nearly straight grips with oval pommels.<sup>4</sup> Usually these pre-Restoration handguns have no sideplates and often were made without trigger guards. The lower ramrod guide becomes prevalent c. 1670, as does the emanation of the barrel screw from the tang on arms of quality.<sup>5</sup>

During the last quarter of the seventeenth century, the English makers turned their attention to the style that had established itself in France in the 1670's, designated as the "Classical Louis XIV Style" by Lenk. Two factors were responsible for this. First, in 1685, Louis XIV revoked the Edict of Nantes, which, issued on April 15th, 1598, had hitherto secured equal political rights for Protestants; thus he precipitated an exodus of over 50,000 families which included not only military leaders and men of letters but also a large part of the skilled artisans of France. The loss of these craftsmen, many of whom had emigrated to other European countries prior to 1685, was a blow to the nation's industry. Some of the Huguenot exiles settled in England, particularly after they had been granted denization<sup>6</sup> without cost by Charles II in 1681. Twenty Huguenot gunsmiths took up residence in Soho and others established themselves throughout London. The most famous was Pierre Monlong, late of Paris, who emigrated in 1684 and received an appointment as gunmaker to William III in 1699. Others included Landreville and Pierre Gruché, the latter having previously made firearms for Louis XIV.

The second factor that contributed to the universal assimilation of the Classical Louis XIV Style throughout England was the publication of the pattern book *Plusieurs Pieces et Ornaments d'Arquebuzerie* by the engraver Claude Simonin in 1685 at Paris (a second edition, by Claude and Jacques Simonin, was published in 1693). These designs, based on the work of Laurent le Languedoc, an "arquebusier du roi," epitomized the basic form and ornamentation of French firearms at that time. Copies of this book soon found their way to England. None of the earlier French pattern books seems to have been used by English gunmakers, or at least no evidence has been unearthed to show that any did.<sup>7</sup>

Continental masters emigrated to London from countries other than France during this period; these included Andrew Dolep, who first applied for admission to the Gunmaker's Company in 1681, James Ermedinger, given membership in 1682, and Jacques

