

# THE FRENCH CUIRASSIER TROOPERS' SWORD 1800 - 1815

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*Few of the armaments carried by the Napoleonic soldier stir the imagination more than the cuirassier sword, a huge and powerful weapon extending some 46 inches from pommel to tip and an appropriate companion for the "big brothers" of Napoleon's armies.*

Quite properly, this sword is deserving of its place amongst British collectors as one of the most popular and sought after French swords. It is somewhat curious therefore that there remain certain misconceptions and misunderstandings in this country concerning its origins, patterns and markings, all of which I shall attempt to clarify in this article.

As a prelude to discussion of the various patterns and designations of the cuirassier sword from 1800 to 1815, it is first necessary to remind ourselves of the new calendar adopted in France during the great Revolution at the end of the eighteenth century. Fired with great fervour, the Revolutionaries sought to sweep aside all the trappings of the *ancien régime* and embark upon a new age. Amongst the casualties of this revolutionary

zeal was the Gregorian or Christian calendar which was replaced by the Revolutionary calendar. The starting point of the new age began with the abolition of the monarchy on 22nd September 1792: this became day 1 of Year 1 in the new calendar which then proceeded through the remaining years of the revolution until it finally met its end in 1804 at the hands of the new Emperor of the French, Napoleon Bonaparte. The revolutionary calendar thus spanned the following years in conventional terms:

Year 1 (I)	22nd Sept. 1792- 21st Sept. 1793
Year 2 (II)	22nd Sept. 1793- 21st Sept. 1794
Year 3 (III)	22nd Sept. 1794- 21st Sept. 1795
Year 4 (IV)	22nd Sept. 1795- 21st Sept. 1796
Year 5 (V)	22nd Sept. 1796- 21st Sept. 1797
Year 6 (VI)	22nd Sept. 1797- 21st Sept. 1798
Year 7 (VII)	22nd Sept. 1798- 21st Sept. 1799
Year 8 (VIII)	22nd Sept. 1799 - 21st Sept. 1800
Year 9 (IX)	22nd Sept. 1800 - 21st Sept. 1801
Year 10 (X)	22nd Sept. 1801 - 21st Sept. 1802
Year 11 (XI)	22nd Sept. 1802 - 21st Sept. 1803
Year 12 (XII)	22nd Sept. 1803 - 21st Sept. 1804
Year 13 (XIII)	22nd Sept. 1804 - 21st Sept. 1805

## Patterns and designations

The "official" title of the cuirassier sword in France is "*la sabre de la Cavalerie de Ligne*", literally the sword of the "line" cavalry. This title in itself is somewhat unusual since most other French swords of the period were designated either by genre, as for example the *sabre de la cavalerie legere* (the light cavalry sword), or were designated by a particular corps, for example the *sabre de carabiniers* or the *sabre de dragons*, etc. Since *la sabre de la Cavalerie de Ligne* was used almost exclusively by cuirassiers, unofficially of course it will always be known as the cuirassier sword.

The first pattern under discussion in this article is that of Year 9. Up to this point, cuirassiers had carried the 1784 pattern *sabre de la cavalerie de ligne*, also known as the "ARCO" pattern. Under the monarchy, the guard of the ARCO sabre incorporated a *fleur de lys* but this device was replaced during the revolution by a fasces surmounted by the so-called cap of liberty. However by Year 8, France was at war with virtually all of her neighbours and, no doubt driven by the war effort, a programme of armament reform was underway under the direction of General Gassendi. So it was that in this year, it was decreed that there would be a new cuirassier sword to replace the ARCO pattern and this would be based upon the pattern as currently carried by dragoons. This dragoon sword upon which the Year 9 was to be based, had its origins in the *sabre des gardes du corps du Roi*, the sword carried by

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the mounted grenadiers of the king's (Louis XVI) bodyguard from 1784. The newly decreed cuirassier sword thus made its first appearance in Year 9 (1801) and accordingly took that year as its designation:

**Hilt:** Brass knucklebow and guard with 3 additional side bars each terminating with a "ball" shaped foot against the guard. Cap pommel with small "v" cut out each side. The distinctive feature of the Year 9 hilt is that, after combining at upper part of the guard, the 3 side bars stop some  $\frac{1}{2}$ " to  $\frac{3}{4}$ " short of the pommel

**Grip:** Plain wood bound with cord to achieve ribbing, covered with brown leather and bound with twisted brass wire binding. The wire binding is tucked into small holes at either end of grip. The lack of a brass ferrule at the base of the grip should also be noted as a particularly distinctive feature of the Year 9.

**Blade:**  $38\frac{1}{4}$  inches long x  $1\frac{3}{8}$  inches wide x  $\frac{3}{8}$  inches thick at shoulder plain FLAT blade with hatchet point. The flat unfullered blade is, by far, the most prominent and easily recognisable feature which distinguishes this sword from succeeding patterns.

