

## History of the term 'Brown Bess'

Curator of Firearms at the [Royal Armouries](#), Jonathan Ferguson, gives us a peek at just some of the fascinating research that has gone into his article: 'Trusty Bess': the Definitive Origins and History of the term 'Brown Bess'

'Twas then I thought on trusty Bess;  
Who, tho' I knew she was but poor,  
I always found a faithful Whore.'

-'Fecit Recantatio Versum' by Thomas Brown (1730)

The smoothbore muzzle-loading musket, whether fitted with matchlock, flintlock or percussion lock, was the infantry soldier's main weapon for three centuries. Many people today know the British version as 'Brown Bess', but where did this name come from? Academics and enthusiasts have debated this question for nearly 200 years, but as it turns out, the field of linguistics already had the answer, and it lay within the field of social history. Discovering this for myself, I decided to research and publish the definitive account of Bess. This blog post summarises my key findings.

### False etymologies

Origins for words or phrases that are incorrect or made up are known as 'false etymologies'. 'Brown Bess' has attracted her fair share over the years. Perhaps the most widespread is the idea that 'Brown' referred to a 'browned' barrel. Browning or bluing involves putting a protective coating on a gun barrel. In reality, the musket barrel was not browned until at least 1808. The word 'brown' does refer to the wooden stock of the weapon, but that is only the literal meaning – more on the metaphorical meaning later. The name is not a corruption of Germanic 'Braun Büchse' – Büchse meaning 'gun' – and certainly doesn't derive from the 'bus' in 'arquebus', an earlier, less powerful firearm than the musket. 'Brown Bess' also has nothing to do with Queen Elizabeth I, nor, as in a lesser-known claim, to her gun founder Thomas Brown.



ROYAL ARMOURIES

The 1777 Short Land Pattern musket (XII.3091). One of many patterns worthy of the name 'Brown Bess'

## Trusty Bess

The key to this puzzle does lie in female nicknames, just not with good Queen Bess. 'Bess' was very common nickname for 'Elizabeth' across British society, but it was primarily one of the lower classes. Like 'Nan' for Anne and 'Moll' for Mary, 'Bess' was a generic and sometimes derogatory name, a bit like 'Sheila' in modern Australian English. It became an indicator of a low social and moral status, used to describe everyone from honest but lowly peasants to slaves, to 'wanton' women and sex workers, or those suffering from mental ill health.

The metaphorical meaning of 'brown' was something mundane or ordinary beyond just its colour, as some today might call a plate of samey, boring food 'very brown'. The old English bill, a basic agricultural tool turned weapon of war, was known as 'a brown bill', and this carried over to the 'brown musket'. This distinguished the ordinary weapon of the infantry from a fine officer's fusil – a light musket – or a civilian sporting gun. It was rough, it was heavy, it was crude, but it got the job done and didn't let you down.

The final piece of the puzzle is that the same meaning of 'brown' was also used for animals, and for people. 'Brown Bess' could be the name of a cow, or for a low-status woman. In this respect it was like the word 'drab'; a thing could be 'drab', but so could a woman. The two words combined reinforced the message; 'Bess' might suggest that a woman was not necessarily a 'lady', but 'Brown Bess' was definitely not a girl that a respectable young man would take home to mother.

All of this is summed up very well in an essay published in 1720 by Whig polemicist Thomas Gordon:

'They may think it hard to pay an honest Porter half a Crown, to lug about a brown Musquet for them when the Trained Bands march; but, let me tell them, they give a much greater Gratuity to a certain Sort of Swissers that come from Covent-Garden, And carry Arms in their Stead, on another Occasion.'

This is confusing to modern eyes, but Gordon is saying that some men are reluctant to pay taxes for another man to take their place in the militia – 'trained bands' – defending his town, but the same men are happy to send a lot more money to pimps, who he compares to 'Swissers' or mercenary soldiers, from Covent Garden – a well-known area for prostitution. The musket is directly compared to the low-status woman, here a sex worker; these men won't 'lug about a brown musquet', but they will gladly 'carry' the pimps 'arms'

or sex workers for them. The only thing missing here is 'Bess', but we know from Gordon Williams' book 'A Dictionary of Sexual Language and Imagery in Shakespearean and Stuart Literature' that low-class women were being called 'Brown Bess' as early as the late 16th Century, and well into the 18th century.

