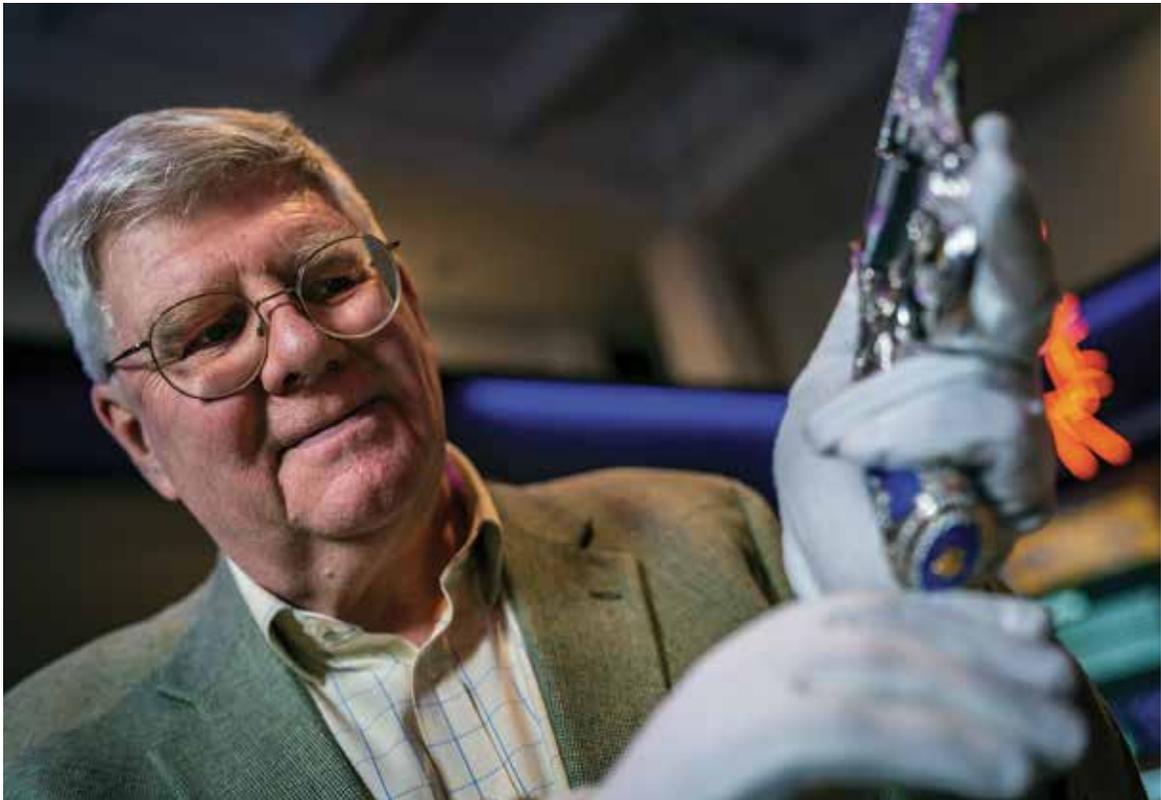


„FIREARMS CAN ALSO BE OBJECTS OF BEAUTY AND DESIRE“

A conversation with Mark Murray-Flutter of the Royal Armouries



© Museum Royal Armouries

Mark Murray-Flutter, senior curator, National Firearms Centre and Royal Armouries, Leeds (UK)

We are honoured to welcome Mark Murray-Flutter as the final speaker for our exhibition *Luxemburger Bundeskontingent. Militär und Gesellschaft im 19. Jahrhundert* at the Musée Dräi Eechelen. As senior curator at the National Firearms Centre and Royal Armouries in Leeds, he brings decades of expertise in historical weaponry. In this interview, we explore his journey into the world of arms and armour, his curatorial work and the stories behind the British musket and other iconic firearms.

Dear Mark, how do you even become a curator of firearms?

I was appointed initially as a firearms curator while working at the Tower of London in the 1980s. Subsequently, I became a senior curator. I originally joined the Armouries with an interest in bladed weapons. (Which I still have.)

What does the role involve, and what does your day-to-day look like?

As a senior curator I am responsible for researching the collection, updating the catalogue, proposing and actioning new acquisitions, preparing exhibi-

tions, giving lectures and talks and answering specialist enquiries. My day starts with looking at emails and actioning those that are needed to be answered promptly. Hopefully, there will be opportunity to do some research between dealing with various appointments. I also provide a number of training modules for those who use the collection, usually related to law enforcement. I also act as liaison between the UK heritage sector and the UK Interior Ministry on questions of legislation that might impact museums, this still does include EU legislation.

For those who might not know, what are the Royal Armouries?

The Royal Armouries Museum holds the UK's national collection of arms and armour and displays its objects at three sites, Fort Nelson outside Portsmouth (the artillery collection), the Tower of London (the traditional home of the collection) and at the new museum site in Leeds. It has objects in the collection that date from the 12th century, and earlier, to the present day. There are roughly 100,000 objects in the collection of around 27,000 are firearms, which are my concern.

As a young curator you created the 19th-Century Gallery of Arms at the Royal Armouries, at that time still at the Tower of London. Is giving a lecture on the many uses of British muskets in the 19th century a step in returning to your beginnings?