**Scabbard:** Plain steel with two flat bands and hanging rings; steel "lyre" shaped shoe.

The Year 9, however, was not an immediate success and the causes of complaint centred in two areas:

1. The flat blade, although very solid, was too heavy, and
2. The scabbard, which had no inner wooden liners, was prone to damage and denting which gave rise to the most unfortunate and embarrassing (not to say fatal) instances of the sword being unable to be extracted from damaged scabbards.

As a consequence, in Year II (1802) the following changes were introduced:

1. The well known double fullered blade replaced the flat unfullered blade albeit overall dimensions remained virtually identical. The double fullered blade remained finished with a hatchet point.

2. A brass grip ferrule was introduced at the bottom of the grip to prevent splitting and the three side branches were taken to within  $\frac{1}{4}$  inch of the pommel.

3. Wooden liners were inserted in the scabbard and the flat bands replaced by semi round bands. The scabbard mouthpiece was retained by a screw through the back edge of the scabbard. The distinctive "lyre" shaped shoe was retained.

It is very important to note at this point that although production of this revised design started immediately in Year 11 (1802), this new sword was never officially incorporated as a regulation

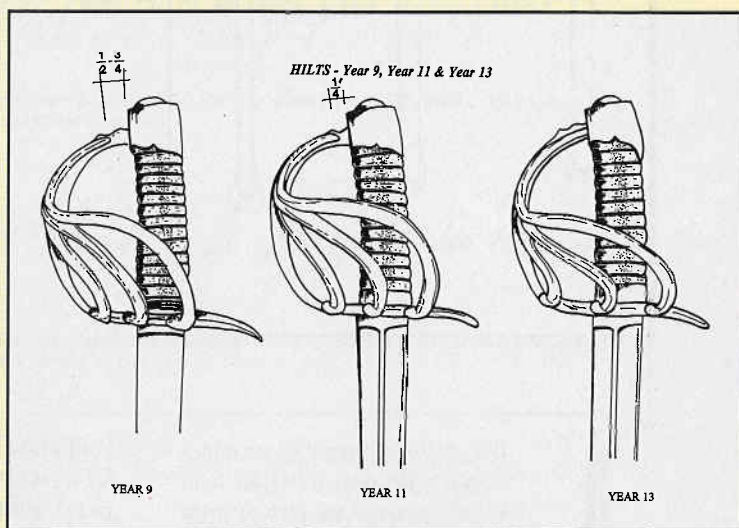
pattern. It was not until some two years later on *1er Vendemiaire An XIII* (22nd September 1804) that, following further modifications, the sword received official approval from Marshal Berthier, Minister of War and thus took its designation as the Year 13 pattern. Consequently, the major modifications and changes introduced in Year 11 became

incorporated as the Year 13 pattern although, according to contemporary reports, the sword was always called the Year 11 and the official Year 13 designation was never referred to. Hence much confusion has arisen between Year 11 and Year 13 swords and this has persisted over the years but, in summary, we can say that, for all intents and purposes, the Year 11 and Year 13 swords are virtually the same sword but the official title of which is the Year 13 pattern. The most easily recognisable difference between the two is the extension of the three side bars of the guard directly into the cap pommel which countered an obvious weak point.

The Year 13 sword then became the standard armament of the cuirassier throughout the remaining years of the 1st Empire although there were still complaints, again predominantly in

respect of weight, since the lightening of the blade by the introduction of fullers had been countered by increasing the weight of the scabbard to prevent denting. In 1811, there was a suggestion that the blade should be shortened by some 2 inches but this change never actually materialised. The Year 13 was eventually replaced by a new pattern introduced in 1816 after the restoration of the monarchy.

