

A brass sporting gun dated 1624

by Stuart Maxwell

In 1973 the Museum bought from an antique dealer, with the aid of a 'special purchase grant' from the Treasury, a sporting gun of brass, bearing the date '1624' and the maker's initials 'IL' (upside down), identified as James Low of Dundee (pls 29–32b); only the firing mechanism is of steel. The gun is 48.5 in (1.232 m) long, and the end of the butt, which takes the form of a pierced crown, can be extended another 3.6 in (91 mm) on two brass rods controlled by two spring catches on the inner side of the butt; the bore is 0.52 in (13 mm) and it weighs 7 lb 1 $\frac{7}{8}$ oz.

The firing mechanism has been altered from snaphaunce to doglock – the pan cover and steel now form one piece and the lock can be held at half cock by an outside safety catch, a development which may date from about 1665 (Whitelaw 1925). The gun's mechanism was altered therefore about forty years after its making, probably within its working life. The top jaw of the cock and its screw, and the trigger and its guard are replacements. A later owner's name and date, 'John Brown/C/1755' have been added in what was originally a void shield on the barrel.

The gun is decorated by engraving on the barrel, stock and butt, and also on the fretted butt-extension. The raised parts of the barrel (at the muzzle where there are three 'collars', just before the stock, where there are two half 'collars', and at the lock end of the barrel) have been chiselled to add to the decoration. The engraved decoration derives from European Renaissance styles, mainly strapwork panels enclosing stylised roses and acanthus leaves in between curving lines and leaf scrolls. The remaining original parts of the steel lock also have traces of engraving.

All-metal pistols are the characteristic productions of Scottish gunsmiths from before 1600 to the end of the 18th century, and the earliest are of brass. Guns, however, are much less common than pistols, and the only other brass sporting gun known is that now in the Armouries of HM Tower of London and described by William Reid in the *Connoisseur* (Reid 1966); its number in the inventory of the Armouries is XII.1786. It has lost all its original steel lock and now has an orthodox flintlock mechanism; unfortunately this means that the original lock plate is no longer there and with it has gone the maker's mark; part of the raised breech of the barrel was cut away in the conversion, which removed the last numeral of the date engraved over the breech. Reid is of the opinion that the remaining upper loop suggests that the date was 1612, 1618 or 1619. He also comments that the barrels of brass pistols signed 'IL' and the Tower gun 'were probably engraved by the same hand'. Comparison of the two brass guns leaves the writer in no doubt of the accuracy of Reid's opinion. It can be confidently asserted, therefore, that the guns now in the Tower Armouries and the National Museum were both made by 'IL'. One consequence is that it can be assumed the Museum's gun will originally have had a trigger-guard very like that of the Tower gun, described by Reid as 'a simple curve from a forward screw to a disc finial [engraved with a rose] at the rear'. The Tower gun has a barrel of 33.75 in, a bore of 0.47 in and weighs 8 lb 1 oz; the corresponding figures for the Museum's gun, in the same measurements, are 36.15 in and 0.52 in and 7 lb 1 $\frac{7}{8}$ oz.

Before considering the engraved decoration of the two guns, other comparisons may be made. Reid has described the expanding butt device on the Tower gun, 'This is a notched brass slide ending in a fretted royal crown. The slide fits into a socket within the hollow butt and is retained in any one of six positions by a spring bolt working upwards in the toe of the butt to

engage in the different notches.' The Museum's gun extends on two brass rods (one being defective, broken off at the second innermost notch), controlled in five extended positions by two spring catches, in what is probably an improved, more stable way of making the extension. The two crowns are very alike, rather crude, English crowns with a central cross flanked by fleurs de lys with two incomplete crosses on the outsides. The crown on the Tower gun ends rather weakly and the outer bar is plain; on the Museum's gun the arches of the crown are surmounted by a central roundel containing a cross flanked by alternating small circles and points, and the heel bar is shaped; it seems probable that the heel of the Tower gun has been damaged and repaired.

