

# A SEVENTEENTH-CENTURY HOUNSLOW 'MORTUARY' SWORD IN GUNNERSBURY PARK MUSEUM

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Gunnersbury Park Museum is the local history museum for the London Boroughs of Ealing and Hounslow and in this capacity collects material representative of the many local trades, crafts and industries both past and present. One such industry was the manufacture of sword blades at the Hounslow sword mill during the 17th century. About one hundred examples of Hounslow blades are known to exist<sup>1</sup>. In 1970 the Museum was fortunate enough to be able to purchase an example of the work of this mill<sup>2</sup>.

The broad blade is straight, single-edged, 720mm long and about 29mm wide at the hilt. Its maximum thickness is about 5mm and the point has been cut back and resharpened for about 140mm of the back edge<sup>3</sup>. The front, or sharpened edge shows signs of wear with notching. The tang is 150mm long and is taken up inside the tang button and hammered over. This button has not been split and so it is likely that the blade is original to the hilt and not some later replacement. The ricasso, that part of the blade nearest the hilt which remains unsharpened, is 46mm long with a small fuller running along the front edge of the blade. The blade is double-fullered towards the back edge. The outer fuller starts at the hilt and finishes about 56mm from the sharpened back point. The longer inner fuller starts about 38–40mm from the hilt and seems to end about 14mm from the point. Both fullers on either side of the blade are marked faintly with a variant on the inscription of the Hounslow sword mill "HOVN ME FACIT" (Hounslow made me) (Fig. 1). This inscription has been convincingly argued to be the work of the same craftsman who made the blades of a backsword in the Museum of London, a sword in Williamsburg, USA, and another in private hands<sup>4</sup>.

The hilt of the Hounslow sword in Gunnersbury Park Museum is of typically so-called 'mortuary' type<sup>5</sup>. (Plate 1). It was probably not made at

Hounslow as the mill seems to have specialised in the finishing of blades. Hilt making could have been a subsidiary manufacture but it appears likely that this was done at another workshop specialising in hilts<sup>6</sup>. It consists of a large, slightly hollowed iron plate which is swept up in the front of the hilt to form into a knuckle-guard<sup>7</sup>. The rear of this plate narrows slightly and is finished off in a narrow turned-under roll. The plate is chiselled in relief with decorations similar to those on a number of mortuary swords in the Montagu family armoury, Boughton House, Northamptonshire<sup>8</sup>, and also in the collection of the York Castle Museum, Yorkshire<sup>9</sup>. The decorations consist of crudely executed designs of stylised patterns and foliage. It lacks mortuary masks and figures but has leaves either side of what seems to be a basket of fruit, probably strawberries (Pl. 2). This decoration is symmetrical either side of the thickness of the blade and a broad band of chevron decoration which runs from the base of the knuckle-guard to the back of the turned-under roll.

Either side of the knuckle-guard, on both the inside and outside of the hilt, are secondary knuckle-guards. Each secondary knuckle-guard terminates where it joins the plate with a pair of scrolls. These guards are decorated with a stylised leaf design where they are joined by two loop-guards. The secondary knuckle-guards join the main one through the two loop-guards.

Smaller back-guards are formed from a continuation of one of the scrolls at the base of the side knuckle-guard and connect with the back of the main plate near the turned-under roll. Each loop and back-guard is incised with three line incisions. The grip has been refurbished with its present binding of copper wire over a wooden handle. The upper and lower wire turk's-head ferrules are made of a more yellow copper or even brass wire and might be the originals.

The pommel is fig-shaped, 44mm high, approximately 37mm in diameter and is drilled to take the three split-headed rectangular screws which hold the knuckle-guards to the pommel. These screws

