

History of Weapons in the LA

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Introduction

The Lancashire Aikikai (LA) considers weapons to be very important to the understanding of Aikido body art. We have always studied weapons in some form. This article endeavours to explain the origins and development of our weapons over the years.

Our weapons roots were initially based on a few influences, mainly Chiba Sensei's interpretation of Iwama weapons, which in turn were interpreted and modified over the years by our Founder and first Principal Mucha Sensei. He and Bob Spence Sensei, our current Principal, both studied with Chiba Sensei in the 1960s and 1970s.

After leaving the UK in 1975, Chiba Sensei developed his own system of weapons practice including Iai Batto Ho, Bokken and Jo. We studied Chiba Sensei's weapons for a few years, (2000 – 2006), guided by Steve Magson Sensei, before homing in on traditional Iwama weapons with Matt Hill, following the teaching of Hitohiro Saito Sensei, the son of Morihiro Saito Sensei.

In recent years we have been introduced to a further study of the Ken with our Technical Director Mimuro Sensei, following the principles of Kashima Shin Ryu. These Ken movements help us to better understand the open-hand movements of Mimuro Sensei's Aikido.

Chiba Sensei and our weapons origins

Huge thanks to Steve Magson, 6th Dan UKA (formerly of British Birankai) for his input on this section.

As mentioned in the introduction, Chiba Sensei was perhaps the main influence on Mucha Sensei's weapons development and study within the Lancashire Aikikai (LA).

You will hear later about Steve Magson Sensei and our relationship with him. Steve was uchideshi with Chiba Sensei following his move to San Diego (US) in the mid/late 70's. He has shared with us a valuable insight into Chiba Sensei's early weapons influence.

According to Steve Magson, the young Chiba Sensei studied weapons under Morihiro Saito Sensei during his short stay at Iwama Dojo. He also studied with his father-in-law, Sekiya Sensei, who was a renowned teacher of Kashima sword work. It is believed that this

combination of Iwama and Kashima were the core basis of Chiba Sensei's weapons development. Steve says 'Sensei was a very innovative teacher. In one of my stays with him, I asked him about his kata and forms, he said - they come to him in his sleep sometimes and he would wake his wife up to try them'. Chiba Sensei was always working, never happy with what he had created, always wanting to improve and make progress.

Steve Sensei has been very kind and abstracted a few anecdotes from Chiba Sensei's old articles for us.

'As far as actual techniques of weapons training were concerned, O'Sensei taught me only two methods. One was Yokogi Uchi, where you place a bundle of live branches horizontally on a stand and strike it with a Bokken. The other was spear-thrusting training, where we thrust a Jo into a Kendo torso-protector wrapped around a large pine tree. Even at that, it was not really instruction, as we speak of instruction in the normal sense. He demonstrated attacking these targets with all his might, and we just tried to copy his moves.'

'Saito Shihan, after many years of effort and research at Iwama, organized a weapons training system: Ichi No Tachi through to Go No Tachi and Kimusubi No Tachi, which was the basis for Sho Chiku Bai sword work. Through necessity, out of a sense of responsibility as O'Sensei's uke, and because I travelled with him in my early days of training, I learned these forms independently from Saito Shihan.'

'Pre 1960, Tamura Shihan and Nishiuchi Shihan were O'Sensei's ukes for weapons. I tried very hard to steal their handling of weapons and trained by myself. It was vital, and my primary responsibility as O'Sensei's uke, to not make blunders. At that time, I was merely a Shodan, with only a year and a half of Aikido training. This tortured me psychologically to no end. I struggled all alone in those days. None of my sempai at Hombu offered to teach me weapons work.'

Chiba Sensei also recalls...

'I have been lucky enough to have had opportunities to learn the art from Saito Sensei's teaching at the time I became an uchideshi at the Iwama dojo in the late 1950s, as well as at the times he was invited to teach at Hombu Dojo one Sunday a month in the early 1960s.'

So, Chiba Sensei's main early influences appear to have been a combination of primarily Iwama - but also Kashima. As you will read later, this latter influence is very interesting regarding our more recent development.

Development of the Lancashire Aikikai weapons System

Thanks to our Senseis Bob Spence, Andrew Baird & Graham Harrison for their input into this section

Bob Spence Sensei recounts the very early days of the LA.

'In 1969 Chiba Sensei introduced weapons to help us understand how the basic techniques of Aikido originated and how they were developed and modernised to the present Aikido we practice today. We practiced the basic movements like Shomen, Yokomen and Tsuki, using Bokken and Jo, and started to learn simple kata. It was in this year at Summer School in Sunderland with Chiba Sensei that we had a visitor from Hombu - Tomita Sensei. He had come over to instruct Sensei in a new Jo Kata which I believe came from Saito Sensei. Up to this point the weapons were not definitive to any one style but seemed to be a mixture.