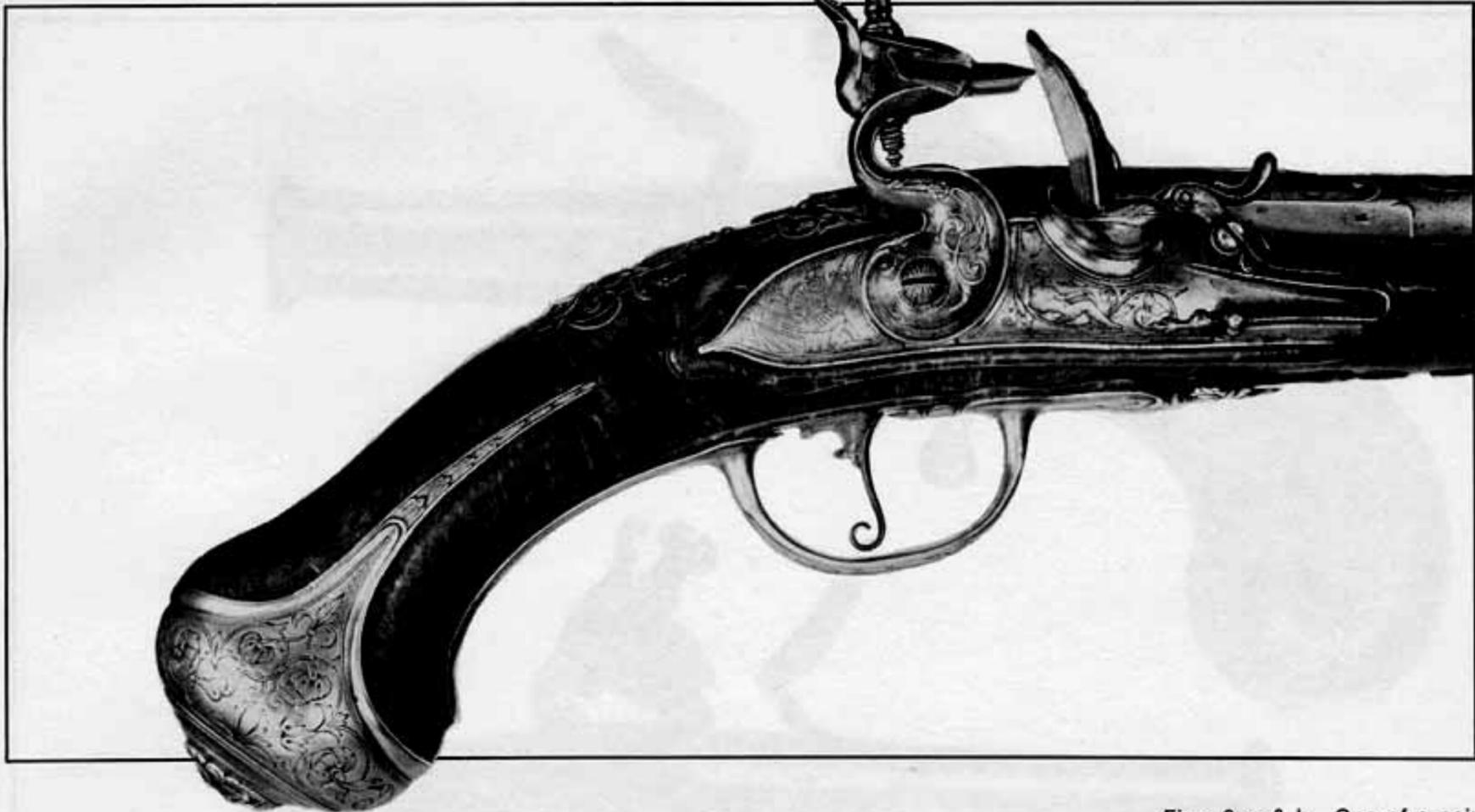




Figs. 1, a to d—A pair of silver-mounted holster pistols, c. 1690-1700, signed "Henry Ellis in Doncaster" on the barrels and "H. Ellis" on the lockplates. Barrels in two round stages, the rear section chiseled with scrollwork and a cartouche; engraved and chased silver furniture (sideplates, lion-mask butt caps, trigger guards, escutcheons bearing crest of Bagshaw family of London, Derby and Essex); burl walnut stocks. Much in these weapons reflects the "Classical Louis XIV Style" and the patterns in Claude Simonin's 1685/93 book, but the character is already quite English in the widely-flaring butts, the leaf-tailed *Lindwurm* sideplate and the robustness of the stock around the tang and escutcheon. Quality is very good but not Ellis' best (compare Fig. 2), about on a par with any competent master gunmaker's output in England or on the Continent; design is pleasing but conventional. Overall length 18.75 in., barrels 12 in., calibre .60. (Clay P. Bedford Collection)

Gorgo, a Swiss refugee working in Soho in 1689. All three utilized the new French style. Dolep and Gorgo are known for their multi-shot revolvers and super-imposed-load guns. The French presence soon affected the work of the native-born London makers. John Dafte and Edward Nicholson, previously utilizing the post-Restoration style, quickly adopted the new mode of design, as did masters Green, Gregory, Matthias, Nutt, Turvey, Warren and Wornall. After 1700, the names of Barbar—probably a French emigré—and Harvey must be added.

What, then, was the Classical Louis XIV Style, and how was it applied to English-made firearms? For one thing, all elements of a gun, i.e., lock, stock, barrel and furniture, were in harmony in respect to design and execution. The gunmaker did not sacrifice one component for the benefit of the others; each bears a relationship to the other. A skillful hand is apparent in the workmanship, and no single element