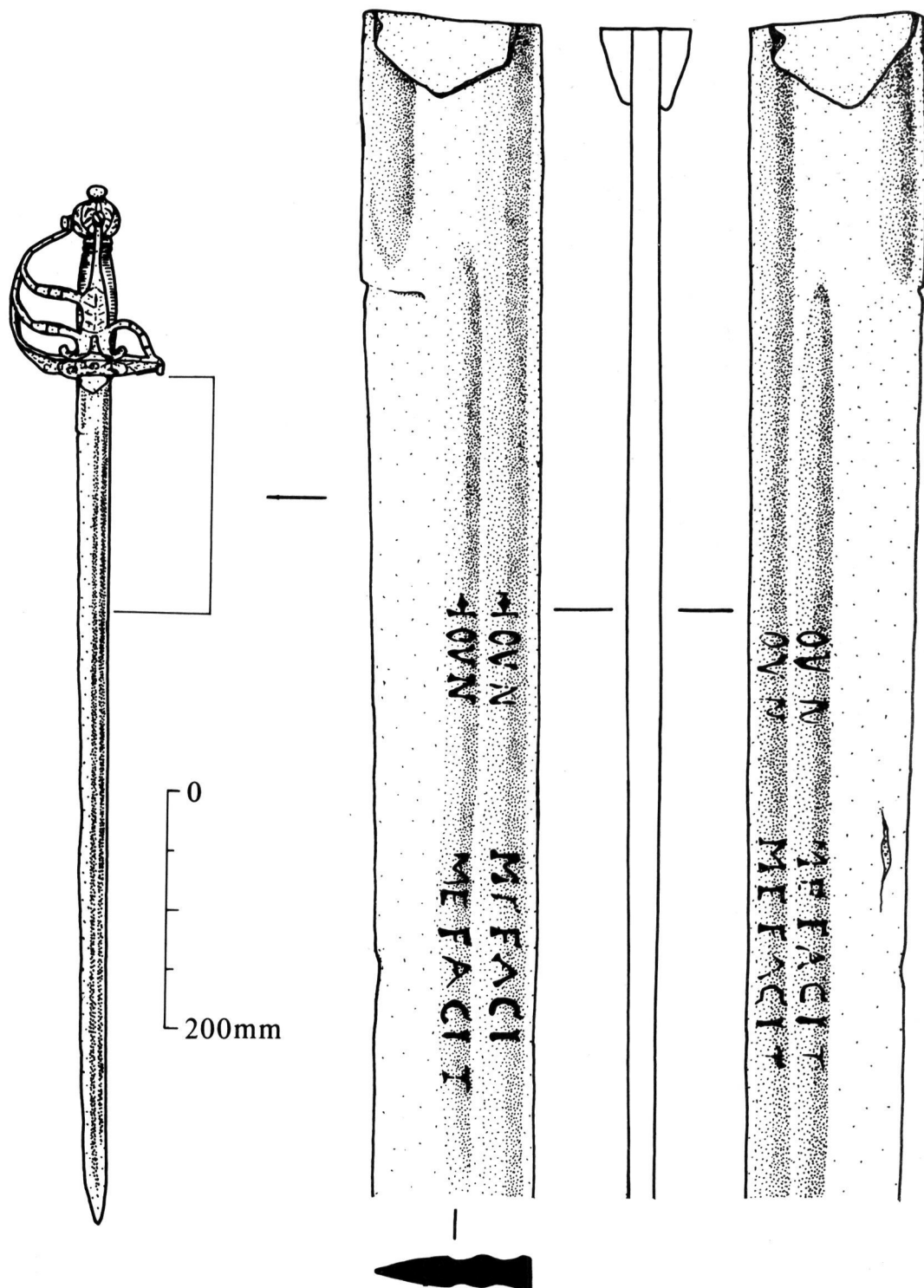


Fig. 1 Hounslow sword: the complete sword (I/5) and upper part of the blade showing the 'Hounslow' inscription.

