VIII.—*A Letter of Sir Henry Lee, 1590, on the trial of Iron for Armour; by the Honourable HAROLD ARTHUR DILLON, F.S.A.*

Read December 8, 1887.

THE Letter from Sir Henry Lee, Master of the Armoury to Elizabeth,^a addressed to Lord Burghley, which forms the subject of this paper, has not before been printed. It is calendared among the State Papers, in the Public Record Office,^b and is holograph bearing the date 12 Oct. 1590.

It is chiefly interesting as recording a trial of war material in the days of Elizabeth; and also showing that then, as now, or till very lately, England was dependent on Germany for an important portion of her military stores.

This had been the case for some time previously to the date of this letter; and we may just glance at the state of things as regards munitions of war in the sixteenth century.

From the first years of Henry VIII.'s reign, arms and armour were regularly sought for and imported, from Germany, Italy, and Flanders.

In 1509 we find Louis de Fava and Leonard Friscobald, both Italians, selling large supplies of armour to the king.

In 1511 Henry despatched Richard Jerningham and two other gentlemen of his court to Germany and to Italy to buy arms and armour. Some of this was for his own personal use; but, besides such, Jerningham in 1513 reports to him his having made very advantageous bargains at Milan for 5000 foot soldiers' suits, or "Almain rivets."

At about the same time Henry, through Wolsey, had negotiated with a Florentine merchant, Guy de Portenary, for 2000 Almain rivets; and in the deed

^a Sir Henry Lee was appointed to the office of Master of the Armoury by letters patent of June 9, 22 Eliz. (1580). His military services not less than his devotion to Elizabeth, as displayed by him in the tilt-yard, led his royal mistress to bestow on him in 1597 the exceptional honour of the Order of the Garter.

^b Domestic Series, vol. ccxxxii. 92.

executed we have the definition of the term as in use in 1512. The “2000 complete harness, called Almayne ryvettes,” were to be “according to a pattern in the hands of John Dauncy, accounting alway a salet, a gorget, a breast-plate, a back-plate, and a pair of splints, for every complete harness at 16 shillings the set.” The splints here mentioned were short taces to protect the front of the thighs.

The price had risen since 1509, when 8 shillings, and in this same year 1512 11 shillings, had been paid for the same suits of armour.

Large quantities of cast and wrought iron and brass guns were also caused to be made at Mechlin by Hans Popenruyter.

It has generally been stated, that the art of casting iron guns was unknown in England until about 1543, when—

“Master Huggett and his man John
They did cast the first cannon.”

This event is said to have occurred at or near Buxted in Sussex, in 1543.

Lord Herbert of Cherbury, who consulted the records in the compilation of his history of the reign of Henry VIII. says, that “great brass ordnance, as cannons and culverins,” were first cast in England by one John Owen in 1535; and that about 1544, “iron pieces and grenades were first cast.” The facts as to time and place, however, seem to be different, for in September 1516 there occurs a payment of 33*l.* 6*s.* 8*d.* to John Rutter of London for “hurts and damages by him sustained in a tenement to him belonging wherein the king’s great gun, called ‘the Basiliscus’ was cast, and for rent.” In 1532 Carlo Capello, the Venetian, writes that Henry “visited the Tower daily to hasten the works then going on there, and was founding cannon and having gunpowder made.” This was in anticipation of the Scottish war.

There is, in May, 1516, a payment to John Hurdy, a fishmonger, “for four bundles of Isebroke stuff for making parts of armour, 8*l.* 6*s.* 8*d.*,”^a and in April, 1517, a payment of 26*l.* 12*s.* to John de Mery “for 2541 lbs. of steel plate of Isebroke, and Lymbrickes stuff.”^b These items will call to mind Othello’s speech :

“I have another weapon in this chamber;
It is a sword of Spain, the ice brook’s temper.”

This has generally been supposed to mean a sword the blade of which had been plunged into some ice-cold stream in the process of tempering. But, oddly

^a *Calendar of State Papers.* Henry VIII. vol. ii.