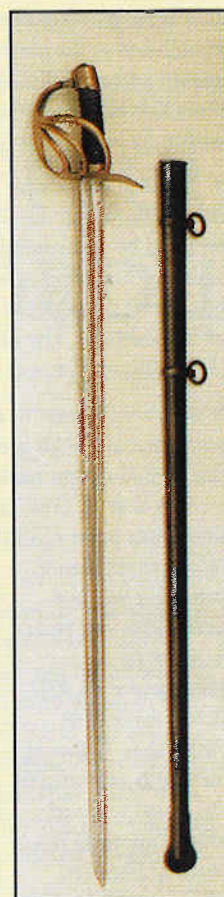
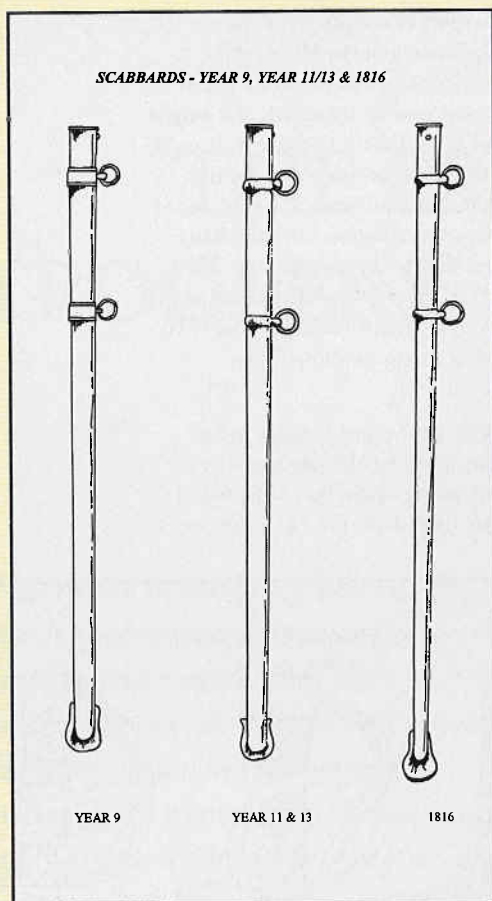
One final point remains to be made: by far the vast majority of surviving examples of this sword are fitted with the 1816 pattern



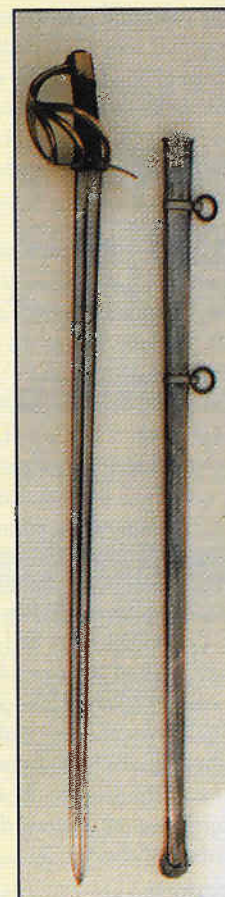
scabbard. This is a much lighter scabbard presumably introduced to counter complaints about weight and can be distinguished by the different shaped shoe and the throat retaining screw on the outer face of the scabbard as opposed to the back edge. In over 15 years of collecting and handling these swords, I have only ever seen 2 examples outside of museums that retain their original scabbards. The other modification that seems to have frequently taken place is the conversion of the original hatchet point into a spear point. Swords retaining the original hatchet point are relatively uncommon but not to the same degree as original scabbards.

## Manufacture and markings

Let us turn now to the manufacture and markings most commonly found on these patterns of sword but before doing so, it is necessary to review the systems



*Year 11*



*Year 13*

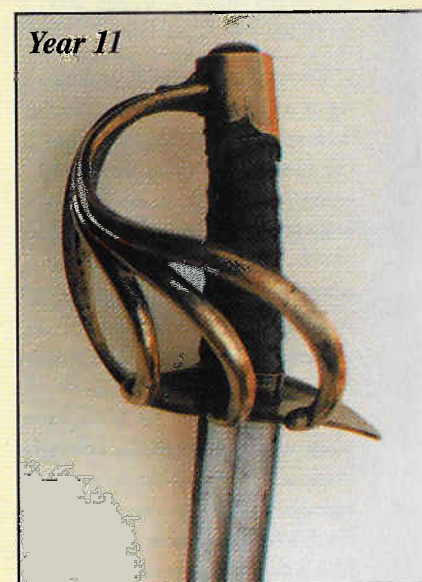
and centres of manufacture in France at the time. The best known centre of manufacture was Klingenthal, a small town to the south west of Strasbourg near to the border with Germany. It was founded as a national centre of sword production in 1731 as the *Manufacturie Royale D'Alsace*, but in 1768 it took a new name derived from the German for blade (klingen) and thal (valley), literally therefore the "valley of blades". Although Klingenthal was a government establishment, set up for the production of state arms and regulated by government inspectors, it was operated by private enterprise, i.e. it was run by a contractor (*entrepreneur*). Between 1731 and 1801, Klingenthal was operated by 7 different contractors, however, in 1801 (or Year 9), the manufactory came under the control of the Coulaux family who remained in occupation as contractors until 1962, a total of 161 years. Whilst the profits may have been attractive for the contractor, it was a hard life, however, for the ordinary

production worker who was paid for what he produced and if a sword failed to pass inspection, then not only was the worker not paid, but he was also charged the cost of the wasted materials!