Figs. 2, a & b—One of a pair of silver-mounted holster pistols, signed on the barrel "Henry Ellis in Doncaster fecit", datable after 1685 (publication of the Simonin pattern book, on which the designs rest) and 1693 (grant of the arms of the Stones family, Mosborough, Derby, which these weapons bear). Silver furniture is chased and engraved, while barrels, lockplates, cocks and steels are chiseled and engraved. Quality is markedly superior to the Bagshaw pistols in Fig. 1, and character is pure Parisian, Classical Louis XIV Style. (Mark Dinely Collection, England)

was overdone at the expense of the gun in its entirety. The graceful swan-or goose-neck cock was standard and contributed to an elegant profile; it is rounded in section, and thicker than those seen on earlier arms, thus allowing for chiseled design in relief. The lockplate, too, is rounded in section and terminates at the rear in a long teat or point; its lower edge curves slightly upward under the cock and slightly downward under the pan, a graceful undulation and a characteristic absolutely essential to any arm that seeks to be defined as being a true Louis XIV flintlock; at the rear the plate dips again, though not nearly as much as in the so-called "banana"-shape locks of about the same time (see Fig. 5b). An internal bridle over the tumbler is present on high quality arms; the external bridle connecting the pan and frizzen hinge screw is occasionally seen but need not be considered a standard or even frequent feature. The metal parts are pro-

fusely engraved, often with representations of human figures. Additional chiseling is sometimes encountered on the back of the steel and on the barrel breech. The barrel is usually round but in two or three stages, each delineated by a baluster turn or girdle. Burl-walnut is used for the stock (although on lesser-quality arms, field maple was often substituted) or straight grained wood, stained by spot-charring to give the appearance of natural striping or figuring. A raised molding was usually carved around the lock, and molding also appears along the fore-end, often in the form of undulating scrolls or grooves. The angle of the grip is more downward, while the pommel flares out to provide not only a cushion for the heel of the palm, but also a setting for the grotesque mask or lion's face on the underside. Its spurs nearly reach the lock and sideplate on either side. On long arms, the buttplate is no longer nailed-on sheet metal but cast brass or silver,



Figs. 3, a & b—Pair of pocket pistols signed "Ellis" on the barrels, 1685-1700. Although apparently turn-off or screw-barrel pistols, they are in fact muzzle-loaders. No guards protect the button triggers, but in addition to the usual half-cock notch in the tumbler there is a "dog"-like spring-loaded safety catch at the lower rear of each cock that prevents an undesired snap. Iron furniture is conventionally engraved and lightly chiseled. Character is very strongly English and owes no great debts to France or Italy. (Glasgow Art Gallery & Museum, Scotland)



or wrought iron, with a pronounced heel and a long finial. Like the lock, the furniture has rounded surfaces and is of steel, usually engraved or chiseled, although silver was often substituted in the last decade of the century, while arms of lesser quality have brass mounts, sometimes gilded. The trigger-guard is strong but yet of graceful and slender proportions; it is inletted into the stock and held by cross-pins passing through pierced tangs projecting into the stock, rather than by nails or screws; the finial terminates on a stylized leaf pattern. The trigger has an exaggerated backward curl. The side-plate is extremely ornate, usually in an openwork pattern of one or more serpents with so-called "dolphin" heads and scaly bodies, or intertwined foliage; ramrod guides have transverse moldings, and the more expensive arms were profusely inlaid with silver wire.

Strangely enough, the French makers abandoned



Fig. 4—Although unsigned, this little pistol is so similar to those in Fig. 3 that it may cautiously be attributed to Henry Ellis. But it has a turn-off, not muzzle-loading barrel, rifled with six grooves, .36 calibre (overall length 6 $\frac{7}{8}$  in., barrel 3 $\frac{5}{8}$  in.). Attribution to Ellis rests on a fairly high measure of probability, but this style of pocket weapon was also produced in London and in other provincial centers; nevertheless, Ellis' personal touch does appear to be incorporated in the overall design and in most of the details of ornament (sparse in this case) and execution (very good). (Clay P. Bedford Collection)