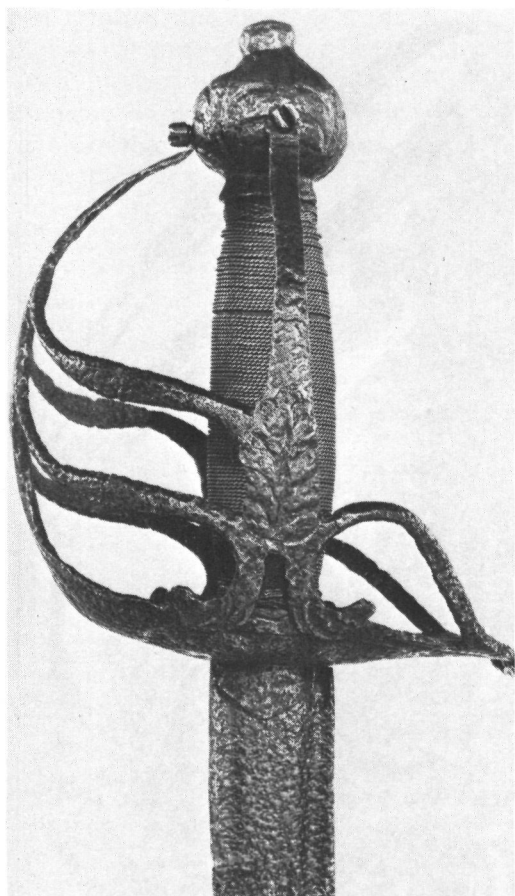


Plate 1 Hounslow sword: The hilt of the Hounslow 'mortuary' sword.

do not appear to be original<sup>10</sup>. The pommel is divided into four equal segments by incised lines running from the base of the tang-button to the top of the pommel neck. Each segment is decorated with a stylised leaf-shaped pattern crudely chiselled in relief.

The blade is secured in the hilt by two langets which emerge through the hilt and project about 15mm along the ricasso. The langets are formed from the quillon-block which has two stump quillons on the inside of the hilt. The hilt probably originally had a cloth or leather lining within the bars to further protect the hand from opponents' weapons and against the roughness of the inside of the guard<sup>11</sup>. The sword might also have had a leather scabbard with metal chape and belt-hook<sup>12</sup>.

The Hounslow sword mill was established about 1630<sup>13</sup> and is shown on a map of 1635<sup>14</sup> to have been situated astride the

Duke of Northumberland's river, one and a half miles west of Hounslow, just above its confluence with the River Crane. The mill appears to have been grinding and polishing blades for swords of various types until its closure during the English Civil War and the removal of its workers to Oxford<sup>15</sup>. It seems to have re-opened for a brief spell later in the 17th century but to have closed by about 1670<sup>16</sup>. Usually a blade can only be attributed to this mill if it bears one of the various 'Hounslow' marks<sup>17</sup>.

Many Hounslow blades are found mounted in 'mortuary' hilts, a name given by 19th-century collectors to a type of hilt which had developed by the mid-17th century<sup>18</sup>. The point of origin of this type of hilt is obscure but it is typically English and is one of the many variations on the experimental basket hilts of the late 16th and early 17th centuries<sup>19</sup>. The name 'mortuary' is a term usually applied to hilts of varying quality, from up-market examples chiselled with portrait busts popularly supposed to be of the ill-fated Charles I of England and his Queen, Henrietta Maria<sup>20</sup> to examples crudely decorated with masks amid foliage. The heads were once thought to commemorate the martyrdom of the King in 1649 but this belief has been shown to be improbable since this type of hilt is of earlier origin and was certainly carried by both Royalist and Roundhead alike<sup>21</sup>. However, many so-called 'mortuary' hilts are not decorated with the mortuary masks but are sometimes very simple with stylised foliage, scrolls, animal heads and geometric shapes decoration or else plain with incised lines<sup>22</sup>.

Military swords of similar type to this example are often found associated with the equipment of horse, or cavalry, troopers of the English Civil War period (1642–51)<sup>23</sup>. Hounslow blades were of serviceable quality and some appear to have