^b *Ibid.*

enough, the old quarto gives the correct reading, "Isebrooke," which in the folio was changed to "ice brook"; and Stevens and others have endeavoured to identify the Salo, now the Xalon, with such a stream. In Isebroke we have the English name for Innspruck, a town as famous as Augsburg and Solingen for the manufacture of high-class steel. The reading "Isebroke" is thus most natural, allowance being made for its having become by Shakespeare's time an expression for a superior blade, and its association with Spain being merely by way of intensifying the excellence.

Such being the case, we may suppose that the "Hungere" iron mentioned by Sir Henry Lee was not necessarily of Hungary, but of the western parts of Germany.

In 1520 Henry caused two armourers, Rauffe Brand and Richard Pelland, to go to Flanders and Germany for the purpose of purchasing arms, etc., especially such as were used for the jousts and tournaments in which that monarch took such a delight, and in which all writers of the day, foreign as well as English, assert that he proved himself so proficient.

All through this and the three subsequent reigns we find mention of purchases abroad of arms, armour, and gunpowder; and in Henry's reign not only were cannon bought in large quantities, but cannoniers, as well as gunstone or cannon-ball makers, were obtained from Germany. If the foreign guns were better than the English, it is however satisfactory to find that there were men in those days who believed in the superiority of English gunners.

Though in 1509 the directions to Sir Nicholas Vaux, Lieutenant at Guisnes, state that all his garrison were to be English, except gunners, crossbow-makers, spies, beer-brewers, armourers, and smiths;^a in 1514 Thomas lord Darcy tells Henry that he hopes whatever gunners are allowed him (at Templehurst) they will be English, and not strangers;^b and in 1534 Sir Christopher Mores writes to Cromwell, "I had rather have one Englishman as he is than five strangers for gunner's work."^c

The next year, however, we find Mores sent with Dethick "a Dutchman born, and by occupation a forger of Armure for the king at Greenwich"^d to Lübeck and Denmark, whence they returned in a few months with some hundred gunners and old soldiers.

Henry VIII. endeavoured to plant the armourers' art in England, and in 1514

^a *Calendar of State Papers.* Henry VII. vol. i.

^b *Ibid.*

^c *Ibid.* vol. vii.

^d *Some Account of the Worshipful Company of Armourers and Braziers in the City of London.* London, 1878.

established the Almayne armourers at Greenwich and in Southwark; and in the same year there are payments for wages for the armourers of Milan and of Brussels, but the metal on which they worked was foreign.

In 1530 an attempt seems to have been made to use English stuff, for among the accounts of the treasurer of the chamber is the item: "Five angels paid to Sir Laurence Skarboro (Starber) knight of Germania for the conveyance of certain ores from this realm to Norembarge, to be there tried to the perfectness of their metals."

What was the result of this assay we do not know, but it was evidently unfavourable; for the purchase of foreign arms and armour continued through the century.

In 1556 Sir John Mason reported to the Council his having obtained 50 fardels of plate iron for harness provided by the Schorers from Augsburg; and, at the present day, it reads strangely in "Considerations delivered to the Parliament in 1559," "That iron mills be banished out of the realm; where wood was formerly 1*d.* the load at the stack, now, by reason of the iron mills, it is 2*s.* the load. Formerly Spanish iron was sold for five marks the ton; now there are iron mills English iron is sold at nine."

Neither in the above notices, nor in Sir Henry Lee's letter, does the Sussex iron appear; but the price of wood recalls the destruction of the forests of that county.

In a report in 1634 on the subject of the manufacture of armour we are told, that battering mills had been established in Elizabeth's reign at Deptford by a Captain Martin, and Germans were brought from Innspruck to teach the English workmen. However, in the year 1634 there was only one German left, and he would not teach.

The report goes on to say, that the best plates came from "Innspruck, which served Millan, Naples, etc., and lately, England."

In 1629 there were 21 workmen in the armoury whose wages amounted monthly to 35*l.* 16*s.* 4*d.* It was said that no other workmen could make tilting armour; yet there was only one of them who could make a complete armour.

Sir Henry Lee was evidently more interested in the welfare of his armourers and their families than in the development of a new national industry; and his sentiments were shared by others.

