

**PROCEEDINGS**  
OF THE  
**CAMBRIDGE ANTIQUARIAN**  
**SOCIETY**

(INCORPORATING THE CAMBS & HUNTS  
ARCHAEOLOGICAL SOCIETY)



**VOLUME LXIX**

1979

**IMRAY LAURIE NORIE AND WILSON**

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A LATE BRONZE AGE SOCKETED AXE  
WITH PART OF ITS WOODEN HAFT,  
FROM FEN DRAYTON, CAMBRIDGESHIRE

S. V. E. Heal

The socketed and looped bronze axehead (Pl. 1)\* is of a recognized Late Bronze Age type: Evans illustrates one of parallel form and decoration from Bottisham Lode, Cambridgeshire. (Evans, 1881, p. 123, Fig. 135.) It is in a very good state of preservation apart from some surface accretion from the gravel in which it was found, and since – wisely – no attempt has been made to “clean” it, it is also uncontaminated; the haft fragment remains in place.

The axehead is 12.6 cm in length, the blade edge 5.7 cm wide and 6 cm along the cutting edge. The socket measures 4.5 cm by 5.2 cm externally and 3.2 cm by 3.6 cm internally. The loop emerges immediately below the moulding of the mouth, the orifice being 1.3 cm by 0.5 cm and the loop itself 1.4 cm wide and .2-.3 cm thick. The decoration is of three ribs running vertically for 7 cm down the faces with two rows of pellets – one terminal and the other 1.3 cm from the lower end of the ribs, the terminal row appears on ribs at the angles of the faces.

The wood is very dehydrated and split, but firmly fixed due to its initial tight fit and subsequent corrosion of the metal. It is not possible to remove the haft stub intact; in its present state it is unlikely that working details could be interpreted if it were possible to see the whole. It can however be determined that the haft was a round stem, and a small sample was rehydrated and identified as oak (*Quercus* sp.)

The use of roundwood suggests that the haft was fashioned from a naturally forked or bent growth, a piece bent with the aid of steam or possibly a limb tied down to grow to the required angle. The stub to fit in the socket could be worked to the required dimensions by the removal of bark and sapwood from the shorter arm of the crook; the handle being formed from the longer arm. Plate 2 shows an example of this method of hafting. There are several instances of axe hafts of oak from prehistoric contexts (Coles, Heal and Orme, 1978); it is a suitably strong and shock-resistant wood for the purpose. Hafts of other woods are also known, including ash (*Fraxinus*) which is perhaps the most suitable.

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\*Found by A. H. Lloyd-Dunn in a gravel pit c. TL 335703. I am grateful to Miss M. Cra'ster for drawing this object to my attention and to Dr G. Morgan for confirming the wood identification. The axe (Acc. No. 78.49) is in the finder's possession.

It is probable that a retaining thong or cord (of hide or vegetable fibre for example) was passed through the loop and attached to the handle, though no trace of this remains. The main function of such a device would have been to retain the head should it work loose from the haft or be detached by a false blow, rather than primarily to secure the head to the haft. The fit of the stub and active use should be security enough initially. In this case it seems that the haft and (putative) retainer failed, the fracture at the mouth of the socket allowing the stub to break off taking the axehead with it.

The condition of the axe blade suggests that it was not much used: there is little edge wear or sign of resharpening. It seems likely that it was not recovered or re-hafted after the accident, but permanently lost. The exact stratigraphy of the find being uncertain it is not possible to say whether the loss occurred in vegetation, disturbed soil or water, but it must subsequently have been waterlogged, allowing the preservation of the wood. It is of course conceivable that it was deposited or discarded on purpose, though the condition of the blade offers no practical grounds for such disposal. The presence of the broken haft suggests that it was used, however briefly, prior to deposition.

#### REFERENCES

1. Coles, J. M., Heal, S. V. E., and Orme, B. J., 1978. "The use and character of wood in prehistoric Britain and Ireland." *Proc. Prehist. Soc.* 44, 1-45.
2. Evans, J., 1881. *The Ancient Bronze Implements, Weapons and Ornaments of Great Britain and Ireland.* Longmans, Green and Co. London.



Pl. 1. The Fen Drayton axe showing the haft remains. (Photo G. Owen)



Pl. 2. Bronze socketed axe from Kew Bridge, showing method of hafting. (Photo G. Owen. Reproduced from *Arch.J.*, 86, Pl. IXb, by permission of The Royal Archaeological Institute.)

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