

“A Flash in the Pan”

An article by **Bob Stevens**

A comment of mine at one of our shoots prompted me to enlarge on this slightly unusual and perhaps rather vulgar subject. (Not for those of a delicate disposition, and not advisable as meal-time reading)

Were you aware that in the 1640s both Cromwell and Charles I issued decrees that all households should save and store *urine!*

Before the advent of modern chemicals urine was the only source of saltpetre, vital for the production of both *black powder* and *slow match*. Saltpetre was also obtained from the stone floors of churches during the Civil War. Women, during the sometimes interminable services, would, under the cover of their long skirts, relieve themselves. The urine would soak away and a crust of saltpetre would form which was scraped from the stone and dried.

If you think this is pretty disgusting, read on...

Urine was also used as a mordant* by dyers of wool and cloth. To obtain the colour blue, Woad or Indigo was used. Indigo had to be imported from the Middle East, and was, therefore, very expensive. To use Indigo, it was placed in a tied muslin bag and added to a tub of stale urine – old enough to have a thick skin on the top, then left to soak while the tub was gently heated. The muslin bag was worked *by hand* to release the dye.

Before you ask... Most Seventeenth Century re-enactors are not this authentic!

* Mordant - “of acids: substance serving to fix colouring matter”. (Oxford Dictionary)

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