

A HORSMONDEN THOMAS JOHNSON GUN IN BRAZIL.

Christopher Sellars.



Late in December of 2020, whilst on a scooter trip in the State of Paraíba in the North-East of Brazil, I visited the Fort of Santa Catarina in Cabedelo, which is seventy-odd miles to the North of the island of Itamaracá, in the State of Pernambuco, where I have lived for the last fifteen years. Upon walking up onto the ramparts I was amazed to see that the majority of the 24 pieces of artillery leaning on the battlements were English. Two more guns are in the inner yard, one lying on the ground, the other mounted on a carriage.

There was one gun that particularly caught my attention due to the 'Rose & Crown' insignia cast on the reinforce. I took photographs of this and several of the other weapons which included pieces with the cypher of King George II of England, (1727-1760). Returning home, I posted some of the photographs on social media, there was an immediate reaction from experts in the field and I resolved to investigate the identity and precedence of these ancient pieces.



I rode back to the fort in early January of 2021, and took photographs and measurements of all 26 guns held there. I sent this information to Ruth Rhynas Brown and Nico Brinck, and they both definitively identified the piece as fabricated by Thomas Johnson, Queen Elizabeth the First's iron gun maker from 1584 to 1595.

The Thomas Johnson "ER" Gun Measurements.

Button end to muzzle face	-	3,250 mm.
Base ring to muzzle face	-	3,000 mm.
Trunnion to base ring	-	1,280 mm.
Trunnion width	-	560 mm.
Bore diameter	-	125 mm.

Markings.

Rose & Crown straddled by the letters E and R in the casting.

Stamped letters T and I – Thomas I(J)ohnson.

Weight mark 33 – 3 – 0 ... 33 CWT 3 Quarters 0lbs.

3,780 lbs. = 1,715 kilos.

Date stamp. 1590



Who was Thomas Johnson ?

Thomas Johnson belonged to a family line of gun founders, his grandfather, Cornelius Johnson, made ordnance and other military equipment for King Henry the Eighth, the earliest records that I have found for this are dated from November of 1511 and are for payments made to him for his services on the King's ships.

These references are from "The letters and Papers of Henry VII, Vol. 1"

26th. Nov. 1511 -

"To Cornelius Johnson upon a book of parcels, signed by Sir Edw. Howard, for mending guns, making ironwork, and carpenters', sawyers' and labourers' wages for stocking guns for the King's ships, The Mary and John, The Anne of London, The Mary Rose and The Peter Pounce Garnade.

£37.2s. 6d.

2nd. Dec. 1511 –

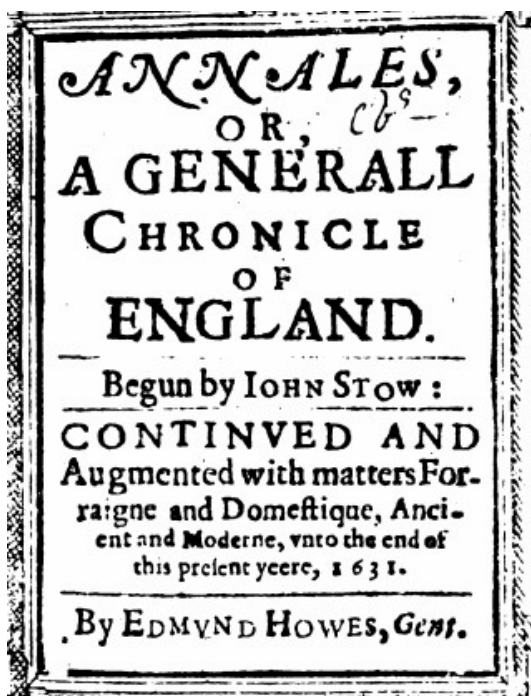
“To Cornelius Johnson gunmaker by way of prest, towards making two new guns of 10 inches compass for the King’s use. - £20

15th. Feb. 1512 –

“To Corneylis Johnson, gunmaker, upon a book signed by Sir Edward Howard for making two new guns of iron of 10 inches.”- £111.6s. 2d.