Reid drew attention to a gun in the Livrustkamar in Stockholm with an 'armorial' extension, 'a shield plate with the arms of the Scottish family of Spens which can be drawn out on a rod and locked with a spring catch on the right of the butt', and to a pair of Scottish pistols in a private collection dated 1614 with extending butts; the pistols are also by 'IL'. He considered that the presence of an English-type crown on the Tower gun meant that it was made for a member of James VI and I's family, and he designated Prince Charles, the later Charles I, as the most likely owner. He thought that the interlaced C-Scrolls which are a feature of the decoration of the butt supported his case, and cited armour at the Tower long associated with Charles and other items associated with Charles I and II which have addorsed C's in their decoration. If a crown-shaped butt-extension signifies a royal owner, the Museum's gun also qualifies as a royal gun. Clues to the owner's identity are absent from the decoration on the faces of the butt; there are, however, small, addorsed C's in the first strapwork panel on the barrel, near to the date; these appear to the writer to be very much part of the decoration, but at the same time they are identical in form with the more prominent C's on the Tower gun. The pair of brass pistols in the Museum, again by 'IL', associated with Louis XIII of France (LH 325 and 326) have their owner's name and arms on top of the barrel, a more normal position. There were originally void shields on both guns, and these would seem the obvious places to proclaim royal ownership, which was surely not something to be hidden. Both shields are surmounted by badly drawn crowned helmets; the crowns are dissimilar, the Tower one being spiky and that on the Museum gun crushed almost out of existence.

The decoration of the gun is so closely linked with that of the Tower gun that they are best described together. Superficially they are different because of their colour, the rich brown of the earlier, Tower gun and the bright brass of our later example, but they are so alike in proportion and design that the engraver was faced by the same situation in both. The upper side of the barrel of the Museum's gun is divided into panels by strapwork which interlaces at intervals, with a four-petalled rose in roundels formed at each join. The panels contain flowers and leaves, either in scrolls or arranged on each side of a central stalk, stylised versions of acanthus decoration. The result lacks the variety of the decoration on the barrel of the Tower gun ('panels of chevronny, checky, leaf and tendril pattern') because the strapwork is more prominent and cuts down the space available for the motifs within the panels. There is an elongated key pattern along the sides of the stock supporting the barrel, and a running scroll of half-acanthus leaves on the two undersides; the Tower barrel has a similar key pattern, but rather weak S-chains on the undersides. The acanthus-type scroll is repeated further along the stock and the underside of the butt, except at the broader part under the lock where there are two opposing chevrons with leaves and flowers in the angles, as on the Tower gun. Lengthways along the sides of the stock are three parallel panels of ornament, with a fourth one inserted where the butt is wide enough to take it; these are divided into small irregular compartments by a ribbon which is straight top and bottom and has rounded corners; within each compartment are the stylised flowers and leaves already described,

in varying sizes. The brass lock-plate has similar flowers and leaves, also simple S-chains, and at each end the plate is cut in 'leaf' form. The decoration of the Tower gun on stock and butt plates is similar but freer, because it is not within the confines of the 3–4 bands; part of this freedom consists of the incorporation of the addorsed C-scrolls already mentioned.