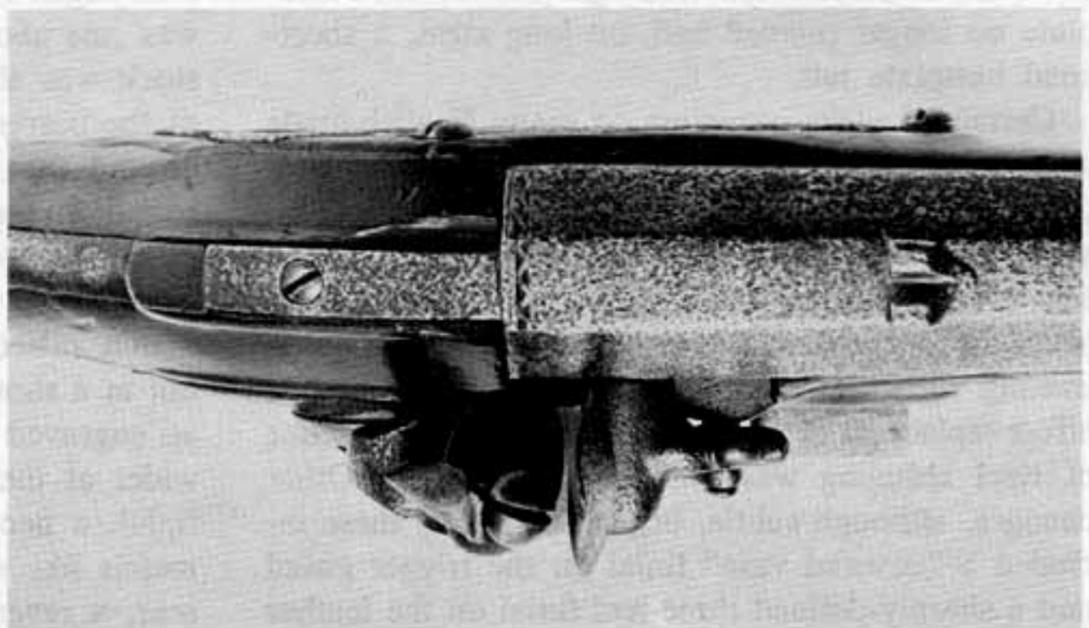
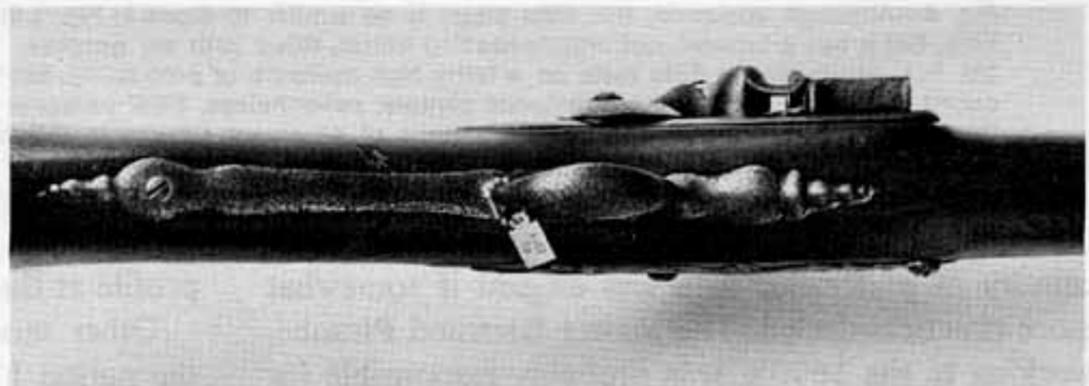
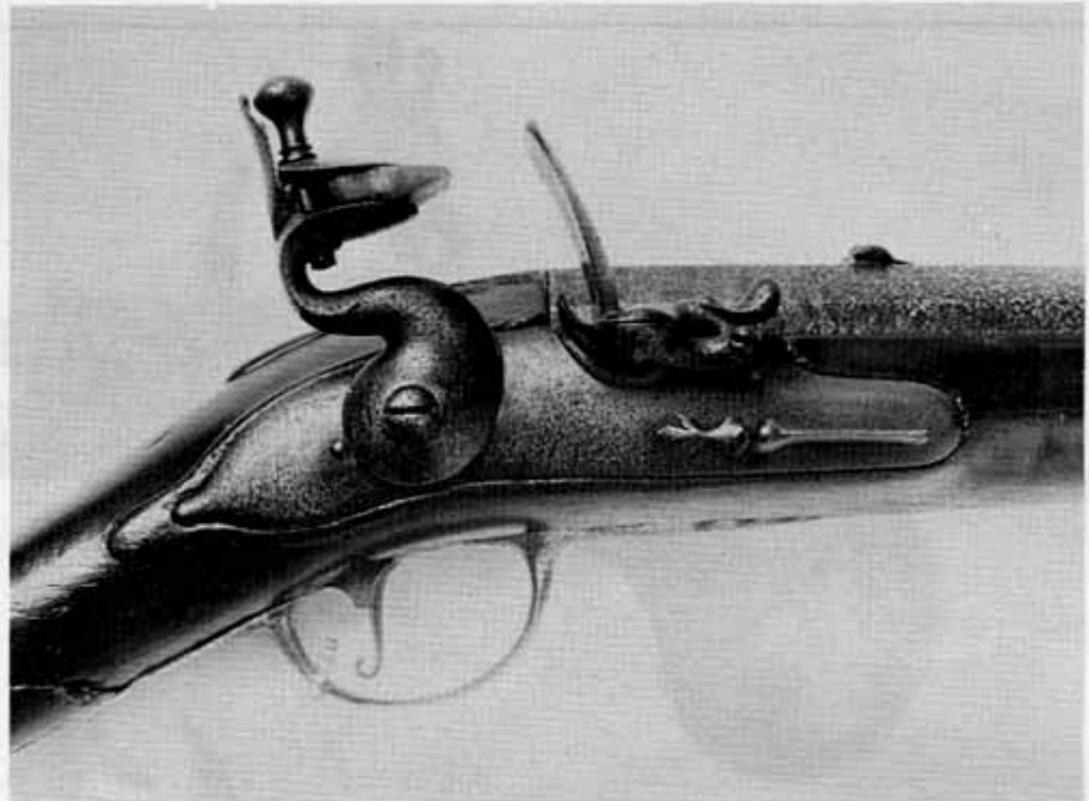
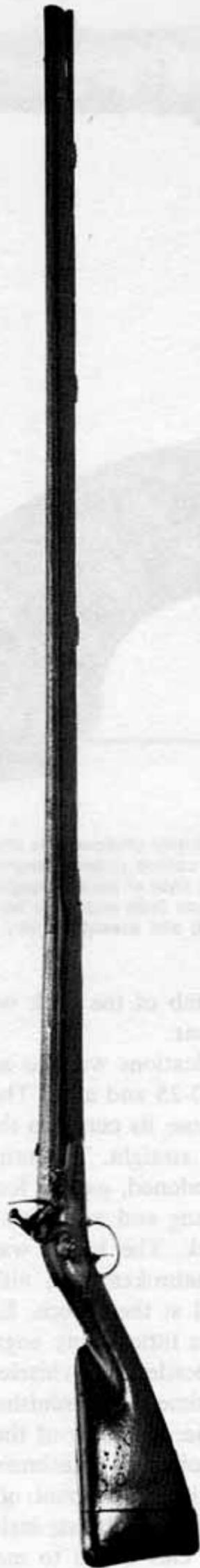
the classical Louis XIV Style early in the eighteenth century in preference to a less elegant if somewhat more practical design. The master Bertrand Pirabe, working in the 1690's, was probably responsible for the return of the flat lock, a straight grain stock, a sideplate no longer pierced and, on long arms, a shortened buttplate tail.

