

MAKING AMMUNITION IN THE ENGLISH CIVIL WAR

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The armies of the English Civil War had often to use their own resources in making arms and ammunition for their needs. This was particularly true of the Parliamentary Garrison of Gloucester. For nearly four weeks during 1643 it was besieged by the King, and for a year the city was dangerously isolated. Supplies from London reached it only after long delay and great difficulty. Colonel Edward Massey, the Governor of Gloucester, wrote to the Earl of Essex that the enemy were drawn out of all parts on purpose to keep back our relief. However, he continued, 'our necessity is not so great for ammunition, we having found a way to make a match, and also what powder we can'.(1)

What things were made locally can be read in the account book and papers of Captain Thomas Blaney, who was Massey's Treasurer at War,(2) and in the Chamberlain's accounts of the City of Gloucester.(3)

Gunpowder was a necessity during the siege. John Dorney, the Town Clerk, composed a narrative of the siege. He wrote that two powder mills made three barrels of gunpowder a week during the seige. One of the first payments made by Blaney, after the City of Gloucester had been relieved, was £9.6s. to Thomas Davis, a powder maker during the time of the siege. He had assistants: a week's wages for the powder makers came to £2.17s. (A musketeer was paid 4s. a week). Another payment was for mending a powder mill; and a cooper was paid for work on powder barrels. Also mentioned in the accounts were necessities for fireworks and the making of granadoes.

The ingredients of gunpowder were charcoal, sulphur and saltpetre. Blaney paid for cleaning wood for charcoals, also on another occasion for three tunnes of coals for the powder works. One payment was made for brimstone or sulphur.

More frequent entries in the accounts concerned the making of saltpetre. Thomas Barnes was paid £3.11s. for making saltpetre in the siege. A week's wages for the saltpetremen came to £2.5s. There were other mentions of saltpetre: saltpetre tubs, baskets, and ashes for the saltpetremen, and hooping tubs for saltpetre. The saltpetre works consumed quantities of wood, which was cut at Lantony [Llanthony] just south of the city. Other details included: five pounds of 'allome' bought for refining saltpetre. Ashes were delivered to the saltpetre house, where a copper was part of the equipment. Most often mentioned in the accounts were saltpetre liquors. According to the History of Technology, saltpetre can be leached out of the nitrogenous earth on stables, pigeon lofts, pig styes and similar places'.(4) This explains the payment to Augustine

Loggins for hauling saltpetre liquor from Mr Boyle's pigeon house.

Bullets were cast locally. Blaney paid Baker, a bell founder, £1.19s.4d. for casting 236 pounds of musket bullets at 2d a pound. He also paid for 'great bullets' brought into the magazine during the siege and since. Later 17s.8d. was paid for 83 pounds of carbine bullets at 2½d. a pound. At the beginning of the Civil War, Robert Holford went to London to buy arms for Gloucester City Council. The chamberlain paid for what he brought back, which included bullet moulds and 500 pounds of lead for casting bullets.

It was also necessary to make cartridges for firing the bullets. At this time a cartridge was 'a paper packet containing a measured charge of powder and ball'.(5) The Chamberlains paid for three quires of white paper for cartridges. Captain Blaney bought paper for cartridges from Tobias Jordan. He was a bookseller and stationer of Gloucester and a member of the City Council. Jordan was one of the citizens 'with lean, pale, sharp and bad visages', as historian Clarendon described them,(6) who brought defiance to the King when he summoned Gloucester before the siege. Other expenses recorded by Blaney in connection with cartridges were canvas, brown thread, pack thread, needles and starch. The Chamberlains bought the canvas to make bullet bags and the brown paper in which to put the powder. Making cartridges was employment for soldiers on the march. A paper headed 'Disbursed in our severall marches to Rosse and Malmesbury and Returne home' referred to quires of paper for cartridges, thread for them and drink for the cannoneers that made them.

Muskets used in the civil War were matchlocks. When going into action a musketeer carried a length of slowly burning match with which to fire his musket. Match was 'a kind of coarse twine heavily impregnated with saltpetre, so that its lighted end maintained a steady glow'.(7) Blaney recorded payment for 163 skeins of bast match and 23 pounds of hempen match. (Bast was the inner bark of the lime tree.) Match too was evidently made locally. Workmen were paid for making match of basing rope. A trough was bought for pounding bast and hemp. The most remarkable evidence of the Gloucester garrison's self sufficiency was that they grew their own hemp. In April and May of 1644 Captain Blaney paid Thomas Evans what he laid out for workmen sowing hemp; for work done in hemp garden; to buy hemp seed; for digging and sowing the ground to bear hemp; and for sowing hemp seed.

The army maintained at least one gunsmith: Giles Reeves was paid as gunsmith to the garrison. A payment was also made for smith coals for the gunsmiths. Usually the army employed local tradesmen to manufacture ammunition, like the already mentioned bell founder who cast musket bullets during the siege. On another occasion Richard Gybbs, pewterer, made pistol bullets.

John Williams, roper, provided match. The Chamberlains paid Richard Tyll, cutler, for swords delivered at the time of the siege.

Then on another occasion there is a reference to Henry Knowles, brazier, had on his premises a broken gun of three or four hundredweight.

Soldiers and citizens brought together their practical skills to provide for the defence of Gloucester in its time of isolation.

References

- 1 Tibbutt, H.G., ed, The Letter Books of Sir Samuel Luke, No 1511, 11 March 1643/44.
- 2 Public Record Office SP 28 129/5, and SP28 228.
- 3 Gloucestershire Record Office: Gloucester Borough Records: F 4/5.
- 4 Singer, C., et al, A History of Technology, vol II, p 380.
- 5 Ibid, vol III. p348.
- 6 Edward, Earl of Clarendon, The History of the Rebellion, book VII, 161.
- 7 Singer, C., et al, A History of Technology, vol III, p355, footnote.