

The Tower Armoury in the Fourteenth Century

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This book focuses on the records of the Privy Wardrobe, a department of state that was responsible for supplying the king with arms and armour in the Middle Ages. The accounts of the keepers of the Privy Wardrobe survive from the 1320s to the early 15th century and contain a wealth of information about arms, armour and other items in their possession. This is due to the inclusion of detailed inventories, which makes it possible to trace long-term changes over time. The potential of these documents was recognised as long ago as the early 20th century, when the outstanding administrative historian of the Middle Ages, T. F. Tout, drew upon these records to write a seminal article on early gunpowder weapons.⁽¹⁾

Yet, as Richardson observes, most of the information contained within these accounts has been overlooked by scholars. This is in some ways understandable. One of the difficulties that has confronted historians who have wished to make use of this type of evidence has been posed by the problem of linking the information contained within the inventories, written in a mixture of medieval Latin and Anglo-Norman French using often obscure terminology, with surviving objects located in museums across the world. Richardson is eminently qualified to write a book on this subject due to his ability to combine his expertise with material objects and the documentary evidence. He is a leading expert on arms and armour and has been a long-time curator at the Royal Armouries, having recently retired from his post as Deputy Master in 2015. His numerous publications include *Arms and Armour of the Elizabeth Court*, *The London Armourers in the 17th Century*, and *The Arms and Armour of Henry VIII*. Richardson also has an excellent understanding of the administrative records of the Privy Wardrobe, with the present work being derived from his PhD thesis of 2012. His specialist skills in both areas is the greatest strength of the book and makes it an outstanding work on the topic.

The book is ordered thematically with the first chapter providing a brief overview of the administration of the Privy Wardrobe. Subsequent chapters examine the chronological development of different items contained within the accounts, that have been grouped together by type. Translated extracts from the documents are liberally included in each chapter, in addition to a smaller number of tables which show how the quantities of items held by the Privy Wardrobe changed over time. The advantage of this approach is that each group of objects can be examined in detail to provide new fascinating insights into English arms and

armour in this period. The book is also richly decorated with 30 colour and 38 black-and-white images of surviving pieces of arms and armour held at museums, together with illuminations from medieval manuscripts. Many of these items are held by the Royal Armouries, but it also includes photographs of artefacts from a variety of institutions, including the British Museum, The Mary Rose Trust and The Bodleian Library. This is very helpful in providing a visual aid to the sometimes very in-depth discussion of the objects in the inventories. The two appendices contain a list of the keepers of the Privy Wardrobe from 1323 to 1415 and a list of the surviving accounts of the office. A glossary is also included with the names of items given in the original Latin or Anglo-Norman French together with descriptions in English. This makes it a useful reference guide for researchers who study late medieval English military history.

Chapter one examines how the administration of the Privy Wardrobe changed over the course of the period. The Privy Wardrobe developed in the early 14th century from two of the major departments of English medieval government, the Chamber and the Wardrobe. Crucially, the keepers of the Privy Wardrobe accounted to another department, the Exchequer, whose accounts have a high survival rate, as opposed to the Chamber, for which few records survive. The Privy Wardrobe was initially itinerant and followed the king on his travels, before being established at the Tower of London in 1338. From this date onwards it remained in the same location, with the keepers also responsible for overseeing the royal mint and exchange and the jewels in the Tower. These officials were often clerics who had long careers as clerks in royal administration, but from the mid-1390s they were from lay backgrounds. The final section of this chapter briefly discusses the 'English system' of warfare that was adopted during the Hundred Years' War, whereby dismounted men-at-arms were supported by foot archers armed with longbows. Richardson argues that the English retained mounted men-at-arms at least until the end of the 1330s, in contrast to the previous historiography on this topic, and casts doubt on the concept of the 'arrow storm', which he elaborates on in subsequent chapters.

The second chapter is the longest in the book and examines how both mail and plate armour developed over time. The 14th century was an important period in the development of armour, with a shift from men-at-arms primarily being protected by mail, to being fully equipped with plate. New light is shed on this process by the information provided by the accounts of the Privy Wardrobe. Richardson demonstrates that sets of 'complete armour', which have traditionally been considered an innovation of the early 15th century, were being issued as early as 1345. He is also able to re-date technological developments such as the use of fully riveted, as opposed to half riveted, mail from 1400 to 1340, and proves that there was a clear distinction between great helms for the tournament and for warfare in this period. Intriguing details are revealed about the origins of the armour acquired by the Privy Wardrobe, most of which was imported from the Holy Roman Empire and Italy. The two cities of Cologne and Maastricht alone were responsible for supplying as much as 84 per cent of the pairs of plate, 86 per cent of the gauntlets and 96 per cent of the great helms. Over time the focus of the armoury's activities changed from supplying full sets of armour to men-at-arms to providing large quantities of equipment to lower ranking soldiers. Richardson links this development to a dynamic shift in the priorities of the Tower, with an increasing emphasis on procuring equipment for infantry in the second half of the century. Large stocks of redundant armour, as with other items, also continued to be retained in the inventories for long periods of time.