'In 1970 the weapons were still not definitive as we had various inputs from visiting Senseis like Sekiya and Tamura.

'In 1971 Chiba Sensei began serious instruction on sword, stick and breathing so that we would get a much deeper understanding of the principles of Aikido and Budo. He started holding weapons courses over full weekends and at this time Saito's name was used.

'In 1973 we were advised to purchase Saito Sensei's Book on Sword and Stick Volume 1.¹ This was to be used as Marian Mucha's main influence going forward.'

Andrew Baird and Graham Harrison joined the LA in 1974 and 1976 respectively. Graham shares his recollections of weapons use and practice.

'When I first started Aikido, Chiba Sensei was our technical instructor and we simply followed what he showed. This was reinforced by Bob Spence and Marion Mucha Senseis. At that time no reference was made to the source. We trained with both Jo and Ken, covering Suburi, Kumi-tachi, Kumi-jo and Jo Kata. In addition, we studied various laido forms.

'It was 1976 that saw Chiba Sensei leave for Japan and subsequently San Diego (USA). Kanetsuka Sensei took over as head of the Aikikai of Great Britain for a short time and the weapons taught were similar to those of Chiba Sensei.

'The LA then left the Aikikai of Great Britain and, like some other Associations, became independent.'

Andrew's Aikido journey started in 1973 with the Institute of Aikido under Sensei Haydn Foster. He recalls: 'Weapons didn't figure in those early classes. They started being introduced in 1975/76.'

Andrew joined the LA later, in 1976. He mostly remembers practicing a lot of sword cuts to wrists and back of legs or Jo Katas in Chorley for the last half an hour of the sessions. Aikido was a different world in the 60's & 70's: no internet, and with first- and second-generation Japanese Aikido teachers trying to teach westerners, with limited command both of English and modern coaching techniques. 'We learnt by attending classes and rushing off the mat at the end of the class to make notes to remind us of what we had learnt or been corrected on.'

Graham remembers, 'So this is what we continued to do for quite some time, with Marion Mucha Sensei working from memory, and supplementing this from Saito books — the old ones with the pictures! Along the way Marion changed certain things, usually without explanation, and this continued for a long time'.

As previously mentioned by Mr Spence, the publication of *Traditional Aikido Vol 1* by Morihiro Saito¹ was a pivotal milestone in 1973.

Andrew recalls: 'The Aikikai of Great Britain newsletters actually reveal that their courses were based on the Saito books. (Chiba Sensei was the Aikikai's Technical Director).' Andrew believes the books made a big impact at the time — and accelerated learning.

'The LA was originally a member of the Aikikai of Great Britain and its Technical Director was Chiba Sensei. That is how the Saito/Iwama style, expressed in the books, became the initial system to be learnt in the LA, in common with many other Associations. This was the only choice of weapons system available to us. Had we not taken this on board, it would have meant shutting out a vital component of Aikido learning.

'In the LA we also studied laido (sword work), which was very different to our Iwama based weapons. The laido forms we studied were adopted from a sword school by Chiba Sensei. This included the 12 standing and 12 kneeling forms. Chiba Sensei possibly taught more forms but these formed the core, as both Chiba & Mucha Sensei taught these in classes I've attended over the years'.

Andrew summarises the position in 1976: 'at that time Aikido and weapons dori were very much Chiba style. Weapons work was Iwama based, and Iai was based on an existing sword school but taught by Chiba Sensei. Mr Mucha held a strong line in continuing this style and did not want to be influenced or sidelined by other Associations. He was disapproving of people practising elsewhere. (Mr Mucha ran a close tight ship).'

Andrew recalls creeping off to Birmingham and Cambridge to be taught by Morihiro Saito and attending UKA courses, with Japanese Senseis including Chiba Sensei.

As life moved on in the Aikido world, the Iwama School developed and changes were made. Saito's son Hitohiro Saito Sensei continued the Iwama development and still does to this day.

Chiba Sensei developed and introduced his own weapons system, and katas and practices, from his base in the US.

So, from 1976 the LA followed its own path as an independent association. Andrew recalls: 'Our weapons were frozen in a vacuum which time had forgotten (Land that Time Forgot)'.

Finally, Andrew adds a few additional points of LA history.

'Mr Mucha went to a Saito Sensei course in Italy in 1986 and we had a course with Tomita Sensei in 1988.

'I'm fairly certain (on limited evidence) that Chiba Sensei and Mr Mucha were in touch with each other at times. Whether technical material came from San Diego we can only guess but odd practices emerged that weren't Iwama weapons. Alternatively, or in addition, these may have come from UKA course videos.