There are many more mentions of Cornelius in King Henry’s papers, he was very active making and supplying equipment for the most famous of the King’s growing fleet of purpose-built warships. In February of 1514 Cornelius was made Master Smith, for life, of the Royal Ironworks at the Tower of London and was paid the handsome sum of 8 p. per day !

71. Cornelius Johnson. To be, for life, master smith of the King’s iron works in the Tower of London, with 8d. a day, *vice* Christopher Wodland, deceased. Lambeth, 10 Feb. 5 Hen. VIII. Del. Westm., 15 Feb. P.S. [4774.]



The 10 inch guns that Cornelius made for King Henry in 1512 were undoubtedly of wrought iron, as three decades passed until casting was utilised to produce iron ordnance. It is thirty years later working for a gunfounder that we find Cornelius’ son, John Johnson, working as a ‘covenant servant’*. This gunfounder was a Frenchman, Peter Baud, who cast the first iron gun in England in 1543. Baud also worked with a Belgian, Peter van Collen, and together they designed and

developed incendiary and explosive mortar munitions, and later, after the death of King Henry VIII in 1547, Peter Baud went on to produce good quality iron ordnance aided by John Johnson. Upon Baud's death, John Johnson was no longer bound by his 'covenant'* status and started to produce artillery of his own and introduced improvements and innovations that perfected and put the accuracy and range of his weapons far ahead of European competition which proved to be of great benefit to England and changed the history of naval warfare. In 1631 the English historian, John Stow, writes that John Johnson's son, our Thomas Johnson, continued improving English iron ordnance and that in 1595 cast 42 iron demi-cannon pieces for the Earl of Cumberland that weighed 6,000 lbs. or 3 tons each piece.

**A covenant servant was an employee who promised not to enter into competition with an ex-employer.*

The question still remains, how did this unique piece of Elizabethan royal ordnance come to be in Brazil? There is no record of English presence in the area of Cabedelo, only of the Portuguese, Spanish, French and Dutch.

Northern Europe was in turmoil due to the Eighty Years' War of the Dutch rebellion against Spanish Rule, complicated by the Iberian Union of Spain and Portugal, and the continuing conflict between Spain and England. There were multiple opportunities for English ordnance to fall into Spanish hands or to remain in Dutch hands after combined English and Dutch forces lost ground to Spain.

The first reference that I discovered about English ordnance captured by Spanish forces was from a Belgian source, 'Histoire L'Artillerie en Belgique' by Paul Henrard published in 1865.

L'ARTILLERIE

EN BELGIQUE

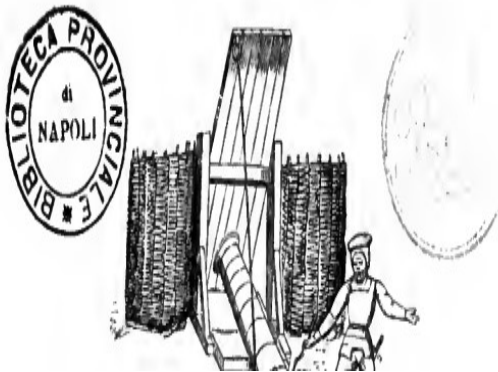
DEPUIS SON ORIGINE JUSQU'AU RÈGNE D'ALBERT ET D'ISABELLE

PAR

M. PAUL HENRARD,

CAPITAINE D'ARTILLERIE,
MEMBRE DE L'ACADÉMIE D'ARCHÉOLOGIE DE BELGIQUE.

Édition ornée de 30 gravures sur bois.



Although this information was encouraging, it only served to indicate a possible conduit by which our gun may have arrived in Brazil, the incident to which it referred was not chronologically compatible however, being from the Siege of Oudewater in 1575, five years before Thomas' appointment as the Queen's Iron Gunfounder in 1580. I considered it important, despite the discrepancy, to discover the source of this snippet of information.