As a young curator I was part of the team that delivered the 18th and 19th-Century Gallery at the Tower of London and to be able to give a lecture on what happened to the British musket, as used during the wars against Napoleon, is like going home. I am looking forward to re-engaging with some of the research I did as a young man for delivering that exciting gallery and to give a talk to you, the readers.

In the 1840s, the Luxembourg army used British muskets from the Napoleonic period to train their recruits. Does this come as a surprise to you (evidently not because you suggested the topic, but we have to ask)?

It was interesting to me to find out that the Luxembourg army was using former British muskets in the 1840s and it prompted me to look into what happened to all those muskets the British made, nearly 2 million; where did they go and who used them as the British army certainly did not need that number. Therefore, this talk, hopefully, will help to address this question. I also hope to address the question of how the British supplied their allies in Europe with these muskets.

Since creating the 19th-Century Gallery of Arms at the Tower of London, you have embarked upon a remarkable career in the world of arms and armour. What would you say has been your most challenging exhibition?

My most challenging exhibition has to be the delivery of a completely new museum in 1996. I was responsible for curating and delivering the Hunting & Sporting gallery, some fifty odd cases and about 700 objects. I had the unique opportunity to set out the story lines and choose the objects that were to illustrate those. It was an amazing experience and was stressful but rewarding. On a different level I really enjoyed putting on, in Leeds, the Waterloo exhibition in 2015 to commemorate the 200th anniversary of the Battle of Waterloo. With this one I was able again to visit my interest in British muskets.

What was the 'best' object you ever had the pleasure to handle?

This is a really difficult question to answer as the 'best' often changes. My most amazing find was a



Detail of a double-barrelled silver-mounted flintlock pistol made by Luxembourgish gunsmith Schwartz, ca. 1760, MNAHA collection

wheellock pistol that I found in a police station (it was going for disposal). It turned out to belong to Henry VIII, one of our most iconic monarchs. It was incomplete but still had its gold damask decoration. I do also have a secret passion for firearms 'bling', hence my attachment to diamond and gold decorated pistols – there are not many of these around, so I am quite pleased to have unearthed three of these for the collection.

In 2005, you founded the National Firearms Centre at the Royal Armouries, where you are now working. Could you introduce the NFC to us?

The National Firearms Centre (NFC) is in effect the firearms department of the Royal Armouries Museum. It is housed in a separate location and holds the majority of the firearms collection, particularly the modern elements of the collection. The NFC not only supports Royal Armouries Museum exhibitions, both permanent and temporary, but also the UK military. We have to stay current with modern firearms development, so we try to acquire the latest models in military service from around the world.

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Installation view of our exhibition Luxemburger Bundeskontigent. Militär und Gesellschaft im 19. Jahrhundert

In the past decade, you have been a strong advocate of mitigating the effects of firearm legislation on the museum community. Why do you think it's important that collection experts engage with contemporary legislation?

Part of my role is to represent the UK museum community with government. Governments tend to enact legislation without working through all the consequences and heritage can often be forgotten. So, my job is to represent heritage and to ensure that appropriate defences or exemptions are in place. Prior to the UK's withdraw from the EU, I was also able to represent the concerns of European heritage with the Brussels EU administration. I did this through the medium of ICOMAM (International Committee of Military and Arms Museums) on whose board I sat for six years. ICOMAM is a recognised committee of ICOM, the International Council of Museums, part of UNESCO.

It is important for curators in arms or military museums throughout Europe and the wider world to engage with their domestic authorities to ensure

that they are not disadvantaged or that our visiting public have a degraded experience through an unintended piece of legislation. This is the role I carry out in the UK.

For many people, firearms are a sensitive topic. What is your take on why firearms should be on display in museums?

Firearms are often viewed as 'bad' and many curators are nervous or afraid of them. But it is very important that museums use their firearms collections for the public benefit. Firearms have been part of the human condition since their invention. They have been used in conflict, for sport or for recreation. These are all important social or martial activities that need to be highlighted and the stories told. The world of the European hunt, for instance, is also the story of rural development throughout Europe. It should not be forgotten that firearms can also be objects of beauty and desire. Think of them as canvases upon which an artist has wrought his skill. Firearms can be beautiful, powerful and engaging emotionally, all things we as museum curators

should make use of. It is sad to say that firearms are going to be with us for the foreseeable future and museums need to reflect that fact.

You have achieved what many aspire to, becoming a museum influencer on TikTok, making heritage accessible to young people. Has fame changed your daily work at the museum?

The TikTok sensation was totally unexpected, but something I have learnt to enjoy and live with. Being recognised on a train or being asked for a selfie are examples of how things have changed. I have also enjoyed the opportunity to engage with a younger audience through the language they use. (It doesn't mean I actually understand all that I say in my videos). Naturally, I have been asked to do more of these, but fortunately they are not long and it is fun – slay.

Interview by Ralph Lange
Centre de documentation sur la forteresse de Luxembourg



Mark Murray-Flutter will be giving a talk entitled *From the Tower of London to the Luxembourg Contingent. The British India Pattern Musket* at the Musée Dräi Eechelen on 11 March 2026 at 6 pm. Admission is free.

See Mark in action
on Instagram



Ralph Lange preparing the installation of the gun display in the exhibition *Luxemburger Bundeskontingent*

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