Dundee was the principal centre for the making of firearms in Scotland in the late 16th and early 17th centuries (Blair 1975). Possibly its trading relations with the Baltic, Germany and the Low Countries had a bearing here – but a case has also been made for the importance of English influence on Scottish gunsmiths (Eaves 1970). From 1587 to 1650 there were 21 gunmakers in Dundee, about one-fifth of the whole Hammermen's craft, but from 1651, when Dundee was sacked by Cromwell's troops, to 1750 there were only 5 gunmakers (Millar 1888, 280). By correlating 'signatures', initials, on weapons with the names of Dundee hammermen, a number of weapons have been matched with their makers, notably Robert Allison who signed the 1614 gun with a wooden stock which is in the Tower Armouries, another weapon once in the French royal collection; Andrew Philip was the maker of Sir John Grant's gun in the Seafield collection, a gun which indeed proclaims the town of its origin by having the pot of lilies and one of the supporting dragons of the arms of Dundee inlaid in silver on the butt. The surname Low appears several times in the 'Lockit Book' of the burgesses of Dundee. John Low, 'faber' (smith), occurs in 1523, and there is a James Low, 'pellio' (skinner), in 1570; in 1588 a second James Low, 'faber', became a burghess in right of his father. This James is probably the maker of the guns. I am indebted to Miss Helen Waddell, City Archivist, Dundee, for this information, and to our Fellow, Geoffrey Boothroyd, for confirming that, in a list of masters of the craft dated 1587 in the Dundee Hammermen's records, there is a James Low, lockmaker, presumably the same man. According to the late C E Whitelaw's ms dictionary of Scottish weapon makers, however, James Low is said to have been admitted freeman in 1593 (Hoff 1955, 213) Whitelaw's dictionary also lists a John Leirmonth, a contemporary 'gunner' in St Andrews, but the presence of other known gunmakers in Dundee would seem to tip the scales in favour of 'IL' working there.

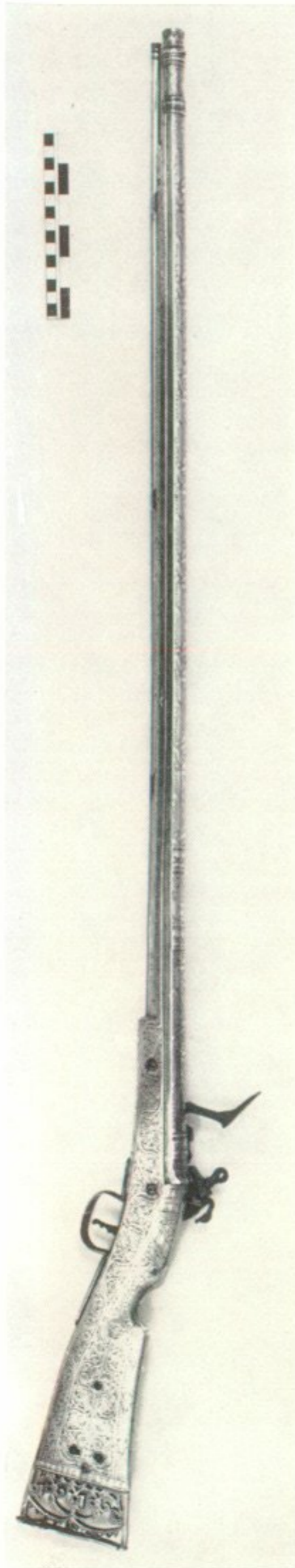
A remarkable number of guns and pistols by 'IL' have survived. In order of date, where known, these are: a pair of walnut-stocked fishtail-butt pistols with snaphaunce locks in the Tojhusmuseet, Copenhagen, dated 1602 (Hoff 1955); a pair of brass fishtail-butt pistols with snaphaunce locks in the National Museum (LH 325–6), dated 1611 (these have Louis XIII's arms, were originally in the French Royal Armoury and were bought from Russia, where they had been taken after the French Revolution, by Charles Whitelaw); a brass fishtail-butt pistol, converted to a flintlock, in the Tojhusmuseet, Copenhagen, dated 1613 (Hoff 1955); a pair of brass lemon-butt pistols with snaphaunce locks and extending butts, in an English private collection, dated 1614 (Blair, 1975); a brass pistol with a fishtail butt, converted to a flintlock, in the National Museum (Colville collection, L. 1949–91) dated 1617; a pair of snaphaunce pistols with mahogany stocks inlaid with engraved mother of pearl (they have crests on the barrels, 'a running hound under a crescent') in the Hermitage, Leningrad, dated on the barrels and locks 1618 (Tarrasuk 1971); the latest date for the brass gun in the Tower of London armouries is 1619; a pistol with a brass lock signed 'IL' and dated (?) 1621 was sold at Sotheby's, 19.3.73, lot 19; the date of the National Museum's brass gun is 1624; a pistol dated 'about 1624' by 'IL' was described in the *Scottish Field* in May 1954; finally there is a pair of brass pistols with lemon-shaped butts, converted to flintlocks, in the Royal Armoury, Stockholm dated 1627 or 1629 (Hoff 1955). The Tower and National Museum guns, the three pistols in the Museum and the pair in Russia have all had their brass gilded, presumably to prevent tarnishing, as steel pistols were blued or browned, as well as to enhance their appearance. Other 17th-century pistols examined in the Research Laboratory were found not to have been gilded. When this is added to

