

Lyme Regis Museum
History of Lyme in Objects
7. 1644 - Lead shot from the Civil War Siege of Lyme
Accession Number LRM 1935/2

By Felicity Hebditch



Lead shot balls made to fire from a musket.

This historic 1930's label refers to grape shot, misshapen shot would have been used in canon rather than muskets. One iron ball can be seen, this is later item.
The balls are 15 to 22.5mm diameter.

Significance

Providing probable evidence of the Siege of Lyme, this lead shot was found in 1933 on the site of a defensive fort. Shot of this kind was fired from muskets, but it can be seen that one is iron and this would be of a different date and may have been found by Miss Lister in Pound Street.

Summary

In the 1600s these were the kind of bullets that were fired from a musket, the usual weapon of the time. Soldiers could make their own shot by melting lead and pouring it into a mould of round holes. These bullets were put down the long barrel of a gun, gunpowder from a box or horn was put into the pan and this was set alight by 'match', a piece of burning rope carried by each man. Flintlock guns, which used a flint to make a spark against steel to set off the gunpowder, had not yet been invented.

This shot was found when workmen were making the Borough Tennis Courts where the Woodmead Halls are now. During the Civil War Siege of Lyme four defensive 'forts' of timber and turf were thrown up by the Town in defence against the Royalist army and this seems to have been the site of one of them. Lyme and Dorchester were extreme Protestant and sided with Parliament against the King.

A diary was found in 1786, describing the siege day by day. The siege lasted from April-June 1644 and the Royalists eventually withdrew, empty handed. Troops at their disposal numbered about 4,500 men, against only about 500 men in Lyme, but the Royalist side seems to have suffered about 2,000 losses. The women of the town played their part in its defence and Lyme suffered few human losses, but many buildings were damaged.

The Civil War 1642-1651 and its causes

During the Civil War more people were killed *pro rata* of the population than in the First World War. Families were divided by their loyalties, brothers fighting each other. In some towns, like Exeter, part of the population supported the King, the other Parliament.

Many people felt you should not attack the King since he ruled by Divine right. But people were angry about the **taxes** they had to pay, for instance Ship Money, raised for the Navy. Some landowners were demanding higher rents from their tenants.

There was **hunger** because the climate was going into a mini Ice Age, when, for example the Thames froze over. Crop yields were poor. Those in power did nothing to alleviate this, in contrast with France, where the king provided wheat for the destitute.

Puritans wanted a **more protestant form of religion** than the Church of England provided. Lyme and Dorchester were extreme in their views, in common with other ports such as Plymouth and Poole. Lyme's vicar was John Geare who was followed by Ames Short in 1650, who refused to obey the authorities at the Restoration of the Monarchy in 1660.

Conduct of the War

The Royalists derived strong support in Devon and Cornwall. They held a line of forts from Dunster to Bridgwater, Taunton and Chard, which control of Lyme would complete. The Parliamentary strategy was to keep the King hemmed in behind this line.

In 1644 the Royalist Army moved towards securing Lyme, with about 4,500 troops from Cornwall and Ireland. Others had been conscripted against their will and therefore made poor soldiers in the attack. The exact number of troops varies between accounts. Parliament was dominant at sea, so their ships could supply Lyme from Poole or Plymouth.

Lyme was theoretically led by its Mayor, but the real leader was Robert Blake who had come from the siege of Bristol and was a brilliant strategist. Prince Maurice, leader of the Royalists, was ill from 'flu, and looked 'a ghost'. Maurice and his brother Prince Rupert were the sons of Charles I's sister Elizabeth: English troops had fought for her in Bohemia (now Czech Republic).

The weapons

Matchlock muskets were the weapons used on both sides. They used **gunpowder** made of saltpetre (potassium nitrate - from urine or natural deposits), sulphur and charcoal. Saltpetre is also used in curing ham and making corned beef etc. It was brought by sea to Lyme.

Gunpowder mills needed a water supply to pound up ingredients, separately and then together; and could ignite when together so needed to be away from habitation. They were



often in coppice woods, to provide charcoal and to be away from towns. Gunpowder was also used for mines and quarrying until more powerful explosives were invented. It gave off smoke when burned - hence smoke in battles - and leaves a deposit in the gun barrel which had to be cleaned out.

To fire the gunpowder in a musket they used '**Match**', rope soaked in saltpetre which was kept alight at one end. **Shot** was made of lead, heated and poured into a mould. In desperation lead was taken from church roofs. Badly formed shot was fired from small cannons, as grape shot, to spread out. Each soldier had a horn to hold gunpowder or wooden containers with gunpowder.

Method of firing

The soldier:

- pours powder in pan of musket
- pours powder in musket barrel, rams it down (with stick that sits on side of gun)
- puts in lead shot
- fits burning matchlock in cocked spring to fire the gunpowder when the trigger is pulled
- takes aim (can use support like hayfork for the gun)
- fires.