Chapter three discusses the evidence for the three types of shields held by the Privy Wardrobe. The traditional 'heater'-shaped knightly shields were only ever recorded in small numbers and appear to have been intended for the personal use of the king. This evidence reinforces the notion that these types of shields were quickly rendered redundant by the adoption of plate armour. Small circular buckler shields called 'targes' for use by infantry were also present in the accounts in relatively limited quantities. By contrast, the large rectangular shields called 'pavises' were supplied in large numbers to equip royal ships. These shields could be fixed upright on the ground by means of a prop and were brightly painted, such as with images of deer, suns and the arms of the king.

The fourth chapter goes on to examine the role of the Tower in supplying equestrian equipment to men-at-arms. This was a period that saw a decline in the importance of the warhorse on the battlefield, with English

men-at-arms primarily fighting on foot. Yet the warrior elite continued to participate in jousts, rode to the battlefield and, on occasion, still fought on horseback. Yet relatively little documentary or artefactual evidence survives for equestrian equipment in this period. The accounts of the Privy Wardrobe, therefore, are especially useful for studying this topic. There is detailed information on a great variety of different items relating to horses, including harnesses, saddles, coverings and reins. A sense of how colourful and splendid some of this equipment would have looked can be seen with the description of a 'shaffron' (head defence) of leather 'painted with the head of a young lady'. Richardson's findings include the interesting observation that metal armour was very rarely used for horses in this period, as there is little evidence for their presence in the Tower armoury. However, some of the terminology used to describe these items is very obscure, making it hard to establish what they are. Furthermore, distinctions between certain objects, such as saddles intended for warfare and those for tournaments, is also difficult to determine.

Chapter five explores the procurement, manufacture and distribution of longbows by the Privy Wardrobe. As Richardson observes, relatively few scholarly works have focused on researching the bow itself, despite the iconic status of the weapon in English military history. The accounts demonstrate that the Tower played an important role in supplying expeditionary forces to the continent with large quantities of equipment from the 1340s onwards. For example, between 1344 and 1351, over 20,000 bows, 110,000 bowstrings and 900,000 arrows were distributed from the armoury. These items were procured from London and other counties in England, in addition to those manufactured by bowyers, fletchers and bowstringers working at the Tower. Occasional details provided about some of these workers provide fascinating insights into their activities. In the 1360s one fletcher is recorded as having assembled over 45,000 arrows over the course of 244 days, at the rate of 187 per day on average. These individuals also included women, with three female fletchers being paid to supply arrows to the Privy Wardrobe in around 1343. Other points of interest include the discovery that quivers were rarely used, instead sheaves of 24 arrows were tied together with string, and that painted bows were significantly more expensive than unpainted ones. The most valuable part of the chapter is Richardson's analysis of the quantities of bows, arrows and bowstrings allocated to equip specific numbers of archers. These items were generally distributed at the rate of one bow to five bowstrings and 48 arrows. This finding challenges conventional views of the English use of the longbow in battle. Historians have tended to accept chronicle accounts of very large quantities of arrows being rapidly expended during battles such as Agincourt. Yet if only 48 arrows were issued to archers for the duration of a campaign, it is probable that they would have been far more selective in their choice of targets.

Chapter six discusses the torsion powered ranged weapons recorded in the accounts: springalds and crossbows. Springalds were large artillery devices that were used to defend fortifications and shot large bolts. These weapons were frequently employed in the 13th and early 14th century, but their usage later declined, most likely in response to the development of early gunpowder weapons. By contrast, crossbows were continually procured and distributed by the Privy Wardrobe throughout the period, due to their important role in siege and naval warfare. The 14th century saw significant technological changes in the design of crossbows, which made them much more powerful, with a transition from wooden to iron crossbows, and the adoption of new winding mechanisms.

Chapter seven goes on to examine the evidence for close-combat weapons, flags and banners held by the Tower. The main type of weapon that was processed by the Privy Wardrobe was the lance, in both its long and short form, which was regularly issued to equip men-at-arms for military campaigns. The Tower also played an important part in supplying lances for tournaments, with different types of lance heads provided for jousts of 'war' or 'peace'. By contrast, other types of weapons, such as swords and pollaxes, were stored in much lower quantities and were mainly intended for the personal use of the king. Some of these items were of high quality, as can be seen from a description of 35 royal swords received in 1325, which included one richly decorated with emeralds and silver, with a belt decorated with white pearls. Standards and banners that depicted the arms of the king or of St George were also regularly stocked in the armoury.

