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We have very little information on the nocks used on Medieval longbows, but by an amazing stroke of luck one of the horn nocks used on the Mary Rose bows did survive - I know this is Tudor but its the nearest we have

I say a stroke of luck because they were made of horn and very little horn survived. Marks can be clearly seen on the Mary Rose bow tips where the nocks had been fitted but none of the bows had any horn nock remaining.

The single nock which was recovered was not fitted to a bow but was found wrapped up and so protected.

If it wasn't for this single find then we would know practically nothing about the nocks they used.

Why this is so important is the fact that the nocks they used turn out to be nothing at all like the ones used today.....

It wasn't until I visited the Mary Rose and saw this nock for myself that it really struck me just how completely different their nocks were to anything I had seen before.

No one seemed to know anything about it, in fact it seemed that people were just completely ignoring it, so I set about trying to find out how and why these nocks were used. This page is basically what I have learned so far about them and my experiences of using them on my own bows.

As far as I can tell all longbows had sidenocks until around the Victorian era when for some reason they changed to using the more familiar modern type. So if you want a replica medieval longbow then sidenocks are a must.

Please feel free to send any comments, corrections, information etc.. and I will update the page - alan@alanesq.com

Firstly lets have a look at what I am talking about:

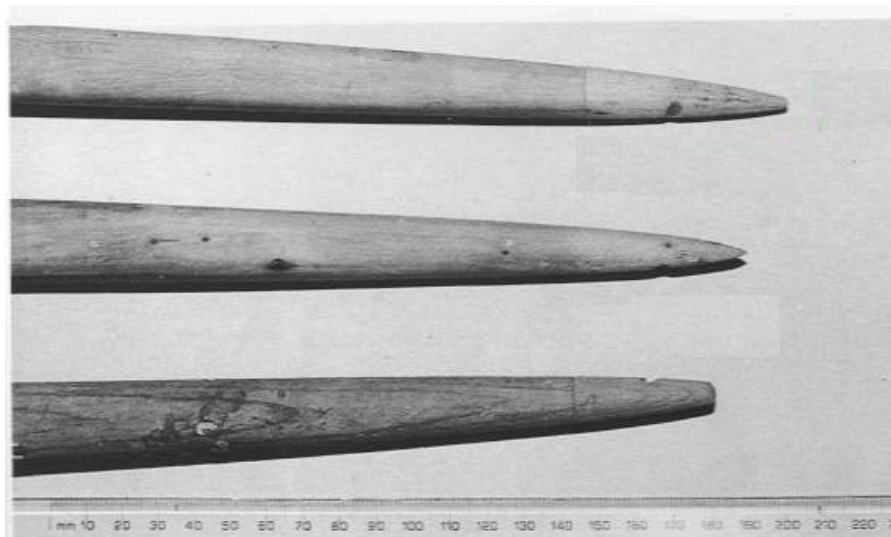


click on the left picture for high res version

As you can see, this is nothing like the nocks used on longbows now. You can't see from these pictures but the far side of this nock is smooth, it is a basically just a smooth horn tip with a single slot cut down one side (hence side nock)
The slot goes right through the horn and into the wood of the bow tip (as can be clearly seen on the second picture) and there is a lip on the bottom edge of the slot

