

Oliver's water-bottle: Does the story really hold water?

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Little has actually been written about the small D-shaped wooden water-bottle which hung by the side of many British and colonial troops during the last quarter of the nineteenth century. In illustrations however, it is almost ubiquitously identified as the 'Oliver pattern' water-bottle. Its invention is attributed to Surgeon-Major William S Oliver, and the assumption appears to have been made that it formed part of the accoutrements developed by Oliver for British Army equipment trials in the late 1870s. Oliver's accoutrements were not selected, but over the years no one has sought to question why it is that an 'Oliver pattern' water-bottle was taken into service. The purpose of this article is to provide an alternative identification of this water-bottle and its predecessor, the canteen carried since Napoleonic times. It will be argued that the small D-shaped water-bottle has little to do with Surgeon-Major Oliver, and has long languished under this misnomer. Now is the time to set the record straight, but in doing so it will be necessary to dismantle a number of well-held beliefs. Hopefully the evidence provided here will aid the acceptance of this argument.

The *List of Changes in British War Material* provided the suspicions, then the clues, and finally a solution to the question raised on the origins of the water-bottle. On a very basic level there is no mention of Oliver or a patent held by him in the List of Changes in reference to **any** water-bottle. The one and only illustration of the D-shaped water-bottle in the List of Changes, shows the 1882 Mark II version, fitted with a spring clip.ⁱ This entry makes reference to earlier variants of the pattern, and tracking those down provided a most unexpected, and initially confusing result. Following the pattern references backwards from 1882 it was found that the so-called 'Oliver pattern' water-bottle was introduced into British service in 1874 as the 'Italian pattern' water-bottle!ⁱⁱ How can this be so one asks, when most authoritative modern texts identify the British Army's earlier round canteen as the 'Italian pattern' water-bottle?

It would seem however, that the British Army itself never described the round canteen as an Italian pattern, so the appellation is probably relatively modern. Reference to such textbooks as the re-printed *Arms & Equipment of the British Army 1886*, for example, finds only mention of *canteen, wooden, with strap*.ⁱⁱⁱ Even when the List of Changes in July 1891 finally declared that pattern obsolete, it identified it simply as *canteen, wooden*.^{iv} There is no evidence of official identification of the round canteen as an Italian pattern during this period. So if the round canteen was simply a wooden canteen, and the D-shaped one was the Italian pattern, what was the 'Oliver pattern' water-bottle? The argument given here is that it did not in fact exist.

The changes and amendments to the real 'Italian pattern' water-bottle, according to the Lists of Changes, are noted here to give a complete picture of its development as far as the British Army was concerned. The use of the water-bottle by naval forces is not covered in this paper.

In May 1874 a new water-bottle was approved for the Army. Introduced by List of Changes (LoC) 2559 in March 1874, it was officially designated as *Bottle, water, Italian pattern*. [Examples of similar bottles have been found with Italian manufacturers marks, and it is believed the bottle was issued to Italian troops, perhaps as late as World War I.] The pattern was sealed to govern supplies for all dismounted services. The LoC described it as being of

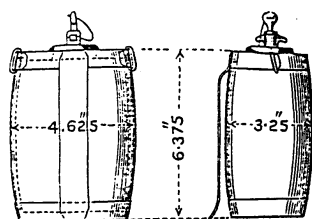
wood, cut from the solid, and furnished with a metal stopper.^v Later, in February 1875 the bottle was approved for mounted services, LoC 2702 stating it *will be considered the universal pattern for general service.*^{vi} The water-bottle initially had a brown leather strap, for which no description was issued in the LoC, and a Mark II black strap for Rifle Regiments was introduced in June 1875. This strap was blackened on both sides, and had the flesh side of the leather facing outwards.^{vii}

LoC 2942 of August 1876 provided amendments to the mode of securing the plug or stopper for mounted services, as the result of losses. The stopper was secured by a brass wire ring passed over the cross piece at the top of the plug to move round the neck of the plug. The ring was attached by a piece of 7-inch whipcord to the iron rim at the top of the bottle. The wire rings and whipcord were to be supplied from the nearest Ordnance Store Depot, and the hole for the whipcord was to be drilled in the iron rim by the regimental artificers.^{viii} The iron rims securing the top and bottom of the Italian pattern water-bottle, were apparently inclined to rust, and in August 1877, a sealed pattern of galvanised iron rims was introduced.^{ix}

It is worth noting here in the chronology that it was around 1877 that Surgeon-Major Oliver, who had formerly been with the 1st Battalion of the 60th or King's Royal Rifle Corps in Canada, returned to England. W Y Carman notes that this was probably to coincide with the equipment trials which were held 1877-78.^x A rare instructional pamphlet by Oliver on fitting and using the accoutrements he developed, makes a particularly interesting notation on the use of a water-bottle. *"The water-bottle * is that in general use, but modified to obviate certain objections."* The asterisk provides a footnote which reads *"An ordinary soda water bottle covered with leather -- may be slung on the waistbelt behind the right hip."*^{xi} From this pamphlet it is rather obvious that Oliver did not provide a water-bottle of his own design, though he did suggest an alternative to the general service water-bottle which was worn by some Regiments. The water-bottle which was already then in general use was the D-shaped 'Italian pattern'.