After spending not a few hours wading through 16th C. sources I finally struck gold ! The information came from a letter written by Louys de

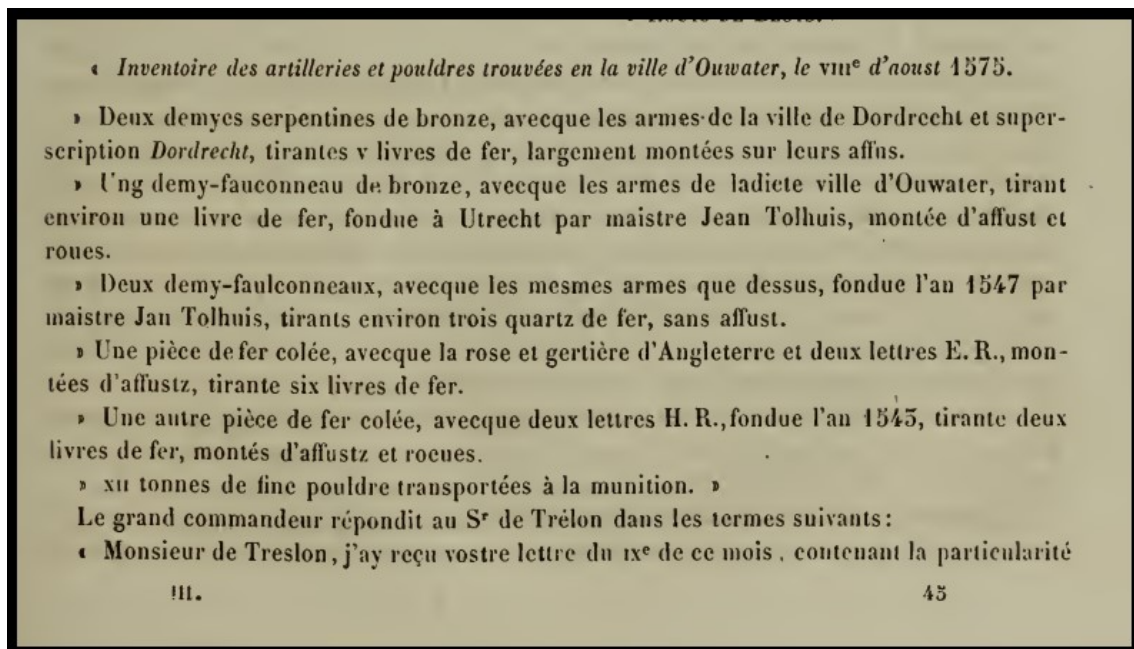
Pendant le siècle suivant les bouches à feu en fonte devinrent beaucoup plus communes spécialement dans l'artillerie de place et de marine. L'Angleterre, où leur fabrication avait pris en peu de temps beaucoup d'extension, en fournit particulièrement les Provinces-Unies après leur rébellion, et parmi les canons qui tombèrent entre les mains des généraux espagnols après la prise des villes qu'ils assiégeaient, un certain nombre • en fer colée • portaient • la rose et la gertière d'Angleterre • et les lettres ER ou HR ciselées sur leur renfort 3.

My translation :-

Over the next century, cast iron guns became much more common especially in field and maritime artillery. England, in particular where their manufacture had in a short time expanded, provided the United Provinces after their rebellion, and among the cannons that fell into the hands of the Spanish generals after the capture of the cities they besieged were a number in cast iron that bore <the Rose and Crown of England> and the letters ER or HR chiseled on their reforce.

Bloys the Artillery Master of the Spanish siege of Oudewater, it was written on the 9th. Of August and sent to his chief, the 'Grande Commandeur de Castille' Luis de Requesens, who thoughtfully enclosed a copy of Bloy's letter in his report of the siege to King Philippe II which luckily caused it to be included in the archive of Philippe's correspondence.