'The history pages on the LA website² have a 1993 photo taken at Chester of Chiba Sensei and Mr Mucha meeting. In the 1990's Mr Mucha introduced me to Chiba Sensei who was teaching on a UKA course.

'1990 saw the LA introduce a Weapons Grading Syllabus (mainly Iwama content). For some time, separate Weapons courses were run during the year, as well as being taught on general courses'.

Andrew recalled that in the mid 1990s Mr Mucha had coached and encouraged Bill Smalley to take a pivotal role regarding developing our Iwama based weapons system. Graham remembered that 'After the death of Mucha Sensei in 1998, Bill Smalley was designated to continue the teaching of weapons within the LA. Apparently, Marion had still been changing things even as he became frailer. Bill continued to share what Marion had shown, at that time, and thereafter, but there were differences of recollection'.

Re-establishing Links with Chiba Sensei

After the death of Marion Mucha Sensei in 1998 we continued along our Iwama based weapons path led by Bill Smalley Sensei.

As Andrew mentioned previously, Mr Mucha kept a very tight ship and attending external courses was frowned upon. However, the year 2000 heralded a new era for the LA. A millennium celebration Summer School course was held at Bangor University, jointly hosted by the BA, UKA & BAF Associations, with an incredible instructor line-up of Japanese Shihans: Tamura, Yamada, Chiba and Shibata.

A group of intrepid LA warriors attended this course. It was an incredible experience, as very few of us had previously ventured outside the Association and it was an introduction to a completely new system of weapons and a renewed vigour in our Aikido learning. Prior to this course, only the likes of Bob Spence, Graham & Andrew had really experienced life outside the LA. It paved the way for an alternative view on Aikido and especially weapons. On our arrival we were faced with a huge mat full of students practising shikko (zagi) up and down until their knees bled. Could we hope to match this intensity of practice? Fortunately, we survived to tell the tale and bring home new knowledge.

Not only that, but it was on our way home from Bangor that Wendy Wallace broached the idea of holding our very own residential course. In 2005 Wendy organised our first Ribby Hall weekend course, which has continued for fifteen years.

Over the next few years, the historic relationship between Chiba Sensei and the LA was rekindled and developed. Joe Curran Shihan of the British Aikikai (BA) (later to become British Birankai) visited the LA on several occasions. He often stayed with Andrew & Sue Baird on his way down from the North East to attend BAB meetings in Birmingham. Joe

Sensei would take the class at the Trafford Club, which included instruction in Chiba weapons, and then a few of us would meet up later for drinks and a meal. Hephzi & Chris recall one memorable post practice Chinese meal where Jo Sensei demonstrated weapons work with chopsticks.

Andrew played a key role in establishing a relationship with Steve Magson Sensei. Steve was given specific permission by Chiba Sensei to teach his style of Aikido, and in particular weapons, to the LA. We had several inspirational years of Steve Sensei instructing on LA courses and a group of dedicated LA members regularly attended external Chiba Sensei courses, including Scotland and Joe Curran's club in the North East. Week long summer schools at Warminster firmed up our new skills and had some of us up at dawn for meditation or laido practice. Several of us twice visited Steve Magson's Aikido retreat in the small town of La Claquette (near Strasbourg — FR) for long weekend courses, which Steve specifically tailored to the needs of the LA.

This close relationship with Steve Magson Sensei and other Senior BA Instructors such as Chris Mooney and Tony Cassells gave us a great insight into Chiba Sensei's unique weapons system. Although our core weapons syllabus is still Iwama-based there remains a strong Chiba thread running in parallel — which is still close to our hearts today.

Back to basics - Search of Iwama Source

As we have seen, 2000-2003 was a period of soul searching in the LA regarding our weapons study. Our teacher, Mr Mucha, had died and our senior instructors were relying on memory. Although our weapons syllabus was based on Iwama, Mr Mucha had kept in contact with Chiba Sensei, had been influenced by his weapons development, and had thus changed what he was teaching to the LA, over a period of time.

Our senior instructors had started their Aikido at different times, and as we tend to remember best the way we first learned something, each instructor had a slightly different understanding of the forms — making it hard to come to a consensus. The situation was often fondly referred to as 'five 5th Dans moving in five different directions'.

At a memorable DG meeting in 2003/4 it was decided that we needed to settle on a clear direction for our main weapons study. To align with the Iwama style, as delivered by Hitohiro Saito Sensei, was considered to be the most appropriate way forward as it was the closest to the system taught by our founder. Most importantly, it had a current definitive source to refer to.