3995. Bottle, water, with spring clip. (Mark II.)

A pattern of this bottle has been sealed to govern future manufacture for all Army services, except mounted troops who wear



In February 1880, a Mark II brown leather strap for the Italian pattern water-bottle was introduced. It was similar to the pattern previously issued which had been converted from the canteen straps.^{xii} LoC 3995 introduced the Mark II pattern bottle [Figure 1] in April 1882, at the same time as the introduction as the Pattern 1882 valise equipment. It was introduced for all Army services (except for mounted troops), who wore their waist-belt outside the tunic. LoC 3995

noted the only difference between the Mark II and the pattern mentioned in LoC 2559, 2702 and 3146, was the means of carrying the bottle. The upper and lower hoops were secured in a different, unidentified manner, two wire loops for a water-bottle strap being inserted beneath the upper hoop. The bottle however was intended to be carried by means of a galvanised iron spring clip secured to the upper hoop on the flat side of the bottle. The spring clip was 6½ inches long and 1_ inches wide. The earlier pattern bottle was redesignated by having the

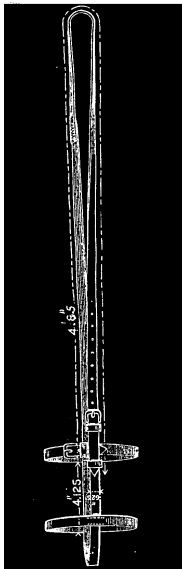
words, 'without spring clip' added to its description.^{xiii} The illustration accompanying the text readily identifies the D-shaped wooden water-bottle. The text conclusively proves its relationship with LoC 2559, the 'Italian pattern'.

November 1882 saw the introduction of a special variation of the service pattern. Both the Mark I bottle without the spring clip, and the Mark II with the spring clip, were covered with felt, except at the ends. The felt was sewn on tightly around the bottles, the aim being to keep the bottle as cool as possible. This variant was made for service in a particular, but unspecified, place. One could draw the conclusion that it was destined for some particularly hot climate, and the Egyptian campaign springs readily to mind.^{xiv}

Three years after its introduction the Italian pattern water-bottle with the spring clip was determined to be obsolete. A decision to revert to the old method of carrying the water-bottle by a long carriage or shoulder-strap, instead of on the waist-belt, was approved in April 1885. The black and buff cases and straps used with this variant were also considered to be obsolete. This did not prevent existing stores from being used up, but after these were exhausted bottles without spring-clips and long leather carriages in either black, brown or buff were issued.^{xv}

New pattern carriages for the Italian water-bottle were approved in January 1886 and introduced through LoC 4974 in June. These included a Mark II buff carriage for all arms of the service equipped with buff valise equipment, except the Royal Artillery; a Mark III black carriage for Rifle regiments; and a Mark II brown leather carriage for all other services with brown

accoutrements, and including the Royal Artillery. The introduction of these pattern carriages in the LoC was accompanied by a woodcut, which conclusively shows the carriage could only have been used on the D-shaped water-bottle. **[Figure 2]** The dimensions of the carriage differed from those introduced by LoC 2734 and 2976, the straps having been altered so that the buckle was brought into close proximity to the top of the water-bottle. The LoC also claimed that the new carriage allowed mounted troops to draw the bottle from the valise straps without unbuckling the valise.^{xvi}



LoC 5906 of 1889 introduced a new felt-covered enamelled iron water-bottle which would “*gradually replace the Italian pattern (LoC 2559, 2702, 2942, 3146, 3995, 4748), both for land and sea service.*” The Italian pattern bottle remained in service for quite some time, and no doubt stores were issued until exhausted.

As late as 1891 amendments were still being made to Italian pattern water-bottle carriages, a Mark IV black leather carriage, a Mark III buff leather and a Mark III brown leather carriage being introduced. Existing carriages were amended to the new pattern, which had the buckle on the top band moved about 4 inches. This meant the buckle lay more to the rear when the bottle was worn.

The buckle of the long strap was also reversed so that the tongue of the buckle was inside.^{xvii}

Thus is the story of the Italian pattern water-bottle, officially fifteen years in British service. How it came to be confused with the equipment developed by Surgeon-Major Oliver can only be surmised. Perhaps this paper may lay to rest the myth of the Oliver pattern water-bottle, or even generate debate on the subject. At the very least it makes a case for carrying out primary research rather than relying on secondary sources.

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 - ii. LoC 2559, March 1874
 - iii. Walter, J (Ed) *Arms & Equipment of the British Army*, 1866, Greenhill Books, London, 1986
 - iv. LoC 6433, July 1891
 - v. LoC 2559, March 1874
 - vi. LoC 2702, February 1875
 - vii. LoC 2734, June 1875
 - viii. LoC 2942, August 1876
 - ix. LoC 3146, August 1877
 - x. Carman, W Y, 'The Oliver Equipment' in *Antique Arms & Militaria*, September 1984.
 - xi. Pers comm. W Y Carman, April 1996
 - xii. LoC 3665, February 1880
 - xiii. LoC 3995, April 1882
 - xiv. LoC 4149, November 1882
 - xv. LoC 4748, July 1885
 - xvi. LoC 4974, June 1886
 - xvii. LoC, 1891