The eighth chapter discusses the role of the Privy Wardrobe in the procurement, manufacture and distribution of early gunpowder weapons. As acknowledged by Richardson, this is an area that has been the

subject of considerable research, notably by Tout, therefore much of this discussion is a summary of existing knowledge on the topic. Guns were first adopted by the English during the reign of Edward III and were primarily used for the defence of castles and other fortifications. They are first recorded in the accounts of the Privy Wardrobe in the 1340s and their numbers gradually increased over the course of the period. Richardson's discussion of the 'ribalds' mentioned in the accounts in 1345 makes an important contribution to the debate over whether the English used guns at the battle of Crécy. These ribalds were identified by Tout as referring to organ guns mounted on carts and this has been cited as evidence for their use at the battle, which would seemingly corroborate the testimony of some of the chronicle accounts of Crécy. However, as noted by A. V. B. Norman, these were instead wheeled carts fitted with spears. Therefore, it is probable that the English did not use guns in this engagement, as they are only recorded in the accounts of the Privy Wardrobe as being sent to France after the battle, for use at the siege of Calais in 1346.

Chapter nine examines the military textiles and tents that were recorded in the accounts. These primarily consisted of various forms of coats, such as gambesons, doublets or aketons, that were worn under or over metal armour. Large quantities of coat armours were processed by the armoury in the late 1330s and early 1340s, but thereafter, as with metal armour intended for men-at-arms, only small quantities were kept in storage. By contrast, textile armours for archers, called jacks, were kept and distributed in substantial quantities from the 1370s onwards. The king's tents were only temporarily held by the Privy Wardrobe, in the mid-1340s, yet are valuable for providing the only known description of such tents in the 14th century. These included a variety of tents for use by the king and his household, which included 18 round houses, two chapels, three stables, one house for the king's ship the *George* and one 'palace' of blue cloth.

The tenth and final chapter discusses the packing materials used to store the items held by the Privy Wardrobe. The transportation of military equipment to supply armies in France was a major consideration of the Tower Armoury in this period. Items were packed in specific containers, with bows and arrows stored in coffers, whereas bowstrings were kept in tuns and pipes. Detailed information survives for the transportation of equipment for Richard II's second expedition to Ireland in 1399. This reveals that large quantities of bows, arrows, bowstrings, mail shirts, lances and pavises were stored in 190 containers, which were packed by eight men over 12 days, with a further four days spent on conveying them to the riverside. They were then freighted to Waterford in Ireland, where they were unloaded and were then transported by land in carts to accompany the army during the campaign. Therefore it would appear that archers were not expected to carry their own weapons or supplies on the march, but these were instead transported for them.

Richardson's research is of great value to military historians and to specialists in arms and armour. Overall, the format of the book and its approach works very well, nevertheless I feel that certain aspects could be explored further, particularly from the perspective of scholars interested in how the English waged warfare. For instance, there is much valuable information on the equipment supplied to armies, garrisons and the crews of ships. Yet these details are scattered throughout the course of the book, which makes it difficult to assess how systematically military forces were supplied with equipment by the Privy Wardrobe. For example, were all armies supplied with bows, arrows and bowstrings? And if not, why were only certain expeditions provided with this equipment? One or more charts listing the quantities of items distributed to armies, garrisons and ship crews would have been very useful in this regard. It is unfortunate that the book, despite the great abundance of images contained within it, does not include any photographs of the Privy Wardrobe accounts themselves. There are also one or two very minor errors. Most notably, the Bargate in Southampton is mistakenly identified as the location where guns and other equipment was sent in 1386. However, an examination of the original document shows that they were sent to 'Richard Trenley, keeper of the gate tower of Southampton, for furnishing the same tower'. This entry therefore refers to Southampton Castle which was rebuilt between 1378 and 1388, with Trenley having been appointed as keeper of the gate of the partly finished structure in 1380.⁽²⁾ Yet these very minor issues in no way detract from a very interesting and valuable book.

The Tower Armoury in the Fourteenth Century makes an important contribution to the study of arms and armour in medieval England. It is packed with many interesting technical details about the construction,

maintenance and storage of equipment processed by the Privy Wardrobe. Its conclusions challenge existing views on how the English waged war during the Hundred Years' War and the technological development of weapons and armour in the 14th century. Therefore, the book is essential reading for all medieval military historians and for anybody with an interest in arms and armour in the Middle Ages.

Notes

1. T. F. Tout, 'Firearms in England in the fourteenth century', *English Historical Review*, 26 (1911), 666–702.[Back to \(1\)](#)
 2. The National Archives, E364/30, rot. E; H. M. Colvin, *The History of the King's Works*, volume 2 (London, 1963–82), p. 843.[Back to \(2\)](#)
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