

KEEP YOUR POWDER DRY!

Part 1: Firearms for Fantasy Campaigns

WHETHER YOUR campaign setting already incorporates firearms or is on the verge of developing them, adding gunpowder weapons to the battlefield can make for exciting new challenges and tactics. This article takes a look at the earliest firearms developed in the late medieval period as well as a new alchemist advanced study in the art of black powder.



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THE DAWN OF FIREARMS

When gunpowder is invented is a matter of chance. While most medieval fantasy worlds presume that gunpowder has yet to be invented, real-world Chinese alchemists developed it during the 9th century and by the late medieval period cannons and handheld firearms were appearing on the battlefields of Europe.

The first firearms were hardly game-changers. They were bulky, slow to reload, inaccurate, and highly dependent on the weather for their usefulness (also, contrary to popular belief, armor was still effective against early firearm rounds). Given all this, an accomplished archer would be hard-pressed to replace their long bow with a harquebus, and fantasy spellcasters still possess stronger and more reliable magical ranged attacks.

In spite of their limitations, however, early firearms did have some advantages. It was very easy to train a soldier to use a firearm compared to training that same soldier to use a bow or crossbow. It was also much easier to produce and carry firearm ammunition than it is to produce and carry arrows. The result was that armies could quickly train and outfit large numbers of harquebusiers, making them more ubiquitous over time.

This article presumes that your medieval fantasy world is only starting to experiment with gunpowder and firearms, so the rules below encompass the two main types of hand-held firearm available in Europe between 1300 and 1500 CE, hand cannons and harquebuses.

Hand cannons were the first firearms; they consist of a barrel and a touch hole. Gunpowder is placed in the back of the barrel and the projectile (or projectiles) jammed down the muzzle. A match is lit and placed into the touch hole, where it ignites the gunpowder and fires the projectile.

The **harquebus** is an improvement on the hand cannon. It uses a matchlock system to hold a match in place so that the shooter may aim and fire when ready. While negating the need for a second set of hands, a harquebus is still a bit bulky to use without a rest.

Both of these firearms are smoothbore weapons, which means that the projectiles don't spin and are wildly inaccurate. Gunsmiths experimented with rifling by the end of the 15th century, but rifled barrels are more quickly fouled and take longer to reload as the rifling makes jamming a projectile down the barrel more difficult.

WEAPON PROPERTIES

Firearms are considered simple weapons; they require far less training than longbows or heavy crossbows. Certain firearms have some of the following weapon properties:

Match Loading

Your weapon requires several steps to load and fire. Because of the time required to load this weapon, you may not move in a turn when you fire this weapon, and you can fire only one piece of ammunition from it when you use an action, bonus action, or reaction to fire it. If there is already an accessible flame to light the match with, you may also move on a turn when you fire this weapon.

Loud

Firearms are noisy and expel a lot of powder when fired. If you are hiding, then you have disadvantage on ability checks to remain hidden or move silently while other creatures have advantage on Wisdom (Perception) checks to see, hear, and smell you.

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Weather Conditions

Early firearms are very susceptible to the weather. If gunpowder gets wet (or even just damp), then it is rendered inert until it dries (*prestidigitation* will keep gunpowder clean). Lighting a match is difficult in the rain and keeping it lit is a challenge in windy conditions. All of these weather conditions can be simply handled by either imposing disadvantage on the attack roll or, in bad weather, ruling that firearms can't be used absent magic or creative thinking to overcome it.

Misfire

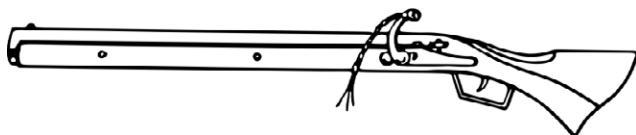
Occasionally a firearm fails to fire due to fouling or the round getting stuck. If the d20 roll is a 1 when making a ranged attack, then in addition to missing the target the firearm is considered to have misfired. You must clear the barrel using a gun kit as an action before it may be fired again (note that the cleared ammunition may be used again). If the d20 roll is a 1 and you had disadvantage on the roll, then you have cracked the barrel and the firearm is useless until repaired (requiring a day of work with a gun kit or a use of *mending*).