Graham Harrison volunteered and was given the task, by Bob Spence, of approaching Tony Sargent Sensei (the most prominent Iwama instructor in the UK, at the time). Mr Sargent recommended Matt Hill Sensei (5th Dan Iwama Ryu). So, Graham, accompanied by Chris Wallace, set off one evening to drive to David Law's Dojo in Swadlincote (S. Derbyshire) where Matt Sensei was taking the session. After the class we retired to the pub and had a very informative and productive chat.

Over the next 10 years or so, Matt Sensei visited the LA regularly to give weapons seminars, and many of the senior LA instructors visited Matt's Dojo in Melksham. Matt did much more than just give seminars, he provided video reference material, worked closely with the LA senior instructors and helped us understand, consolidate and develop our weapons system, which now forms the basis of our grading syllabus.

Aligning with Hombu and Mimuro Sensei

Thanks to Mimuro Sensei for his input into this section.

Our relationship with Mimuro Sensei started in 2007 when he and Cathy started visiting the Marple Club. These visits soon developed into annual courses which were well attended, including visitors from nearby clubs which were members of Birankai, UKA, Komyokan and the BAF. Mimuro introduced us to his flowing Kenjutsu work which was influenced by his early study of Kashima Shin Ryu. His weapons teaching is mainly Kenjutsu and does not include the Jo. These movements apply directly to Mimuro Sensei's open-hand body art and so are important in understanding his Aikido. For this reason, it is good to study his Ken forms as part of our Aikido practice.

Mimuro Sensei learned his weapons mainly from Mr Noguchi, who was 10 years his senpai (i.e. his senior), of Meiji University Ikuta Aikido Club. Noguchi Sensei was secretly teaching weapons without Yamaguchi Sensei's (formal) knowledge. Mimuro Sensei also studied weapons with Mr Minoru Inaba, who was 12 years his senpai. Mr Inaba learned Aikido from Yamaguchi Sensei and Kashima Shin Ryu from Kunii Sensei. Of course, Yamaguchi Sensei knew all along that they were both learning and teaching weapons, but they still practiced 'secretly'. Mimuro Sensei considers the flowing nature of Kashima Shin Ryu to be very compatible with his own and with Yamaguchi's style of Aikido.

Referring back to the first section and the reference to Chiba Sensei learning Kashima Ken work from his father-in-law, Mr Sekiya — Mimuro says that 'Sekiya Sensei was a student of Yamaguchi Sensei and learned Kashima Shin Ryu from Mr Noguchi'. Mimuro practiced with Mr Sekiya for many years at Yamaguchi Sensei's dojo. It was only a few years ago that he found out that Mr Sekiya was Chiba Sensei's father-in-law.

Mr Sekiya mainly learned Aikido from Yamaguchi Sensei and he met Mr Noguchi in Zoushukan Dojo in Shibuya. Yamaguchi was the main Shihan and Noguchi was a sub-instructor at Zoushukan. When Yamaguchi was away Noguchi taught both Aikido and Kashima Shin Ryu. Mimuro Sensei studied for over 20 years under Seigo Yamaguchi Shihan.

Mimuro refers to 'the very strange feeling (an odd coincidence) — this relationship between Sekiya, Chiba and himself'.

In 2018 the LA appointed Mimuro Sensei as Technical Director and we started the process of aligning our Aikido grades to Hombu. As we know, Hombu does not include formal weapon study in their normal practice and weapons do not appear in the Hombu grading system until 2nd Dan. However, the LA has always considered weapons to be a very important part

of Aikido practice and as such weapons study remains an integral part of our grading syllabus.

Summary

So, this brings us up to date.

Our weapons journey began with Mr Mucha and a 'hybrid' of the Iwama style, strongly influenced by Chiba Sensei. Then came a period of study into Chiba Sensei's Birankai weapons system. This was followed by a consolidation and alignment to the pure Iwama Aiki-Jo & Aiki-Ken. Finally came the introduction of Mimuro's flowing Ken work. An interesting and varied journey indeed.

Perhaps the most interesting feature of the story is the common link of Sekiya Sensei in both Chiba and Mimuro Senseis' weapons development and in their mutual study of Kashima Ken work. An amazing full circle journey, which has happened purely by chance.

So, what is the next chapter in the LA's weapons journey? Perhaps something for the next generation of senior instructors to ponder.

¹ Morihiro Saito, *Traditional Aikido: Sword – Stick – Body Arts, Vol 1 Basic Techniques*. 1973
ISBN: 0-87040-266-8

² <http://lancashireaikikai.org/members-r-open/member-r-open-home.html>
Refer to your Club Leader for access password

Chris Wallace (Marple) & Hephzi Yohannan (Trafford/Chorlton)