

NOTES

A Middle Bronze Age side-looped spearhead from Ashtead

The purpose of this note is to record the discovery, with the aid of a metal detector, of a small copper alloy side-looped spearhead 'on the south side of the railway line in the vicinity of Ashtead Pond in 1989'. The finder, a local man who wishes to remain anonymous and who retains the spearhead, also confirmed that it was found at a depth of 8 inches (200mm) in 'a disturbed area close to springs', and that 'modern coins' had been recovered from the same locality. Furthermore, the findspot was believed by the finder's father to have lain close to (but outside) the site of a former council rubbish tip situated 'just by the station'. The area thus defined overlooks the Rye stream, a westward-flowing tributary of the river Mole whose waters it joins beyond Leatherhead Common to the south-west.

The spearhead was submitted to the British Museum for identification in January 1990 (where the findspot was given as 'Ashtead Common', cTQ 181 588), but had been collected by the finder before full recording could take place (Stuart Needham, pers comm). The present writer has since had a chance to re-examine it, and to make the following observations:

The spearhead

The spearhead (fig 1) is complete, and measures 98mm in overall length with a diameter at the circular socket mouth of 15mm. It weighs 30.2g. It has a slender, and originally probably leaf-shaped, blade 63mm in length, a rounded mid-rib, and simple string loops set mid-way between the base of the blade and the socket mouth. The blade wings are clearly incomplete and the surviving edges are nicked and damaged. Casting flashes survive between the base of the blade and the top of the string loops, while the casting appears to have failed at a point close to the base of the blade, leaving a void which runs down the socket to one of the string loops. There are traces of grinding on the blade-wings parallel to the mid-rib. A small amount of sandy soil is present in the socket but no trace of the wooden shaft tip. The spearhead retains a robust brown-green

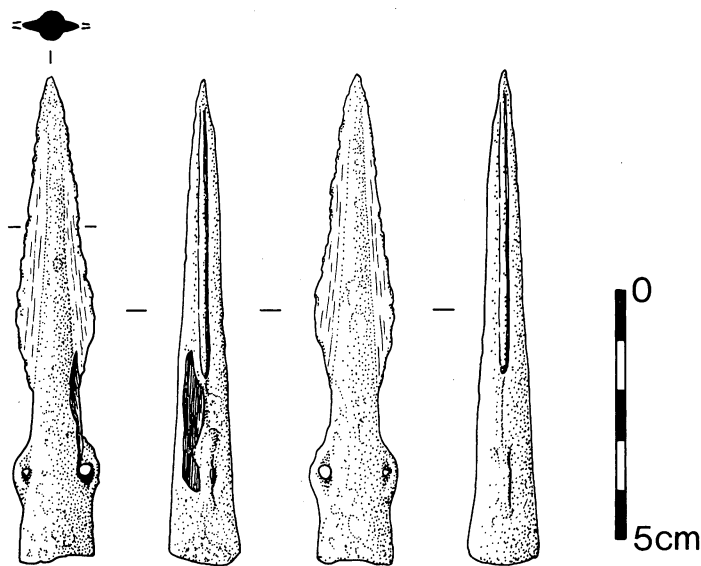


Fig 1 A Middle Bronze Age side-looped spearhead from Ashtead

surface patina with a little surface pocking, and there are some small areas of powdery reed-green corrosion close to the area of faulty casting and around the socket mouth.

Discussion

The Ashtead piece falls into neither of Rowlands' (1976, 52) main side-looped spearhead groups, sharing attributes characteristic of both (ie the rounded mid-rib and circular-sectioned socket of his group 1 and semi-circular string loops of his group 2). At just below 100mm in length it lies at the smaller end of the size range while, typically, the small diameter of the eyes in the string loops seem impractical as effective aids to hafting (Ehrenberg 1977, 7). Nevertheless, the traces of grinding visible along the blade-wings indicate that the spearhead had seen much use.

The small size of side-looped spearheads compared with the larger and broadly contemporary basal-looped forms, together with their often contrasting distribution patterns (Ehrenberg 1977, 17 & 22–3), has led several writers to suggest that the two types fulfilled separate functions: the side-looped pieces being widely used as light hunting javelins; and the basal-looped pieces reserved for less mundane ceremonial or ritual purposes. Finds of either weapon type are scarce within the county away from the Thames (eg Needham 1987, fig 5.9; but see the recently re-discovered basal-looped spearhead from 'Buckland' in this volume (Williams 1999)) and offer little in the way of firm corroborative evidence. However, the exceptionally large basal-looped spearhead (over 798mm in length) found at a depth of 9 feet 6 inches (2.9m) with animal bones close to the headwaters of the Wandle at Wandle Park, Croydon must surely indicate an episode of deliberate votive deposition (Coleman 1899–1900; Rowlands 1976, no 1489; Needham 1990, 249 & fig 4).

The Ashtead side-looped spearhead can be added to the few other such spearheads known from the interior of the county. In addition to single examples from 'Barrow Hills', Chertsey Common (Guildford Museum, G.828; Phillips 1967, 16 & fig 6.5; Stuart Needham, pers comm) and the Roman temple sites at Farley Heath (British Museum, 1853 4–19 25) and Wanborough (O'Connell & Bird 1994, 99 & fig 22.2), a further spearhead of this type has recently come to light in Ewell and is currently being prepared for publication.

The date of these side-looped pieces probably falls within the Taunton phase of the Middle Bronze Age (ie MBA 2: 14th–13th centuries BC), and possibly starting a little earlier (Needham *et al* 1997, 84–6), which suggests that they are broadly contemporary with Deverel-Rimbury pottery, sherds of which have been recovered from the Ashtead area and from elsewhere within the Mole catchment (Needham 1987, fig 5.7). Somewhat surprisingly, the present spearhead is the first piece of Bronze Age metalwork to have been recorded from the Ashtead locality.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Thanks are due to the finder and his father for allowing me to see and record the Ashtead find, for information regarding its findspot and for a set of detailed photographs from which the accompanying drawing has been made; also to Stuart Needham for alerting me to its discovery, and for providing a list of Surrey parallels.

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