The musket was thus cast as the soldier's metaphorical wife, or sometimes as the mistress or prostitute that he would find on campaign. Brown Bess might be nothing remarkable, but 'she' was what a man needed. As military man John Shipp put it in his memoirs;

'It is his best and dearest friend in time of need; his pillow on which he rests his weary head; it is his constant companion day and night ; it defends his name and honour against the encroachment of his enemies ; it is his dependance ; it warms his cold chilly bosom ; he is wedded to it in honour – bound to it by love – rivetted [sic] to it by long tried attachment. It is his great and sure peace-maker between him and his foes ; they seldom quarrel, save when she misses fire, but which is not intentional, but from the cold damps of night, and the silvery dews of morn, or the drenching rain. It is more – it is his shield that will ward off the impending blow of his foe'.

This curious relationship between man and gun has a long history of which 'Brown Bess' is only part. There isn't space to cover this, but film buffs will recognise the scene in Stanley Kubrick's Vietnam film 'Full Metal Jacket' where conscript soldiers are taught that their days of chasing girls are over and that they are now 'married to this piece. This weapon of iron and wood' (meaning their M14 service rifle). Female names for weapons are commonplace, from the medieval siege gun 'Mons Meg' to 'Lebel Ma'm'selle', a First World War nickname for the French Lebel rifle.

### **A long history**

For many years the earliest written use of the name was thought to be this entry in Francis Grose's famous dictionary of slang, first published in 1785: '**Brown Bess. A soldier's firelock. To hug Brown Bess; to carry a firelock, or serve as a private soldier**'.

This has led some to claim that 'Brown Bess' is historically incorrect in the early 18th century. An earlier reference was found in the American 'Connecticut Courant' newspaper issue of April 2, 1771, which was actually reprinted from British papers of earlier that year. This reported remarks made by Hannah Snell, famous for having

successfully posed as a man and served as a soldier in the British army. Snell said: **'...but if you are afraid of the sea, take Brown Bess on your shoulders and march through Germany as I have done.'**

In the course of my research, I was able to push things back even further and unearthed several previously unpublished examples. I will give the two earliest here. In 2010, archivist Avril Pedley found in the British Library a letter written by John Grose, a young British clerk in the service of the East India Company. In this letter, dated October 17, 1763, Grose reported being issued with a 'Coat, Pair of Breeches and musket (alias Brown Bess)' upon joining the local militia. There is a possible even earlier instance appears in an anonymous biography entitled 'The Adventures of a Kidnapped Orphan'. It describes events that would have taken place during the 1750s but was not actually published until 1767. Of the titular 'orphan', the author wrote that 'he began to handle Brown Bess with tolerable dexterity'.

The other interesting conclusion that I came to in this research is that those of us who study, collect, or re-enact with muskets have been far too restrictive in our use of 'Brown Bess'. People who know their antique firearms tend to reserve the name for the 'Long' and 'Short' Land Pattern muskets that entered service from 1730, and some include the Board of Ordnance India Pattern introduced in 1793. In actual historical usage, however, the name applied just as much to the New Land flintlock musket of 1802 and also to percussion muskets, notably the Pattern 1842, which many today would never think to call 'Brown Bess'. As the percussion rifle-musket became common in the mid-19th century, the name became derogatory; 'Brown Bess' was the obsolete old war horse being replaced by the latest cutting edge mass-produced rifle technology.

So there you are. Far from being an obscure name, 'Brown Bess' was simply an extension of an existing slang term for a common woman or sex worker. It reflected the soldier's relationship with his personal weapon. We also now know that we can call any flintlock or percussion smoothbore musket in British service 'Brown Bess', just as our ancestors did.