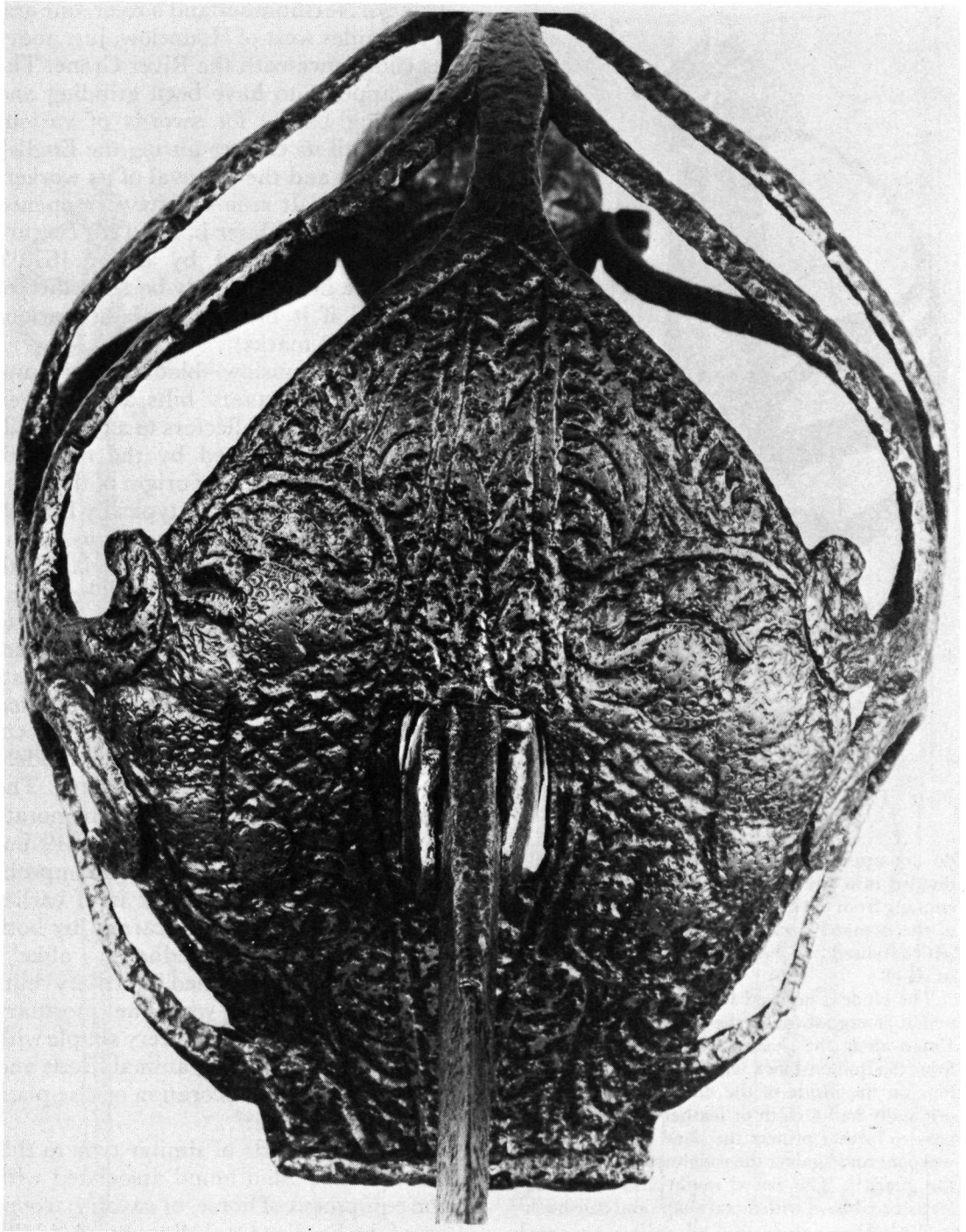


Plate 2 Hounslow sword: The hilt of the Hounslow 'mortuary' sword showing the decoration on the plate.

been rehilted and used at a much later date. At the time of writing Gunnersbury Park Museum has acquired six further Hounslow swords, one of which has a Victorian mameluke hilt, probably fitted for ceremonial purposes<sup>24</sup>.