Certain changes occurring on many English-made arms within the first twenty years of the 18th century heralded the gradual degeneration of the Classical Louis XIV Style on that side of the channel, too. The use of burl wood for gun stocks was superseded by dark-coloured, straight-grain walnut, contrasting with the bright silver mounts which had in effect replaced steel on arms of quality. The practice of steel chiseling was gradually abandoned. Other changes, although subtle, began to appear; these included a "covered vase" finial on the trigger guard and a sharply-defined three-leaf finial on the feather

spring. The comb of the cock was given a straight profile at the rear.

Other modifications were to assert themselves in the period 1720-25 and after. The lower edge of the lock began to lose its curve so that by the 1730's it was just about straight. The ornate carving on the stock was abandoned, except for some shell-design at the barrel tang and a narrow border of molding around the lock. The barrel was often completely round in an unbroken line, although a few were made octagonal at the breech. Except on the finest arms, there was little if any engraving on the lock; a thin raised border was chiseled around its edge, but in a short time this diminished to no more than an engraved line. The bow of the trigger guard was wider at the points of attachment to the tang and finial, a necessity on account of the use of fragile metals like silver and brass; inside the bow, at the rear, a reverse curl began to make its appearance.

Figs. 5, a to e—Massive wildfowling gun, 83½ in. overall, barrel (in three stages) 66¼ in., weight 17 lbs. Barrel London-proofed and fitted with front and rear sights. 7½-in. lock is of marked "banana" shape and signed "H. Ellis". Straight-grain walnut stock, no ornamental carving save simple ferrules / borders around tang, lock-plate, along both sides of ramrod channel. Iron furniture, incl. serpent sideplate, "covered vase" trigger guard finial, long (5½ in.) buttplate tang and four baluster ramrod pipes. Piece is datable 1710-20, shows early 18th-century cock profile and feather-spring and trigger guard finials. In spite of strictly utilitarian character, quality of execution is high.