This all takes a long time; they fired about 12 to 14 rounds in hour. Muskets were inaccurate beyond 50 yards. They had to keep the match burning all the time as they were on alert night and day, the opposing troops using a quarter of a ton every 24 hours:

Sept. 7th, 1643, Parliament ordered twenty barrels of powder, a tun of match, and a tun of sacre and minion shot, to be sent by sea.

Quoted on p.80 of George Roberts' *The History of Lyme Regis and Charmouth* reprinted 1996 Lymelight books and Philpot Museum Lyme Regis

Lyme had demi cannon brought by sea; they fired a cannon ball of 32lbs. The Royalists had cannon but they were heavy to bring by land.

No uniforms

Armies in most wars had some kind of coat of arms or uniform but in the Civil War they had none. Devices on hats showed which side you were on; soldiers on King's side had red or pink hat bands or pink feathers, Parliament orange feathers. But either side could wear black or white. In Battle of Marston Moor Parliamentary soldiers wore white kerchiefs in their hats; General Fairfax made his escape taking off his kerchief. Some of the Royalists in the Lyme siege changed sides.

Food

Troops lived off the land. Royalists ate 3,000 sheep belonging to local farmers during the siege. Lyme brought in '15 fatt bullocks' before siege began.

Siege of Lyme 20th April – 15th June 1644

Lyme had about 500 men at its disposal together with the considerable help of its women. Its existing **defences** were geared towards the sea, rather than for landward defence. On the



landward side they made defensive ditches probably in an arc around from Sherborne Lane. They built blockhouses of turf/timber/stone in advance of this line, with the women helping. One fort was near the Charmouth Road, but probably now slipped over Black Venn cliff. Probably one of these forts was where Woodmead Halls now are. This particular collection of shot was discovered in the bank there when making tennis courts; it had been a school before. There was another fort further to west. From these forts the Parliamentarians could shoot at the attacking army advancing towards the town.

Lyme was strengthened by belief

The courage of the townsmen was increased by the vehement harangues of 25 puritanical preachers who confidently assured eternal salvation to those who should fall in the contest...Like the followers of Mahomet, they learned to look on death with diminished terror, the more they became inflamed by the powerful vapours of enthusiasm.

From a contemporary comment

Drake's Diary

We know how the siege proceeded because a diary was discovered in 1786 which had been written in the town by Edward Drake entitled: *An account of the most remarkable passings that happened at the streight siege of Lyme Regis, by the Prince Maurice, from the time of his sitting down before it, being the 20th of April, in the twentieth year of King Charles, unto the 16th of June, following, 1644.*

On the 20th April the Royalist army of 4,500 men arrived over the hill, boasting that they would 'take Lyme by breakfast'. For two months the inhabitants of Lyme stuck out against their attackers with enormous courage, suffering death and wounds and the destruction of their houses and ships. The siege began with a formal declaration: a trumpet fanfare followed by Prince Maurice calling on Lyme to surrender. He was answered with jeers and shouts. Lyme men could see bonfires of army encamped on the hill, whilst Royalist officers were used Haye House and Colway Manor as headquarters. Lyme women very much took part, firing muskets, bringing up ammunition and to do so wore men's clothing. The strength of men and women in the town totaled around a thousand, as well as animals in support.

At 3 am next day the Royalists crept to the west under cover of a hollow lane and hedges. Lyme men set fire to cottages to have clear view, but the smoke caused some confusion. Lyme counter attacked. And so it continued....with Drake describing the siege day by day and how much shot was used.

To oppose the Town forts, the Royalists built their Fort Royal above the Woodmead Halls area and their Western Fort above the Cobb. From there Royalist cannons could fire down onto Parliamentary ships delivering supplies and ammunition, but the Royalists were short of heavy guns and ammunition. They did bring a heavy canon with them but guns and ammunition were heavy and more easily carried by sea. Because the Parliamentary side was dominant at sea the Royalists could not be supplied by ship.

Night attacks on the ships in harbour set some to 'wildfire', and flaming arrows were shot to set fire to the mainly thatched town. Red-hot cannon balls were fired into houses, in one



five children in one bed escaped death, one being injured. Lyme men, in making sallies out from their forts against the attackers, killed many more than Royalist side did. At the end of the siege hardly a house was undamaged. 2000 oaks were awarded to Lyme from the land of the Royalist Lord Poulett to rebuild Lyme.

On 15th June from 2 am Maurice withdrew on King's Orders for the more important siege of Bristol. After 57 days of confinement Lyme people went out into the fields again to enjoy the fresh air, but feelings continued to be bitter. Lyme men went on attacking Royalist towns. An Irishwoman, who had come with the Royalists, was shut in a barrel of nails and thrown into the sea. Extra Parliamentary troops were brought in to relieve and strengthen the garrison.

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