## NOTES

1. There have been several discussions of the mill, notably C. Milward. 'English signed swords in the London Museums' *Apollo* 29 (1939) 125–9.
2. C. Milward 'Further notes on London & Hounslow Swordsmiths' *Apollo* 35 (1942) 93–6.
3. M. R. Holmes *Arms and Armour in Tudor and Stuart London* HMSO (1970) 33–7.
4. J. T. White 'The Hounslow Sword Blade Industry' *Hounslow Chronicle* (Autumn 1978). 'The Sword Blade Makers at Hounslow Sword Mill' Pt 1, *Hounslow Chronicle* (Autumn 1980). The Sword Blade Makers at Hounslow Sword Mill, Pt 2 *Hounslow Chronicle* (Spring 1983).  
My thanks to Mr J. Tofts White for making available to me his unpublished notes on Hounslow blades in public and private collections.
5. Purchased by Mr J. T. White, former reference librarian at Hounslow District Library, at the Arms Fair, Cumberland Hotel, London and sold to Gunnersbury Park Museum. This is illustrated and reported in the London Borough of Hounslow's Progress No. 26, February/March 1971. Accession No.: 70.35.
6. See White (1980) *op. cit.* in note 1 for a consideration of the general appearance of Hounslow blades including the example under discussion.
7. Museum of London No. 36.154/4, described in Holmes *op. cit.* in note 1, 35. Notes on the others kindly supplied by Mr J. T. White in the historical file for the sword, Gunnersbury Park Museum.
8. Mr A. North, Department of Metalwork, Victoria and Albert Museum, kindly pointed out an early reference to the term 'mortuary' as applied to broadswords of this period in E. Castle *Schools and Masters of Fence* (London 1885) caption to No. 3 Plate IV, which illustrates a broadsword from the Wareing Faulder Collection, 'Swords of this type are often called 'mortuary' as a number of them were made in memory of Charles I, and bear his likeness upon the hilt'.
9. See G. I. Mungeam. Some Notes on London-Made Sword Hilts of the Seventeenth Century *J. Arms and Armour Soc.* 6 No. 7 (Sept. 1969) 209–13, for a discussion of the manufacture of hilts for Hounslow swords.
10. The description of the hilt is based on that used by E. Oakeshott *European Weapons & Armour* (London 1980) 173–5.
11. My thanks to Mr A. V. B. Norman, Master of HM Armouries, the Tower of London, for making available his as yet unpublished catalogue of the Montagu family armoury, Boughton House, Northamptonshire and specific examples N 206 (258) and N 201 (144).
12. York Castle Nos: CA 719, CA 735, CA 745, CA 779, AA 1615. My thanks to Mr A. North, Department of Metalwork, Victoria and Albert Museum for bringing these swords to my attention and to Dr Newman, York Castle Museum, for further information about these swords.
13. From discussions with Mr A. North.
14. See Museum of London 36.154/2 for another Hounslow bladed sword with a red cloth lining, described and illustrated in Holmes *op. cit.* in note 1, 36, Plate 18D. Also W. B. Redfern 'On a Cromwellian Sword' *Connoisseur* 40 No. 238 99–100.
15. See Tower IX-1089, illustrated in A. R. Dufty *European Swords and Daggers in the Tower of London* HMSO (1974) Pl. 49c.
16. White (1980) *op. cit.* in note 1, 20.
17. Moses Glover's Map of the Hundred of Isleworth, 1635 in the Duke of Northumberland's Archive, Syon House, Isleworth, Middx.
18. White (1983) *op. cit.* in note 1, 12.
19. White (1980) *op. cit.* in note 1, 20.
20. Mr J. T. White has compiled an index of all known Hounslow swords and the marks on their blades.
21. See note 5 and Redfern *op. cit.* in note 11, 99–100.
22. Oakeshott *op. cit.* in note 7, 173–5 and A. G. Credland 'Some Swords of the English Civil War with notes on the origin of the basket-hilt' *J. Arms & Armour Soc.* 10 No. 6 (Dec. 1982) 196–205.
23. See Tower, Mann Collection and IX-1214, IX-1086, illustrated in Dufty *op. cit.* in note 12, Pls. 47 & 49.
24. Oakeshott *op. cit.* in note 7, 174.
25. See Tower IX-1245, illustrated in Dufty *op. cit.* in note 12, Pl. 48b.
26. Good collections of such equipment are preserved at Littlecote House, Wiltshire and the Tower Armouries.
27. Accession Nos: 84.9/1–6.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I should like to thank all the people who helped in the preparation of this text, in particular those already mentioned in the notes and Bridget Clifford, Ann Balfour Paul, Jon Cotton, John Mills and the Audio-Visual Unit, London Borough of Hounslow, for producing the photographs.