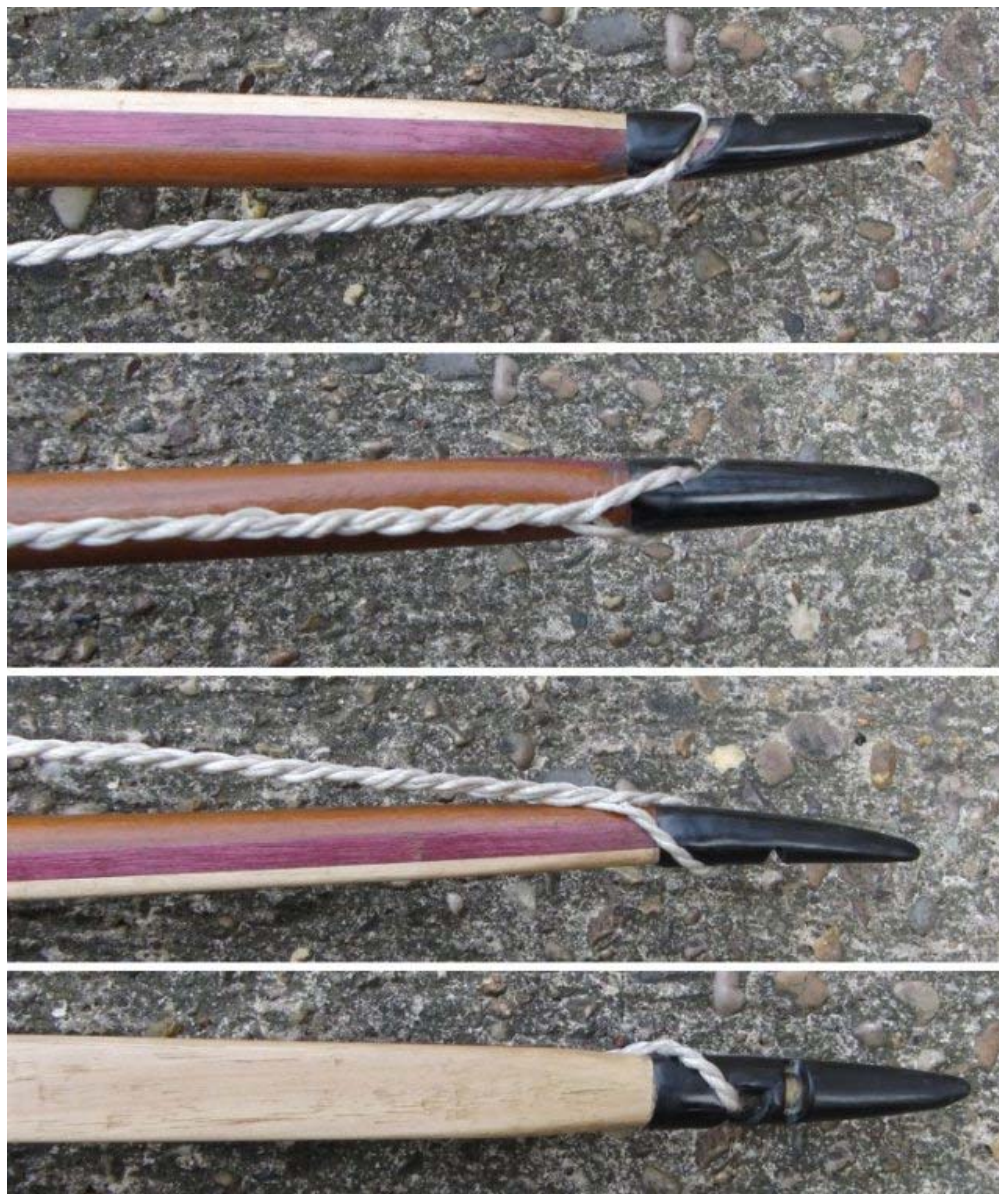
Bow Tips:

This is a picture of a typical Mary Rose bow tip and you can see by the colouration of the wood where the nock would have been and the slot in the bow tip would have been the base of the slot in the horn nock.



My Sidenocks:

A few pictures of a nock I have made for my bow which is based on the Mary Rose nock (this is a laminate bow, 130lb at 32")





Big thanks to Lee of [Heritage-Longbows](http://www.heritage-longbows.com) for showing me how to use a sidenock with a loop as I had been completely unable to figure this out, I had been using a noose on my string up to this point although I had always strongly suspected this was wrong. The secret to using a loop is the lip on the bottom edge of the nocks string slot which helps holds the string in place - I had thought this was just for when using a stringer but it turns out to be a vital feature of the side nock

Sidenock on my 130lb yew bow



The above is the first time I have tried a second slot for the bracer, it works really well even with a large loop on the bracer string. I had suspected it would get in the way of the bow string but this is not the case at all.

BTW - This explains why a few of the Mary Rose bows have a double slot in the bow tip.

i.e. I didn't go right through to the bow wood with the second slot but I would imagine that sometimes if the horn is thinner then you would

This nock is made from deer antler (naturally shed so no animal was killed to get it, but its unpleasantly smelly stuff to work - think I will stick to plastic in future)

This is the above nock (before I cut the second slot) along side the Mary Rose one for comparison



I think you can see how similar they are. The slot is angled down slightly which results in a nice lip on the bottom edge.

This picture shows how the bow tip sits inside the nock (red line).

