

PROCEEDINGS
OF THE
CAMBRIDGE ANTIQUARIAN
SOCIETY

(INCORPORATING THE CAMBS & HUNTS
ARCHAEOLOGICAL SOCIETY)



VOLUME LXXII

for 1982 and 1983

IMRAY LAURIE NORIE AND WILSON

1984

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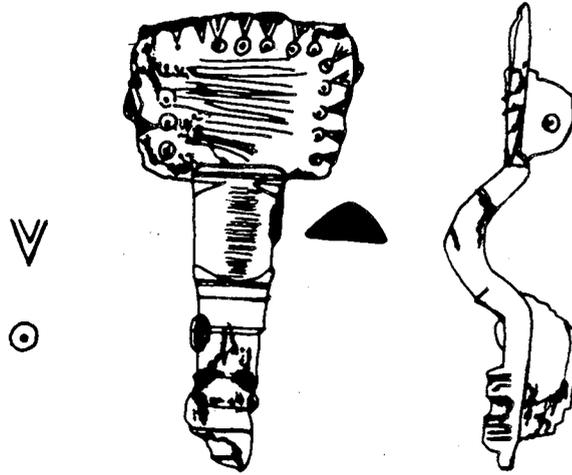


Fig. 1. The Wentworth brooch

AN ANGLO-SAXON BROOCH FROM THE CAMBRIDGESHIRE FENS

M. D. HOWE

During the course of building works at Wentworth, Isle-of-Ely, an Anglo-Saxon Small-long brooch was recovered. The brooch came from the foundation trenches of a new house opposite Wentworth Church (TF 482786) in September 1980. At present (November 1981) this object remains in private hands. (Fig. 1)

Description

The brooch is made of copper alloy. Its foot was lost in antiquity and the brooch is now 58mm long, 27.5mm across the uncorroded width of the headplate and 10mm wide at the mid-point of the bow. The brooch is corroded on its surface and shows signs of moderate wear. The headplate is decorated along its edges with stamped decoration produced by a combination of a v stamp and a o stamp. The o impression was made with a ring-and-dot stamp but due to mis-striking and corrosion this detail of the decoration is now far from clear. The stamped decoration has been applied with reasonable care but is irregular in places. Sixteen combinations of the two stamp motifs occur on the brooch and the remainder of the decoration consists of cast-in and incised-line designs. There is evidence of hammer marks on the reverse of the bow and these may result from the manufacturing process. The catch plate of the brooch is heavily corroded and worn and little remains of the fastening mechanism behind the head. No textile remains or corrosion products are evident on the reverse and this suggests that the brooch was lost by chance rather than having been deposited in a grave.

Discussion

The Wentworth brooch belongs to Leeds Square-head (plain) type of Small-long brooch (Leeds 1945 pp. 26-32). The brooch's rectangular headplate places it in Leeds' first variety of this type and thus, in common with the majority of this variety, it is probable that the Wentworth brooch had a crescentic foot. It also lacks lappets below the bow as do most of this class of brooch. The Square-head (plain) type of Small-long brooch is one of the commoner of this brooch form. When Leeds was writing, this type showed a marked concentration in the Midlands and Cambridgeshire regions but with examples also coming from Norfolk, Sussex, Worcestershire, and Gloucestershire. This distribution pattern remains ostensibly the same at the present time although recent finds are beginning to expand the distribution area to the north and east. The provenance of the brooch under discussion is of interest as it is one more indicator of Anglo-Saxon activity in the Fens.

Leeds regarded the Square-head (plain) class as one of the early types of the Small-long brooch. He states that it is "one of the few types that occur in southern cemeteries, like High Down, Sussex" (Leeds, E.T. 1945 p.26) and, on the grounds that he considered the type to be rarely embellished, assigned it to the earlier end of his typological sequence. Where "engraved Circlets" existed he drew a parallelism between those with four circlets and his cross pattée derivative group which he placed amongst the earliest of the English Small-long brooches. These conclusions now cause considerable problems as it is evident that a number of Square-head (plain) brooches bear stamped decoration. This decoration is frequently masked by corrosion products and can be worn but careful examination will reveal it. Furthermore, the details of such decoration are repeated exactly and can only have been produced by the same stamp. Engraved decoration does occur but in the majority of cases this is confined to straight line ornamentation. The occurrence of this type of brooch in cemetery assemblages of an early date and at some distance from the main area of distribution would at first sight appear to justify the attribution of an early date to the Square-head (plain) Small-long brooch. However, the number of such occurrences cited by Leeds is not large and he is forced to admit that this type of brooch occurs "very rarely" in such contexts.

