

# Is That Actually An *English Civil War* ‘Lobster Pot Helmet’ ?

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We have all, I am sure, been there – the Country House, the Castle or the Museum – and seen, or had pointed out to us, the ‘Lobster Tail Helmet’ (hereinafter just simply helmets, or this blog is going to get very tedious) “from the English Civil War”, or worn by some member of the family “whilst serving under Prince Rupert / Oliver Cromwell” (why is it always Rupert or Cromwell – were there no other Generals in the Civil War ? But I digress, back to the point, Stephen.) Now I make no claim for the originality of any research for this blog (and which in a shorter form was originally published in *Arquebusier – The Journal of the Pike and Shot Society*); it is simply the siftings from the Royal Armouries seminar ‘The Armour of the Wars of the Three Kingdoms’, together with a subsequent meeting and conversation with Thom Richardson<sup>1</sup>. I thought however that the conclusions of Thom’s researches and publications might be of interest to devotees of the Civil Wars, especially when wandering around the aforesaid Houses, Castle and museums, looking at exhibits or reconstructions.

## **Lobster Tailed Helmets.**

Or more usually simply referred to as a ‘pott’ in warrants and inventories.

I have always looked at these Helmets in the various collections, admired the armourer’s skill (and occasionally commented on the lack of it) but I have never considered the actual dating, accepting the museum’s description and thinking no further.

I have, I suppose, known for a long time that the London Armourers of the seventeenth century each identified their individual work with a distinct mark, and that by using that armourers’ mark pieces could be approximately dated since we have, from the records of the Armourers’ Company, precise dates when an individual was working. What came as a surprise to me was that the actual style of the helmet itself changed with a fashion in three distinct phases: c1630-c1650/1, c1650-c1660/1 and c1660-c1680, with a variation appearing around 1670. 1630 marks approximately the first appearance of the English pattern lobster and c1680 is approximately when the last of these helmets was manufactured, although they were issued at least as late as 1688<sup>2</sup>.

Whilst, as I said, the armourers’ marks can be used to roughly date a helmet this is not a lot of help when looking at an exhibited piece; firstly because you can rarely see the actual armourer’s mark and secondly simply because who carries a full glossary of marks, armourers and active dates in their bag ? However by merely looking at the shape of the helmet an approximate date is immediately apparent from the fashion style – ‘fashion’ is probably the best term for the various changes of style since no one style offers any particular benefit over any other.

Anyway when you have one of these helmets in front of you just look at it carefully and bear these simple style changes in mind. NB there was no variation in these style types (so no, you never find a type 3 skull made in 1645, or indeed before 1660) and the time changeover from

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<sup>1</sup> Keeper of European Armour and Oriental collections at the Royal Armouries.

<sup>2</sup> *The London Armourers of the 17th Century*: Thom Richardson. Royal Armouries, 2004. For notes on the 1688 issues see the author’s forthcoming book from Helion, *The Army of James II*.

one to the next was very fast – undoubtedly a deliberate change from the Armourers’ Company.

So the variations in style of the English Lobster Pot Helmet :

### 1630-1650/1, Type 1



The helmet skull was made in two pieces and joined to create a small, low comb (which does mean that you cannot make a reproduction by using a spun steel bowl). When lowered the moveable peak had a distinct downward slope from the front of the skull towards the edge. The peak is sometimes deeper (front to back) than later examples and can also be decorated or with a decorative upper edge, with rarely exists on later examples. Occasionally armouries will record the face bars as a separate item suggesting that these may be a ‘stock of spares’ held in readiness for future repairs.

### 1650-1660/1, Type 2



The helmet skull was still made in two pieces joined to create the low comb but the peak was now almost perfectly horizontal when lowered<sup>3</sup>. The great majority of surviving helmets come from this period, although there is some evidence that when earlier manufactured helmets may have needed to be repaired they were ‘modernised’ at the same time, thus making them look later than their original date of manufacture. This latter is particularly problematical where, as is often the case, the armourer who originally made

the helmet was still working.

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<sup>3</sup> The helmets from the Littlecote collection are almost entirely of this type.

### 1660-1680, Type 3



The two pieces of the helmet skull were joined to form a bowl, flat without a comb (although the join can usually be seen without the need for too close an examination). The peak when lowered was still usually horizontal when lowered, as in 'type 2', although examples from the later years of manufacture which reverted to the earlier sloping peak of 'type 1' are also known<sup>4</sup>. From about 1670 some helmets were manufactured with, or had added, horizontal bars across the vertical bars, a sort of "type 3A".

These stylistic changes happened fairly swiftly, as might be expected from a relatively small number of armourers working in close proximity and all being members of the same Armourers' Company (whose Hall has some nice examples of Type 1 on the walls by the way) although there was undoubtedly a brief time overlap. Nonetheless given these fashions it can make you look more closely at a helmet next time it is described as "Civil War" or a re-enactor is being particularly pompous about his exact appearance being "perfectly historically accurate".

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<sup>4</sup> There is a type 3, post 1660, helmet with sloping peak in the Wallace Collection.