Note the mark the slot leaves in the bow tip - identical to the Mary Rose bows

The bow tip should really go as far as the Green circle (i.e. 40mm)
I could have then put the slot a little higher up the nock

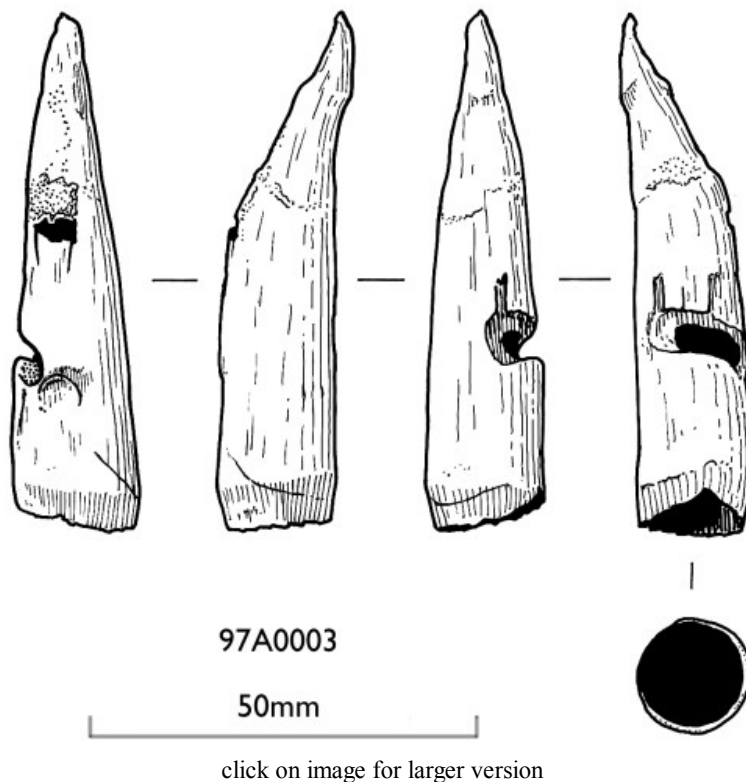


The bow tip should be approx 12.5mm wide 40mm in from the tip (base of the nock) and the nock should be around 15mm at its widest



Above pictures c/o Steve Stratton

I have received a copy of the archaeology diagram from the Mary Rose Trust, this gives accurate dimensions of the nock (i.e. 15mm wide and 65mm long)



I happened to have some naturally shed antler tips which were given to me some time ago and when you look at one of these next to one of my nocks I think you will agree its pretty conclusive that the nocks were just the end sawn off a horn or antler, drilled, stuck on the bow tip and a slot cut down one side - simple ! (well, maybe smoothed a bit as well in this case)



Misc:

The obvious question when you see a sidenock is why were they used.

This is a question I have pondered a lot and I can't give a simple answer, I suspect that the real question should be why have we recently converted from sidenocks to the ones we use now? I would guess the answer to this is likely to be that we are using different string materials and mostly much lighter bows.

One thing which I think may be significant is the way the slot goes right through the nock into the wood of the bow tip - I wonder if the reason for doing this is so that the string actually holds the nock in place so if the glue fails then the nock will still work. I have tried using a bow with the nock not glued on like this and it does work ok. I have been informed that glues of the time would be very strong but not water proof.

I have heard it suggested that sidenocks prevent the bow twisting but I don't know if there is any truth in this idea but with sidenocks the string does tend to sit to one side of the bow tip resulting in the bow string going diagonally along the bow - maybe this is significant ?

Now I am using them with a loop I find they are very easy to string and the nocks are very easy to make - so maybe the answer is simply they are the easiest and most reliable way to make a nock?

Whatever the reason the fact is that if you want an authentic Medieval/Tudor copy longbow then sidenocks are the only option

I don't know why but sidenocks seem to have been almost completely ignored by modern longbow archers - It is now very slowly starting to be taken up, but still it is extremely rare to see anyone using sidenocks, even when they claim to be using a replica Mary Rose bow?

I know a few people have experimented with them and I know of three other people who use them on a regular basis but basically any longbow you buy (even if based on a Mary Rose bow) will have what I call "Victorian type" nocks. (This is not the bowyers fault, they give the customer

what they want, its up to us to start asking for them)

So I have created this page in the hope it will get people interested in the side nock and maybe get more people using them
I have been using them on all my bows for a couple of years now (up to 140lb at 32") and I can assure you they work very well and there is no reason not to be using them

I predict that in a few years time it will start to seem very odd to see a longbow with anything other than sidenocks

Erik Roth (AKA Bowtoxo) has kindly allowed me to publish part of his manuscript which relates to the making of mediaeval and Renaissance bow strings

click [HERE](#) to view it

Some info from Hauke Gipp

I'm a traditional archer from Holland

We have been to Portsmouth (last july) where we were invited to the Mary Rose museum and the museum archives. I saw the only surviving horn nock and the tips of the bows, one thing was clear to me: They used sidenocks reenforced with horn!

