

## NOTES ON FIVE ROMAN PERIOD WOODEN ARTEFACTS FOUND IN WELL FILLS AT ELMS FARM, HEYBRIDGE, ESSEX (Site HYEF 94 )

DM Goodburn BA AIFA Ancient Woodwork Specialist  
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### INTRODUCTION

This report is based on direct observation and measurement of five conserved objects of worked roundwood and timber found during excavations at Elms Farm, Heybridge in Essex. The objects were carefully packaged and passed to the Museum of London Specialist Services, during the final stages of the publication project on the Elms Farm excavations, by Hilary Major of the Essex County Council Field Archaeology Unit. Some basic broad dating and contextual information was supplied together with four wood Sp. identifications of uncertain attribution. A set of notes and a sketch were also supplied on one of the objects HYEF <7603>. The above have been used as a reference framework for the following summary descriptions and discussion.

None of the objects are very easily recognisable and the functional interpretations offered here could be debated. Comparative sources for Roman period wooden finds have been consulted (Weeks and Rhodes 1986, Padley 1991, Earwood 1993, Cool and Philo eds. 1998 and Morris 2000) without finding close parallels except possibly for the suggested fence pale top (below). All dimensions given are post-conservation. It should be born in mind that Roman period turnery finds are comparatively rare apart from small cylindrical boxes which were not found here.

### <2758> FROM FILL CONTEXT [8196] A WOODEN SWORD-LIKE OBJECT

This object was in 6 fragments, some of which conjoined, when seen by this writer. The object is made of radially cleft oak, split from a parent tree of fairly slow straight growth with c. 2mm wide annual rings. It was carved to the form of a small bat or blunt sword. The surfaces of the object are slightly worn and weathered, but the wear is not generally localised, although the blunt tip appears slightly battered. The maximum width of the blade is 60mm with a thickness of 11mm. The centre of the blade is roughly flat with tapering bevels down towards each blunt edge in the manner of a sword. The handle is approximately 115mm in length with a crudely axe or adze carved pommel. The space between the pommel and blade of the sword is uncomfortably narrow for a man's hand and might be more suited to the hand of a child or woman. The function of the object is not absolutely clear, but three possibilities seem most likely, that it was a toy sword, a paddle-like bat for pottery or dairy work, or that it was a weaving sword.

### <5667> FROM FILL CONTEXT [16083] A FINELY TURNED OBJECT

This carefully turned object was in two fragments totalling about 125mm long with a diameter of approximately 30mm. The cross section is now slightly oval but it is uncertain whether this represents ancient drying from a green

turned state or post-excavation shrinkage. The object has a smoothly turned original end c. 25mm in length which is convenient for the thumb to grip. A lathe centre mark and faint saw marks can be seen on that end.

The other 100mm of the surviving length of the object was carefully and regularly turned to produce a series of concentric beads c. 3mm wide and 3mm proud. A small hole c. 4mm in diameter had been drilled through the thickness of the object where the bead turning stopped. The object appears only slightly abraded, but is full of ancient woodworm holes. The borer damage suggests that it may have lain abandoned in an unheated, probably damp room for sometime or that the wood is sapwood as the heart wood of walnut has some resistance to beetle attack in normal domestic conditions. It is not clear what part of the parent log has been used for this object although it is clearly not a section of roundwood.

The wood used for this object has been identified as walnut which seems visually plausible. It has been suggested that the timber was probably of SE European origin. This is quite possible but recent detailed pollen studies have suggested that walnut was almost certainly introduced to Britain during the Roman period as an orchard tree along with many other useful plants and trees (Scaife 2000:116). Therefore the object could have been made in Britain, possibly quite locally. The function of the object is obscure but its size and form are suggestive of an origin in a small piece of domestic equipment of some sort.

#### < 6615> FROM FILL CONTEXT [9879] A MYSTERIOUS TURNED 'FINIAL' OR PENDANT

The most mysterious object of this small assemblage is this item, which appears to have been roughly sawn off the end of a larger turned object, perhaps to enable the bulk of that object to be reused in some way. The cylindrical finial or pendant was in three pieces when seen by this writer. The maximum diameter of the object is 80mm and the maximum surviving length c. 95mm, the last 30mm of that being a small loose projecting bobble that must have almost reached the end of the original artefact. The main solid cylinder of the object is pierced by three evenly spaced, bored and chiselled holes c. 10mm square. In two cases the holes contain shrunken wood fragments in the other the convex ended hole could be seen to be c. 25mm deep. The chisel used was clearly 8mm wide. The object was turned from a piece of roundwood rather than a split section of timber, and the Sp. has been identified as birch, which seems plausible visually.

The function of the turned object is not at all clear and its form cannot be paralleled in the noted corpora. However, observations of a modern (mock ancient) suspended light fitting in turned wood with three evenly spaced mock bronze arms supporting light bulbs has thrown up an interesting possible origin for this off cut. The modern fitting had a turned cylindrical core ending in a very similar finial or pendant to this object although it was c. 10% smaller. As we know that lamps were often suspended in Roman Britain perhaps this object could be interpreted as the end of such a decorative light fitting which originally had three light radiating wooden arms which would have supported

three lamps slung on light metal chains? No obvious use for this object in furniture or another common application seems plausible. Images of Roman interiors shown in wall paintings at Pompeii (dell Orto and Varone 1992) and elsewhere have been scanned but have not yet revealed a representation of such a light fitting so this identification is offered very tentatively.

<7185> FROM FILL CONTEXT [16083] A CRUDE ROUNDWOOD 'HANDLE'?

This crudely worked section of bark-less roundwood has a roughly knife cut, tang-like projection at one end suggesting either that it was a rough handle for a tool of some kind or that it had been joined into some sort of frame. Both ends had been neatly rounded with a knife and are slightly worn. The total length is 255mm and the maximum diameter c. 20mm. The Sp. of the roundwood has not been identified.

<7603> FROM FILL CONTEXT [8196] A PROBABLE SPEAR SHAPED FENCE PALE TOP.

This blade like section of roughly carved oak sapwood has the form of a spear head broken both at the tip and the tang. The total surviving length is c. 135mm, width 105mm and the maximum thickness c. 16mm. This form seems to have been fairly carefully axe or adze carved to a form very close to that found in three examples of Roman period fence pales with spear shaped terminals that have been found in the London area (Goodburn in Bringham et al Forthcoming- Regis House Report). The top of any well requires fencing or protecting in some way to stop it being a danger to animals and people and stop material falling in it and fouling the water. In Britain there is quite good evidence of fencing in wells and waterholes from at least the Bronze Age and often this appears to have been done with oak pales (Goodburn Forthcoming in Masefield et al).

This fragmentary example is somewhat unusual as it appears to have been made from a thin outer slab from a hewn beam or saw baulk, as it has faint saw marks on the heart wood side and a hewn surface on the other. Such sawn slabs are widely used today for cheap, short life fencing that can last up to c. 15 years if well off the ground. The other examples from London were made of cleft oak heartwood for durability and strength in thin sections. The parent log from which this fragment was cut derived from an oak of fairly slow growth as the fragment had c. 10 annual rings.

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