When creating his typology Leeds had to work with material which came from nineteenth-century excavations or was salvaged from sites destroyed by industrial development. Thus excavation details are in most cases scanty or non-existent and the dating of Anglo-Saxon grave goods has rested on typologies and will continue to do so for the immediate future. Until the results of modern excavations have provided a sufficiently large body of dependable stratigraphic and sequential information we are obliged to concentrate on the close investigation of such finds as the Wentworth brooch for our dating. As has been said, many types of Small-long brooches bear stamped decoration and a comparison of these

stamps may enable an insight to be gained into the economic system which produced these brooches. As yet we do not certainly know the date range for the use of stamps on Small-long brooches, and this will only become apparent after much more study has been devoted to this rather neglected brooch type. Similarly an extensive study of the amount of wear on these objects prior to their final deposition will give some indication of their length of use. At present it would appear that a number of Small-long brooches were very worn by the time they became buried. Most examples show fairly heavy wear on their catch-plates and a brooch from East Shefford (Berks), British Museum registration 93, 7-16, 40, was employed even after its catch-plate had ceased to be serviceable. Corrosion products from the remains of the iron pin adhere to the righthand side of the brooch just below the base of the bow. This suggests that on the failure of the catch-plate the pin was bent around the face of the brooch thus fixing it almost permanently in position. The brooch may have continued in use for some time after this adaptation had taken place but alternatively it may have been felt that the brooch was so worn out that it was only fit for burial. The Wentworth brooch, in common with many Small-long brooches, has also lost its foot. Although this example is too corroded to allow examination of the original surface of the break, other broken brooches show evidence of wear on the break demonstrating that the object was in use for some considerable time after the break had occurred. This can be clearly seen on another Small-long brooch from East Shefford (British Museum registration 93, 7-16, 39).

The present state of the study of Small-long brooches, owing to a lack of further study forces us back to Leeds' typology in order to date the Wentworth brooch. Little work has so far been done on the dating of Small-long brooches from associated objects in grave assemblages. Myres figures two funerary vessels accompanied by Small-long brooches in his *Anglo-Saxon Pottery and the Settlement of England*. The first example comes from Weldon, Northants. (Northampton Museum D 301/1954-5) and is accompanied by two brooches of different design but both belonging to Leeds' cross pattée derivative group. The funerary vessel is biconical with an everted rim and decorated with line-and-dot ornament. Using Myres' typology this pot would appear to date to the early sixth century. Typologically the brooches also fit this date range but little consideration has been given to the degree of wear on the brooches and, when better understood, this process could seriously test the viability of Leeds' typology. The second example figured by Myres is a small biconical bowl found with two Small-long brooches at Wallingford, Berks. (Ashmolean Museum 1938-1211). The brooches belong to Leeds' cross potent derivative type which would typologically date them to the first half of the sixth century. This date accords with Myres' date for the bowl. However, both these examples illustrate the circuitous process of dating Anglo-Saxon objects when removed from their archaeological context.

The Wentworth brooch, because it belongs to one of the most general type of Small-long brooch, is difficult to date accurately from form alone. However its stamped decoration may give an indication as to its general date. The v shaped stamp on the Wentworth brooch belongs to a class of triangular stamps of similar size which appear to occur on brooch types within the middle range of Leeds' typology. This is merely an initial observation which can only be confirmed or rejected by further study. A pair of brooches of the lozenge foot type from East Shefford (British Museum registration 93, 7-16, 33 & 34) and a brooch from Eye, nr. Peterborough (Howe, 1980) are both decorated with stamped designs which are triangular in shape, and the Eye brooch bears an arrow-shaped stamp which is similar to that employed on the Wentworth brooch. The example from Eye belongs to a variant of Leeds' cross-potent type which typologically dates it to the mid sixth century. It was found in association with a pot decorated with stamped pendant triangles which, according to Myres, dates the pot to the mid sixth century (Myres 1977, p.20). With these examples in mind the Wentworth brooch also dates from the middle years of the sixth century.

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