Rest

The weapon requires more than two hands to operate effectively. If you only have two hands available and do not have a rest, your range decreases as noted in the weapon description. It takes an action or bonus action to set a rest.

Shot

The weapon may fire multiple projectiles instead of a single round. If shot is used, then all creatures within range (the shot is cone-shaped) must make a DC 15 Dexterity saving throw or take damage. If the attacker has a spell save or maneuver save DC higher than 15, use the higher DC. Creatures in long range have advantage on their saving throw.



FIREARM DESCRIPTIONS

Hand Cannon

The earliest handgun required resting the weapon while dropping a lit match to the touch hole. You must use a rest or have another creature drop the match for you to avoid the rest penalty. In melee the hand cannon may be used as a two-handed club, dealing 1d6 damage.

Harquebus

The harquebus is the earliest type of matchlock firearm. While easily held in two hands it is unwieldy without using a rest, hence the reduced range without one. In melee the harquebus may be used as a two-handed club dealing 1d6 damage.

Harquebus Hybrid

Given the relatively slow rate of fire some harquebuses are designed as hybrid weapons, integrating a club or axe into the design. These count as two-handed weapons dealing 1d8 damage of the appropriate type (bludgeoning for club, slashing for axe). The addition of a melee weapon makes the harquebus a little more difficult to aim and fire, reducing its range.

GUNPOWDER AND AMMUNITION

Unless otherwise noted, these items can be used with any of the firearms in this article.

Ammunition, rounds (20). While hand cannons use sling bullets (or, in the case of shot, whatever's at hand), matchlocks require rounds cast just for their barrels. 1 gp; 2 lb.

Gun Kit. This set of artisan's tools contains everything necessary to clean a gun, repair a misfire, remove a stuck bullet, and cast new ammunition. 25 gp; 3 lb.

Lead Ingot. This lead bar can be melted down and cast 10 rounds with a gun kit. 2 sp; 1 lb.

Powder Flask. This is a portable container that holds the gunpowder that a creature needs to load along with the ammunition and are often made from materials that won't spark nor easily

SIMPLE RANGED WEAPONS

Name	Cost*	Damage	Weight	Properties
Hand Cannon	80 gp	1d8 piercing	12 lbs.	Ammunition (range 20/60), Match loading, heavy, loud, misfire, rest, shot (1d6 piercing), two-handed
Harquebus	100 gp	1d10 piercing	10 lbs.	Ammunition (range 30/90, without rest 25/75), match loading, heavy, loud, misfire, two-handed
Harquebus Hybrid	150 gp	1d10 piercing	15 lbs.	Ammunition (range 25/75, without rest 20/60), match loading, heavy, loud, misfire, two-handed

* Costs are for settings where such firearms are commonly available. The GM should feel free to increase the cost if the weapons are sufficiently rare; in some settings they may even be considered priceless “magic” items!

burn. The price is for a typical wooden powder flask—many flasks are made from more expensive materials and have intricate carvings, making them works of art. 1 sp; 1 lb.

Rest. This is a forked rod that is set into the ground so that a creature can rest its weapon. 5 gp; 2 lb.

CUSTOMIZING FIREARMS

Any of the firearms in this article can be improved in either or both of the following ways.

Rifling. Rifling a barrel increases its effective range and accuracy, but lowers the round’s speed. All ranges of a rifled firearm are doubled, but the damage dice for hand cannons and harquebuses are 2d3 and 2d4 respectively. Rifled barrels are slower to load, so you can never move on a turn when you load and fire a rifled weapon, even if you have a fire source ready. Rifling a barrel requires several hours and a gunsmith workshop. Purchasing a rifled firearm adds 50 gp to its cost.

Sighting. Putting proper sights on a firearm is tricky, especially with smoothbore weapons, but possible. It requires a few hours (within the span of a long rest) and grants a +1 attack bonus when using the firearm. You need to make a DC 20 Wisdom ability check with the gun kit tool proficiency bonus to properly apply a sight to a firearm. Add 100 gp to purchase a firearm with sights, or 200 gp to add sights to an existing firearm.