As to his views on the probably increased use of armour, though they were wrong, yet they were those of a man who had travelled much, had fought well on the Scottish border, and had commanded a battery at the successful siege of Edinburgh in 1573; on the conclusion of which he was the first Englishman into the

castle, being hoisted in as a hostage for Kirkcaldy of the Grange during the discussion of the terms of surrender.

The following is the text of Sir Henry Lee's letter :—

"May it please your good Lordship in the time of Mr. Secretary who God hath latly called to his mercy, he was very desirus to prefere to the comodity of some fewe as I take yt, certayne Ierne metell w^h grewe or was made in Sropshere or ther abouts in the possessyons of a gentellman whos name I knowe not, never makynge me aquaynted wth his meanyng. To give the more credyte to that stufte to the armourers of London and to Jacobi the Mr. workman of Grenewhyche, the Counsell apoynt in there presence that S^r Robarte Constable and my cossyn John Lee shoulde see a proof made w^h by tryall proved most usefull.^a After thys I beyng come to the Court and the matter earnestly followed by some, he intrusted me (a new brest beyng sent owt of the contry of gret litenes and strengthe as he was made beleve) to cause another of the very same wayght to be made in her Ma^{ty}s office of Greenewhyche w^h I presently performed, then he inbressed (? *ordered*) me to make a trial of them bothe w^h all indyfference which I dyde in the presence of a chefe servant of his, and other gentlemen. I chose a good and stronge pystolle, I took very good powder and weighed it, so I dyde the bulletes and w^h equall charge I tryed fyrste the one and then the other; that made in the Offyce and of the mettell of Hungere helde out and more than a littell dent of the pellet nothings perced, the other clene shotte thereowe and much tare the overpart of a beme the brest-studde upon as longe as my fyngeers. Thus muche for this Yenglyshe mettell. I most umbly beseach y^r Lordship informe her Ma^{ty} what prejudysse is lyke to follow to the wholle compene of the armorers, beyng very many th^t lyve on that trade wth ther wyves and chyl dren, beyng powre men and such as may be evill spared in any grete scare or where warres may happen as well by sea or land. To drawe so necessary a trade into few men's handes it will undone the whole compenee. The armour made of Yenglyshe stuff wrought some one or fewe Inayched^b (*etched*) and all the rest badge. Trewe yt is good

^a Proving of arms was evidently customary at this period, for among the accounts of the Ordnance, it is stated that over twenty-two hundredweight of the two sorts of powder corne and serpentine were expended between 17th November 1558, and 4th October, 1559, "in provinge of gret Ordynance harquebuttes and daggs."

^b The expression *Inayched* is not clear, but by *badge* may be meant armour painted black.

"Their hands and faces were all badged with blood."—*Macbeth*, ii. 3.

In a report of the stores at the Tower in 1564 is "The making black of v^c corslets p^t of Gresham's provision drowned in the sea v years past and by reason of the salt water will by no means be kept clean except they be blacked at 5/ the pece.

armour demynishethe not the bowldnesse of a man and of the towe, very good Lorde, yt is better to have an armore of evill shape and good mettell than of good shape and evill mettell. But yf yt please youre good Lordshipe and the rest of my Lordes of her Ma^{ty}s Counsel, I do not see but ther may be hadde made here wth in the reme and upon a reasonable rate, both of good shape and good stuffe. And they to serve into her Ma^{ty}s store shuche a proportion yerely as may be agreed upon their abilite considered, now as yit is upon all occasions either by sea or lande for longe vyages or shorte trade of marchandyse ther is innough to be found. The worlde as yt is lykelye to use more hereafter than in the tyme paste therefore not to be spared.

“Under your correctyon ther is fewe that deserve more to be cherysshed, and this trade brought into the hands of few who wyll mayntaine no more than may enrych themselves. How will Her M^{ty} be served or the dayly nede of others supplied.

“I am an umble suitor in their behalves w^h I take to be necessary for my country and carytable for so powre a compene. And so I umbly take my leve prayinge for you and restynge to serve you as your Lordshipe hathe moste bounde me.

“Frō Woodstocke the xii of October 1590

“Your Lordshypis umbly to commande

“HENRY LEE.”