The other main centre of armament production was *la Manufacture d'Armes de Versailles*. A relatively unimportant centre of manufacture prior to 1792, it was suddenly given enormous prominence with the outbreak of the revolutionary wars ("*la Patrie en danger*") and the sudden realisation of the exposed and precarious location of Klingenthal next to the German border. In 1793, Versailles came under the control of the mercurial Nicholas Boutet who subsequently became director-general of all arms production in France during the 1st Empire and, despite several scandals, went on to dominate the arms industry in France until his death in 1833. Versailles, then, was the most important centre of production and became renowned for the quality rather than the quantity (for which Klingenthal was

known) of its product. Certainly the arms of all elite units, such as the Imperial Guard, originated in Versailles.

The output of Klingenthal was prodigious by any standards: between 1800 and 1816, a total of 15,199 Year 9 blades and 54,640 Year 11/Year 13 blades were manufactured. Of these, approximately half were hilted by



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Klingenthal and half by Versailles. It is not all uncommon therefore to find cuirassier swords marked to Klingenthal on the blade but with Versailles on the hilt.

Blades manufactured at Klingenthal were always engraved with the name of the manufactory and, until 1810, the name of the contractor (Coulaux brothers) also appeared along the back edge. After 1810, the name of the contractor was replaced by the month and year of manufacture. During the period of Napoleon's first exile in Elba from April 1814 to March 1815, the designation "imperiale" was temporarily replaced by "royale". Hilts made at Versailles were generally stamped "VERSAILLES" in capitals along the knucklebow.

In addition, blades, hilts and scabbards made at Klingenthal or Versailles were stamped with *poinçons*, the inspection and approval stamps of the government officials who regulated production. These officials, *inspecteurs, contrôleurs* and *réviseurs* (inspectors, controllers and reviewers) each had their own mark, normally the initial of their surname, with which approval was signified. Since records exist which tell us the dates of service of these officials, very accurate production dating can be achieved (on swords with undated blades). I shall not attempt to list any individual markings in this article but for those who would wish to delve further into this area, full lists of

personnel, their *poinçons* and dates can be found in 4th portfolio 1968 of *Armes Blanches Militaires Françaises* by Christian Aries, in *Tradition* magazine No.74 or in *Armes Blanches* by J.L. Hoste & J.J. Buigne, Editions du Portail 1995

Apart from Klingenthal or Versailles, there is one other manufacturer's mark often encountered on Year 9, Year 11 or early Year 13 swords. This is the AP mark of L'Atelier de Paris (literally the Paris Workshop) a *fourbisseur* or private manufacturer of arms from the same period. This mark is commonly accompanied by an inspection stamp in the form of a fasces surmounted by cap-of-liberty, the republican symbols of revolutionary France but again, there has been some confusion in this country concerning the form and meaning of these markings. Perhaps due to the somewhat large foot of the "A" and the off-centre stamping that frequently occurs, one very well known auction house habitually refers to this mark as "AR" which is then interpreted as "*Armée de la République*":

The French cuirassier sword was a finely made, well balanced and effective weapon which went on to form the basis of all French heavy cavalry swords throughout the nineteenth century and was copied by several other countries. The one thing you can also be sure about with French swords from the Napoleonic era is that they have

#### TYPICAL BLADE MARKINGS

AR



The "AP" mark of L'ATELIER DE PARIS (literally the Paris Workshop), a private blade and sword manufacturer. Generally found on Year 9 blades and some Year 11/13 blades up to c.1804 and often accompanied by the proof stamp of fasces surmounted by Phrygian bonnet, the republican symbols of revolutionary France.

*Manuf. nationale na. 4. Ju Klingenthal Coulaux Freres Entrep. 1804*

"*Manufacture Nationale de Klingenthal, Coulaux Freres Entrepreneurs*" - Pre Empire (1804) Klingenthal marking, Coulaux Brothers Contractors.

*Manuf. imp. Ju Klingenthal Coulaux Freres*

"*Manufacture Imperiale de Klingenthal, Coulaux Freres*" - Klingenthal c.1804-1810, Coulaux Brothers Contractors.

*Manuf. imp. Ju Klingenthal Juin 1812*

"*Manufacture Imperiale de Klingenthal Juin 1812*" - The name of the contractor replaced by the date of manufacture from 1810.

undoubtedly seen action - the French had no equivalent of our Yeomanry cavalry so your cuirassier sword may have campaigned with the Emperor in Spain, Russia, on the plains of Germany or may even have swept past the British squares at Waterloo.

*My thanks to Frances Ryan whose extensive knowledge of the French language is undoubtedly now enhanced by knowing such essentials as the French for scabbard and langet!*

**Footnote:** Having attempted to emphasise within this article the rarity of Year 13 swords retaining their original Year 13 pattern scabbards, it was interesting and coincidental to see a Year 13 with original scabbard at the Regent's Park Arms Fair on 3rd September 1995 (stand of Armada Antiques).

Year 13