SCIENCE OF BLACK POWDER (ALCHEMIST ADVANCED STUDY)

Sometimes seen as a subset of the science of destruction, the science of black powder focuses on harnessing the explosive energy of black powder to infuse firearms with magical power. While this is costly in terms of magical power, one alchemist can give a significant edge to a squadron of harquebusiers.

This advanced study is a new option for the alchemist character class*. The cantrips *mending* and *prestidigitation* are added to the alchemist spell list.

Signature Powder

At 2nd level, on choosing this science, you have mastered the formula for gunpowder and can also give it an extra magical spark as well. By expending a spell slot, you enchant enough black powder to fire 5 rounds per spell slot level. A creature using this signature powder adds 1d4 to its attack roll and there is no chance of misfire.

Discoveries of Black Powder

At 6th and 10th levels, your studies of the Science of Black Powder allow you to concoct magical variants of black powder. Select one discovery from the list below. You cannot mix multiple discoveries together into a single powder.

Each spell slot spent grants you enough powder for 5 rounds multiplied by the spell slot level.

* C. Richard Davies, “The Alchemist: Where Madness Meets Magic,” <https://www.patreon.com/posts/alchemist-where-5739275>

You don't regain expended spell slots until the powder is completely used. After a long rest, you can choose to "disenchant" any remaining magical powder in order to reclaim the spell slots. Any rounds fired by these discoveries have no chance of misfire.

Ghost Powder. You have concocted a type of black powder that touches the Ethereal Plane and negates damage resistance against piercing weapons. Additionally, creatures that are normally immune to piercing weapons take half damage from rounds fired with ghost powder.

Energy Powder. You can infuse your black powder with a particular type of energy. Rounds fired with this powder do an additional 2d8 damage of a particular energy type (chosen when you take this discovery). You may choose this discovery twice, each time selecting a different type of energy. When using a higher level spell slot, you may choose to add an extra 1d8 damage per spell slot above the first rather than enchant more ammunition.

Veil Powder. You have concocted a denser version of black powder that leaves an obscuring mist in a 5-foot radius centered on you. This mist lingers for 1d4 + 1 rounds and the area containing the mist is considered heavily obscured. The firearm is automatically fouled after the veil powder is used, requiring it to be cleaned with a gun kit before it can be fired again.

Superior Powder

At 14th level, you have truly perfected your art. By expending a spell slot, you create a shimmering powder that helps slide a round into place and explodes on command so long as the shooter is touching the weapon. Rounds fired with superior powder take little time to load; a creature may make as many ranged attacks per round as it is able, so long as it has superior powder and ammunition. There is no chance of misfire and rounds fired with superior powder get an extra damage die.

You create enough powder for 5 rounds times the spell level of the spell slot spent. You may also combine superior powder with any other black

powder discovery (including signature powder) that you know, providing you have enough spell slot levels.

NEW MAGIC ITEMS

This section lists three magic items that appear along with firearms. Their rarity depends on how common firearms are in your campaign.

Moon Powder

Wondrous item, very rare

This chalk-white alchemical powder produces no noise nor visible smoke when used to fire a round. Its formula is unknown to most alchemists and is highly sought after for its usefulness in sniper fire and assassinations.

Moon Powder is very rare even in campaigns where firearms are common, but somehow it always seems to manage to land in the hands of the worst cultists and assassins.

Rain Match

Wondrous item, common

A rain match is a cord covered with an alchemical fluid that allows it to burn even in heavy rain (it may be snuffed by other means). Thus, firearms equipped with a rain match suffer no disadvantage in rainy weather providing that the gunpowder is kept dry. This match is consumed after being extinguished, or when it burns out after 12 seconds.

Spark Staff

Weapon (hand cannon), uncommon

It didn't take long for shooters to realize that hand cannons were more easily fired with a little magical help. The spark staff resembles and functions like a hand cannon without a touch hole. The gunpowder and round must be loaded normally, but instead of touching a match the creature need only utter a magic word and the gunpowder ignites. Spark staves fire faster than hand cannons and have the loading property in place of match loading. 