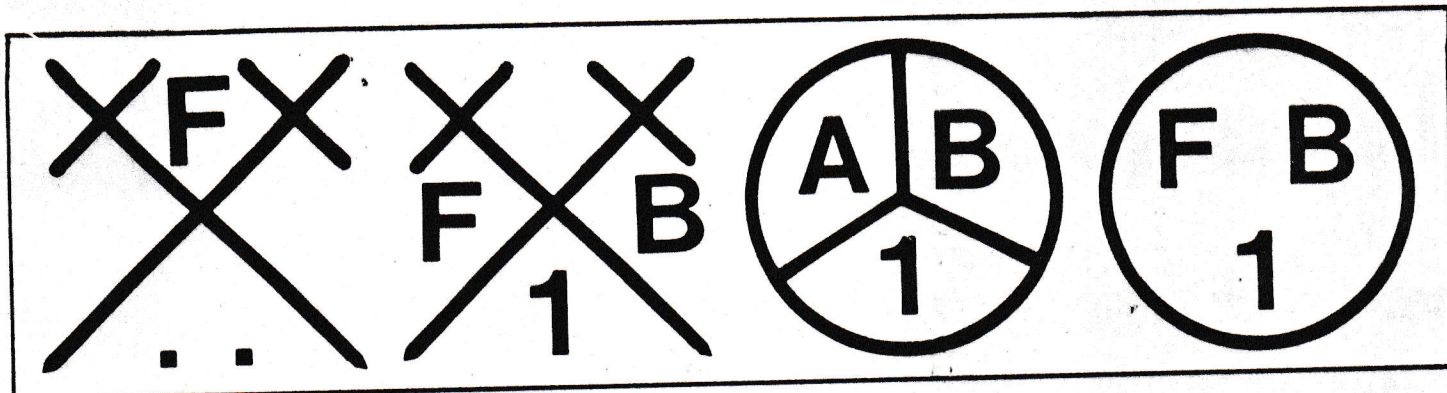


Britain's Secret Proof Marks

Udo E Tröster



Editor's Note:

In a recent issue of the German magazine *Deutsches Waffen-Journal* collector Udo E Tröster revealed details of the secret marks which, for many years, have been impressed on guns proofed in Birmingham. So well has this secret been kept that very few people knew of the existence of the marks and even fewer had been able to break the code. By dint of detailed research Tröster broke the code and was then able to confirm his findings in England. We can now reveal that the London Proof House has also adopted a year code system incorporated in its proof marks and full details of both sets of marking are published for the first time. Two important questions arise. By what authority are these marks impressed and on whose authority was the system started? And why the secrecy?

THE "SECRET PROOF MARKS" of Birmingham are not proof marks at all. Originally, they were called "private view marks" but, in fact, they are simply date marks. The system was introduced in Birmingham in 1921 by the then Proof Master Lieutenant Colonel Charles Playfair. His reasons are not clear and no information is forthcoming about how and by whom the marks were authorised.

The first mark consisted of crossed swords or sceptres with a capital letter indicating a year code and a number of dots indicating the seniority of the inspector who viewed the weapon (see Figure 1). The year code does not follow the calendar year but runs from 1 July to 30 June. The code runs from A to V, excepting the letters I and Q which were not used.

The letter code used in conjunction with mark No. 1 from 1921 to 30 June 1941 is shown below. From that we can see that Figure 1 shows a gun viewed by the chief inspector between 1 July 1926 and 30 June 1927.

A	=	1 July 1921 to 30 June 1922
B	=	1 July 1922 to 30 June 1923
C	=	1 July 1923 to 30 June 1924
D	=	1 July 1924 to 30 June 1925
E	=	1 July 1925 to 30 June 1926
F	=	1 July 1926 to 30 June 1927
G	=	1 July 1927 to 30 June 1928
H	=	1 July 1928 to 30 June 1929
J	=	1 July 1929 to 30 June 1930
K	=	1 July 1930 to 30 June 1931
L	=	1 July 1931 to 30 June 1932
M	=	1 July 1932 to 30 June 1933
N	=	1 July 1933 to 30 June 1934
O	=	1 July 1934 to 30 June 1935
P	=	1 July 1935 to 30 June 1936
R	=	1 July 1936 to 30 June 1937
S	=	1 July 1937 to 30 June 1938
T	=	1 July 1938 to 30 June 1939
U	=	1 July 1939 to 30 June 1940
V	=	1 July 1940 to 30 June 1941

Colonel Playfair died in 1941 and the marking system seems to have fallen into disuse until the present Proof Master, R.P. Lees, was appointed. He modified the old mark and reintroduced it with effect from 1 January 1950. This time the mark was used for a calendar year. The letter on the left segment gives the year code and the letter B in the right segment stands for Birmingham. The numeral in the lower segment indicates the "rank" of the viewer. The letter code used from 1950 to 1974 is as follows:

Code	Year	Code	Year
A	1950	O	1963
B	1951	P	1964
C	* 1952	Q	1965
D	1953	R	1966
E	1954	S	1967
F	1955	T	1968
G	1956	U	1969
H	1957	V	1970
J	1958	W	1971
K	1959	X	1972
L	1960	Y	1973
M	1961	Z	1974
N	1962		

* It seems that the first few thousand guns proofed in 1952 are likely to have a false mark. The mark should have been C for the year and then B for Birmingham but, due to a misunderstanding, the new mark was cut B C instead of C B. It is probable that this mark continued in use until the dies were worn, when the new dies were correctly cut.

When the letters of the alphabet were exhausted, a new mark, shown in Figure 3, was introduced. It quickly became impossible to read the marks within the divisions and so the marks dividing the circle into three was dispensed with and the current mark, Figure 4, was introduced. The same simple letter code applies:

Code	Year	Code	Year
A	1975	D	1978
B	1976	E	1979
C	1977	F	1980

The system of identifying the viewer by his seniority was retained. Thus Figure 3 is a gun viewed by the chief inspector in 1975 and Figure 4 is a gun viewed by the chief inspector in 1980.

The London Proof House did not introduce a system of secret marking until 1972. That too was kept secret but no code was thought necessary. The mark to be found consists of the letters LP for London Proof over the last two numbers of the year, thus
 $\frac{LP}{72}$ or $\frac{LP}{73}$

In both cases, the marks are very small indeed and it is necessary to look very closely in the area in which other marks are impressed. These very small dies wore very quickly and the marks are often difficult to decipher. A good glass is necessary when seeking them.