I have known side nocks on longbows for several years. I have been shooting a Hedeby (Haithabu) replica bow for some years now. The original(s) dating from the 8th/9th century a.d. are of Viking origin. They had one side nock carved into the yewwood of the upper limb and no nock (slot) on the lower limb. There had been a knot to hold the string. There was a nail in the back of the upper limb to hold the string when unstrung. The bow(s) had an estimated drawweight of about 80 to 90 lbs and with respect to the archaeological record of arrowheads found together with the bows, they should be regarded as weapons of war.

In a museum very close to the place where those bows were excavated I saw some other longbows which had been excavated some km's north in Southern Denmark. In a peatbog close to the village of Nydam three ships and a lot of gear and weapons were found which are regarded as a sacrifices after battles were won. Among the weapons there were about 40 longbows, made from yew and some of elm, of which several had a spike made of antler, bone or even iron fixed to the top of the upper limb, which characterizes them also as weapons of war. Those bows had sidenocks as well and I made a replica of a Nydam bow - from Hickory :o(The archaeological finds date from 240 to 400 a.d. and are of Germanic origin.

I think sidenocks are the first type of nock used on longbows and with bows going heavier throughout the Middle-ages using horn provided good protection for the tips against both, bowstrings cutting through relatively soft yewwood and damage of the tips due to transport and battle.

The sidenocks of all three different types of longbow work well with Flemish loops if they are tight enough. On the Viking bow replica a linen thread was used to whip just beneath the nock to prevent the string from cutting into the wood. I think, because of the much better quality of yew there was no such whipping on the original bows.





The bright coloured bow with the antlerpoint is the Nydam (it should be Yew but this one I made from Hickory). It is about 60lb@28". The one with the thread binding is my old Hedeby (was 65lb@28") and the one with the cowhorn is the ELB I made some weeks ago (70lb@28")

Questions still to be answered

In Roger Ascham's Toxophilus ([see here](#)) there is the following paragraph

"Great strings and little strings be for divers purposes : the great string is more surer for the bow, more stable to prick withall, but slower for the cast. The little string is clean contrary, not so sure, therefore to be taken heed of, lest with long tarrying on it break your bow, more fit to shoot far, than apt to prick near; therefore, when you know the nature of both big and little, you must fit your bow according to the occasion of your shooting. In stringing of your bow (though this place belong rather to the handling than to the thing itself, yet because the thing, and the handling of the thing, be so joined together, I must need sometimes couple the one with the other) you must mark the fit length of your bow. For, if the string be too short, the bending will give, and at the last slip, and so put the bow in jeopardy. If it be long, the bending must needs be in the small of the string, which being sore twined, must needs snap in sunder, to the destruction of many good bows. Moreover, you must look that your bow be well nocked, for fear the sharpness of the horn sheer asunder the string. And that chanceth oft when in bending, the string hath but one way to strengthen it withal. **You must mark also to set your string straight on, or else the one end shall writhe contrary to the other, and so break your bow.** When the string beginneth never so little to wear, trust it not, but away with it; for it is an ill saved halfpenny, that costs a man a crown. Thus you see how many jeopardies hangeth over the silly poor bow, by reason only of the string. As when the string is short, when it is long, when either of the nocks be naught, when it hath but one wape, and when it tarrieth over long on."

The line "You must mark also to set your string straight on, or else the one end shall writhe contrary to the other, and so break your bow" to me suggests that the string should not be allowed to go to one side of the bow tip. On my nocks the string runs diagonally along the length of the bow (i.e. the string sits to the side of the bow tips)
If this is the case then I do not know how.

Links/Pictures

[Have a look at the Mary Rose side nock yourself](#)
[Discussion on sidenocks \(Primitive Archer forum\)](#)
[Info on Nydam bows \(paleoplanet forum\)](#)



The Mary Rose nock



Alabaster of Martyrdom of St Edmund-late 15c - Picture c/o Jeremy Spencer

Hugh Soar has kindly supplied these pictures of a couple of bows from his collection which have sidenocks:



bow by Grant of Edinburgh circa 1775



Bow by Dave Galloway

[link to My longbow page](#)

You can contact me on - alan@alanesq.com