

Smallarms of the English East India Company

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Summary

The ultimate historical importance of this topic must lie in the part it plays in an assessment of the role played by European technology in the British conquest of India. The results of eleven years work on the mass of military historical information and technical data in the East India Company records will appear in a forthcoming book intended as a tool in making such an assessment. This summary outlines the categories of smallarms which archaeologists might expect to find on the wreck sites of English East Indiamen, and then offers a specific example of how a smallarm has helped to identify a wreck.

1. The three main categories of arms on East Indiamen

(a) By far the largest category consisted of the weapons made for the Company in England, being exported for the use of their forces in the East. They are also potentially the most helpful for nautical archaeologists. The majority were 'land service' arms intended for the Company's three Presidency armies of Bengal, Madras and Bombay, but a few were 'sea service' arms specially made for the Bombay Marine (later the Indian Navy), and also issued to the Company's own lesser vessels such as hoys, pilot vessels and, later, steamers.

(b) The East Indiaman's own arms for the use of the crew. They were of distinct types provided by the owners in set numbers, and specially marked after passing the Company's inspection.

(c) One or two chests of the Company's own land service muskets [as at (a) above], but used on board for training recruits during the voyage to India.

2. Exceptions and caveats

There were several lesser categories of smallarms carried on some English East Indiamen and which for the excavator might form confusing evidence as to nationality or date of a wreck.

(a) Arms exported by the Company for sale or trade in the East, which did not bear their ownership mark.

(b) Smallarms intended for Madagascar, of which there were two sub-categories:

(i) Low-grade trading guns and middling buccaneer guns taken out under licence by captains of East Indiamen, to be offered in exchange for refreshments on the voyage out;

(ii) Smallarms of various types and qualities laden on ships on the Company's own account as commodities in the small-scale slave trade between Madagascar and India, particularly between 1735 and 1761.

(c) The many smallarms captured by the Company's forces in the East from the French and Dutch in the late 18th century, and a few bought at Calcutta from Danish ships.

(d) Board of Ordnance smallarms used by Royal Service troops in India, which might be found in large numbers on wrecks of East Indiamen transporting British Army units.

(e) Old unserviceable arms or components [as at 1(a) above] being returned on homeward-bound ships as ballast, to be sold in London.

(f) Smallarms being exported as items of private trade by the crew, a practice common at least in the second quarter of the 18th century.

(g) Arms being smuggled by the crew. The worst offenders were the captains themselves, and the trade was said to be extensive between 1760 and 1790.

(h) Smallarms which were the legitimate personal property of passengers and crew, or were being freighted by gunmakers to customers already in India.

(i) The Company's own smallarms [1(a) above]

were very widely distributed about the globe by war, sale and capture, and their presence on a wreck cannot be taken to indicate that it is an English East Indiaman.

3. *The Albion*

This Thames Estuary wreck had been identified with the assistance of the remains of a musket from the site (see Redknap, this volume). The musket was of General Lawrence's pattern, introduced in 1760 and discontinued after 1769, dates which eliminated all but one of the candidates. It was also a pattern of great importance in military historical and firearms terms, and otherwise known only from documents.

4. *Conclusion*

The world-wide dispersal of EIC smallarms, added to the variety of other arms which might be found, means that smallarms offer no reliable indication of the nationality of a wreck. However, the many successive patterns of land-service arms [1(a) above] offer an accurate date, which may help to identify wrecks, as with the *Albion*. Any and all smallarms found on the wrecks of English East Indiamen are of relevance to current research by the author. In the long term wrecks offer the best source of specimens of the more than a hundred patterns known to have been made for the Company from c.1750 to c.1850 and the many unknown patterns of c.1600 to 1750.