This is a transcript of the inventory of material captured by the Spanish after their siege of Oudewater. This was probably the bloodiest of the many sieges of the towns held by the Dutch rebels, almost all of the population, men, women and children were mercilessly slaughtered and the town razed in a crazed frenzy, as reported by Requesens to his King.



As can be seen there was just one piece with an ER Rose & Crown, and not several guns as reported by Henrard in 1865.

“Une pièce de fer colée, avec la rose et gertièrre d'Angleterre et deux lettres E. R., montées d'affustz, tirante six livres de fer.”

:- “One cast-iron piece, with the rose and crown of England and two letters E. R., mounted on a carriage, firing six pounds of iron.”

The other english gun in the inventory :-

“Une autre pièce de fer colée avecque deux lettres H. R., fondeu l’an 1545, tirante deux livres de fer, montés d’affustz et roeues”

:- “One other cast-iron piece with two letters H. R., cast in the year 1545, firing two pounds of iron, mounted on a carriage and wheels.”

Of course it would be wonderful to be able to speculate that this was a Thomas Johnson ‘royal’ gun and perhaps our gun in Brazil, but the chronology denies the possibility. The question remains, which sovereign was the E. R., could it possibly have been cast for King Edward VI. During

his short six-year reign ? After all, it was together with another English ‘royal’ gun with the letters H. R., cast in 1545...presumably being cast for Henry VIII ?



King Edward VI - 1547- 1553

A later, and more possible, reason for our gun to be in Brazil is that it may have been brought to Cabedelo by Dutch Forces in 1634, when they attacked Fort Santa Caterina, and may have been acquired by the Dutch during the actions of the combined Dutch and English forces fighting in the Dutch Revolt against Spain at Sluis in the Netherlands.

From Queen Elizabeth's correspondence it is known that she actively supported the Dutch rebels materially in their revolt against Spanish dominance, but this aid was only of a clandestine nature, until the signing of two treaties between England and the United Provinces.

The first treaty was signed and ratified on the 7th of January 1578, and was followed by another treaty in August of 1585, The Treaty of Nonsuch. The treaty makes interesting reading regarding the payments, interest, ceding of power and control demanded by England !

A Treaty between Elizabeth Queen of England, and the States of the United Provinces, by which the said Queen engages to assist the States on certain Conditions. Made at Nonsuch the 10th of August, 1585.

In 1588, after the Treaty of Nonsuch, Queen Elizabeth I was openly having English guns cast to be sent to aid the Dutch against Spain.

1588.
Aug. 16.
The Court.

109. Warrant to John Phillips, gun founder, to cast 12 bastard demi-culverins, weighing 25 cwt. a piece, for Michael de Decher to transport for defence of Middleburg in Zealand. [$\frac{1}{2}$ page, draft.]

As far as I have been able to ascertain, the Brazilian 'Cabedelo' gun is the only known example of Thomas Johnson's iron guns to have the ER insignia made in the casting, these more accurate and longer range pieces turned the tide of naval battle strategy and enabled the English maritime dominance of the high seas.

There is another Thomas Johnson gun that was recovered from the mud at Sluis in the Netherlands, The Dutch appear to recognize it's rarity and importance, and it has been restored and mounted on a carriage and on display on the quay of the town. It has been confirmed as a Thomas Johnson Horsmonden gun, the letters are chiselled into it.



*The Thomas Johnson gun on the quay at Sluis in Zeeland, Holland.
Photograph by Mr. Arco Willeboordse from www.horsmonden.co.uk*

Hopefully the Brazilian Heritage authorities can be persuaded to restore and mount the Cabedelo gun on a period wooden carriage and place it on display under cover at the fort, it would undoubtedly help tourism there.

Huge thanks to Ruth Rhynas Brown and Nico Brink for their help in identifying this unique Tudor gun.

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