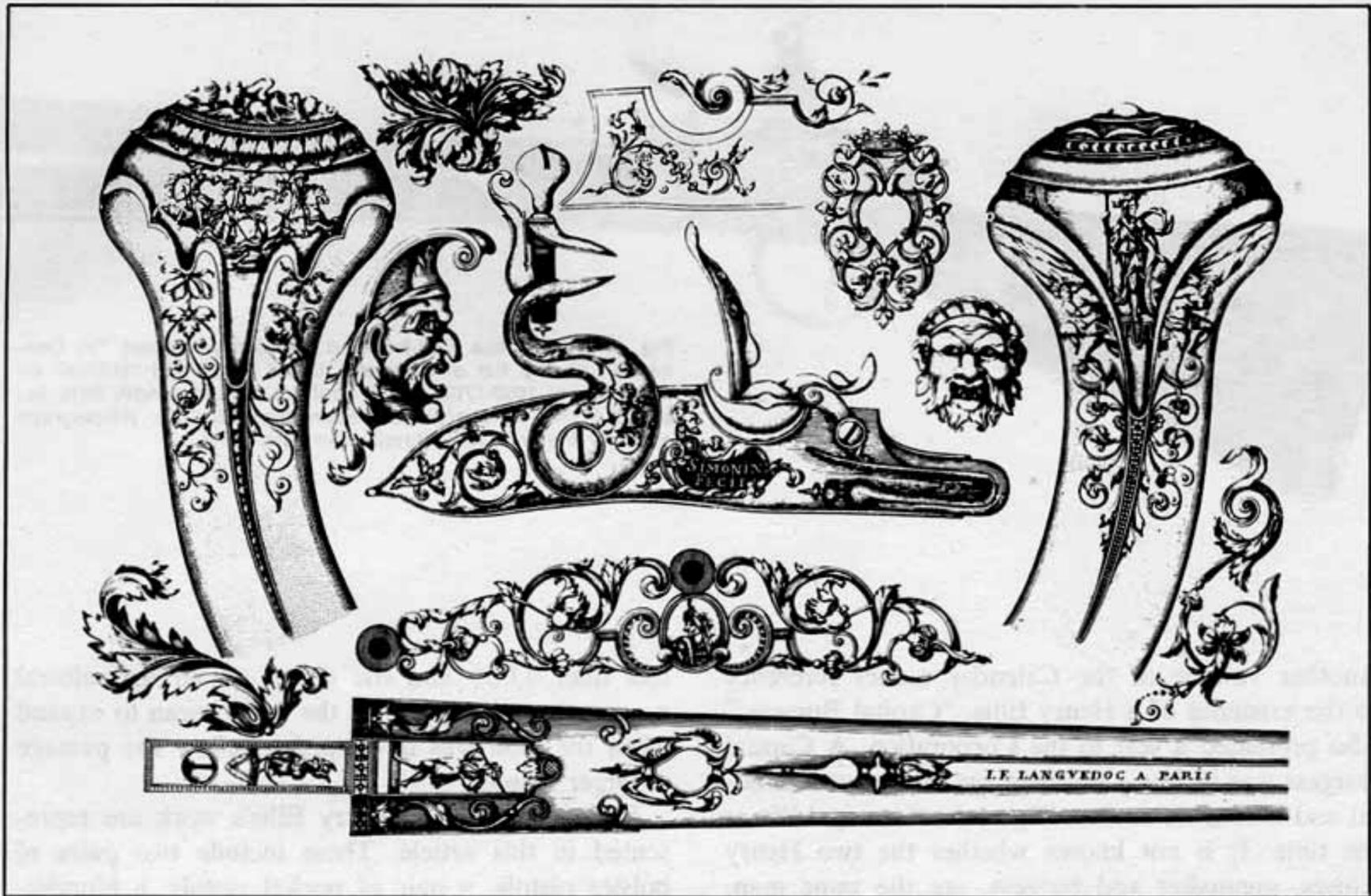


Fig. 6—Plate 6 of *Plusieurs Pièces et Ornaments d'Arquebuzerie* of Claude Simonin, Paris, 1685.

The most striking change was in the sideplate, which became stylized into a few set patterns of trophies of arms or foliate scrollwork, not bad in themselves but reduced to banality by constant repetition. Gradually the manufacture of silver mounts passed into the hands of the silversmiths<sup>8</sup>, and the London gunmakers turned more and more to Birmingham for the supply of locks and barrels. Even the brass furniture was obtained already cast. In effect, the London makers for the most part became highly skilled assemblers of firearms components. After 1750 in England the emphasis was placed on technological improvement rather than on ornamentation. To be sure, highly engraved and inlaid firearms continued to be made, but for the most part these are inferior to those of the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

The popularity in England of turn-off pistols, most of which have no wooden fore-end and a lock forged integrally with the frame, may have contributed indirectly to the decline of the Classical Louis XIV Style.<sup>9</sup>

But the gun trade was not limited to London. Some of the finest work was produced by provincial makers: Nicolas Paris of Warwick, Nicholes of Oxford, Ellis of Doncaster and others. Henry Ellis of Doncaster has been selected to represent the English gunmakers who worked in the Classical Louis XIV

Style for several reasons. He was unquestionably one of the most skillful and imaginative in this period of tasteful elegance, from its flowering in the last decade of the seventeenth century to the nuances of its decline some twenty years later. Enough examples of Ellis's work, which was not limited to holster pistols, are available to mark him as a master gunsmith familiar with the pattern book of Simonin. There is the enigma of why so versatile and talented a craftsman would have chosen to work in so remote a provincial community as Doncaster, far removed from the center of the gunmaking industry in London. But little is known of Henry Ellis. Several families with that surname were residing in London in the seventeenth century, and there exists the possibility that Ellis, if born and raised there, might have been apprenticed to one of the London makers and then moved north. His production appears to date no earlier than around 1690 and at least as late as 1712, for the following entry, dated 18 April 1712, appears in Volume I of the Calendar to the Records of the Borough of Doncaster:

Indenture of lease of William Justice of York, gentleman to Henry Ellis of Doncaster, gunsmith, for seven years from May 1st next, of a messuage with orchard and garden thereto belonging in Frenchgate Street, Doncaster at a year rent of 8 Lbs 1 s.



Fig. 7—Three-stage iron-barreled blunderbus signed "in Doncaster" on top flat of octagonal barrel stage and "H. Ellis" on lockplate, c. 1690-1700. Brass furniture. Overall length 30½ in., barrel 17 in., foliage/serpent openwork sideplate. (Photograph courtesy Weller & Dufty, Birmingham, England)

Another volume of the Calendar makes reference to the existence of a Henry Ellis, "Capital Burgess," who presented a seal to the Corporation. A Capital Burgess was in fact a life member of the town council and indeed an eminent figure in municipal life at the time. It is not known whether the two Henry Ellises, gunmaker and burgess, are the same man.

Doncaster, now a city of over 86,000 inhabitants in the West Riding of Yorkshire and nearly 150 miles north of London, lies astride a ridge dividing the watershed of the rivers Don and Trent. Originally a Roman *danum*, or way station, its first charter of incorporation was granted by Richard I in 1194. Today, heavy in agriculture with many markets, Doncaster is the center of a large coal mining area. At the beginning of the eighteenth century it was a typical rural township with a population of probably

less than 4,000 and the center of an agricultural community. Around 1722 the town began to expand when the Don was developed to allow the passage of larger vessels.