the royal connections of so many weapons by James Low we are left in no doubt about his importance as a gunmaker.

I am grateful to my colleague David Caldwell for helpful discussion in writing this note.

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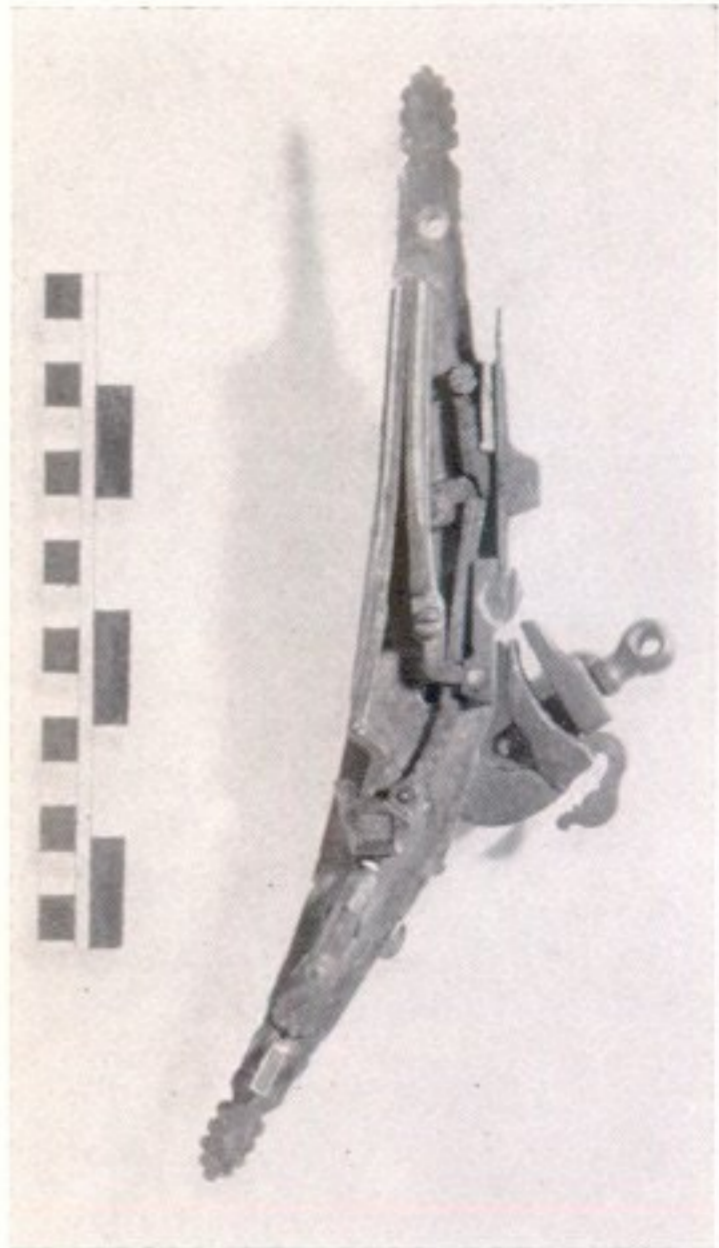
a



b Barrel detail



c Barrel detail



b Interior view of lock

a Barrel detail



a Detail of butt and lock-plate



b Butt extended