Five specimens of Henry Ellis's work are represented in this article. These include two pairs of holster pistols, a pair of pocket pistols, a blunderbuss, and a wildfowler of exceedingly large proportions. A turn-off pistol is illustrated which, although unsigned, is believed to have been made by Ellis.

The work of Henry Ellis represents the period of greatest refinement and elegance in the art of English gunmaking. It is in this context that Ellis and his contemporaries must be ranked; their achievements are among the most beautiful in the history of English firearms manufacture, and in some respects perhaps unsurpassed.

#### NOTES

1. Few books are available which deal authoritatively with the artistic aspects of firearms. The two best works in this field are: Hayward, J. F.: *The Art of the Gunmaker, 1500-1830*, 2 Vols., London, 1962, 1963; and Lenk, Torsten: *The Flintlock*, Urquhart, G.A., (Trans.) and Hayward, J. F., (Ed.), London, 1965. The former deals with gun design and ornamentation in Europe and to some degree in America while the latter is concerned primarily with French arms (first published in 1939 in Swedish).
2. Strangely, military muskets and pistols often retained features that had long been dispensed with on private arms. Flat, three-screw locks, occasionally with backcatches, were often utilized for military muskets as late as the early 1720's. The 'banana' profile on military locks was common until the 1750's, several years after the advent of the straight, uncurved lock on civilian arms.
3. Some butt caps are deeply fluted or pierced; see

Claude Blair, *Pistols of the World*, New York, 1968, ill. 236, 239. Rudimentary spurs began to develop c. 1650-60.

4. Three major snaphaunce types were in use in England. The first, often called the Anglo-Dutch snaphaunce, developed in the last quarter of the sixteenth century; it has a horizontally operating sear and a separate steel and pan cover. The second, referred to as the early form of the English or Jacobean lock, has a combined steel and pan cover (cf. R. Held, *The Age of Firearms*, rev. ed., 1970, Fig. 169). These two ignition forms have a sear which passes through the lock to engage the tail of the cock, and, usually, a buffer or stop screwed to the center of the lock to arrest the fall of the cock upon firing. A dog safety catch behind the cock is often seen on the English lock, thus giving rise to the comparatively modern term "dog lock". Still another snaphaunce—an advanced form of the English lock—developed c. 1640;

in this, the sear is enclosed within the lock and the external buffer is dispensed with; a shoulder, or step built up on the back of the cock arrests the fall of the cock. This ignition type usually has a throat-hole or reinforced cock and the dog safety catch was generally retained.

5. English handguns dating from the end of the sixteenth century to c. 1640 are illustrated in: Ian Eaves, *Some Notes on the Pistol in Early 17th-Century England*, in the Journal of the Arms and Armour Society, Vol. VI, No. 11, London, 1970. Three typical pistols of the English Civil War period are shown in: Howard L. Blackmore, *British Military Firearms*, London, 1961, p.34. Other pre-Restoration pistols are illustrated in: Clay P. Bedford and Stephen V. Grancsay, *Early Firearms of Great Britain and Ireland*, New York, 1971.
6. The admission of an alien to residence and certain rights of citizenship, but without conferring citizenship upon him.
7. J. F. Hayward, *op. cit.* (fn. 1).
8. Until the Plate Offences Act of 1738, silver gun mounts were rarely submitted for assay at the Gold-

smith's Hall in London; hence hall marks on silver furniture are not often encountered on arms made prior to that date. Probably many of the earlier gun-makers chose to cast their own mounts or submitted specific patterns to the silversmiths.

9. A turn-off pistol was one having a barrel that unscrewed just ahead of the powder chamber in the fixed breech and had a ball chamber just slightly wider than the rest of the bore up to the muzzle, so that a slightly over-sized ball could be loaded from the breech end and allowed to roll forward until it came to rest on the stricture of the narrower bore. This caused, upon the piece being fired, an increase of compression and hence a more forceful shot. Many of these pistols were also rifled. The system developed just prior to c. 1640 and was used for all types of pistols until the end of the seventeenth century, when it was restricted to belt and pocket pistols. The earliest turn-off pistols were often made with wooden fore-ends. A collectors' term, "box lock" refers to those turn-offs made after c. 1750 which have the cock, steel, pan and feather spring mounted atop the breech instead of on the side.