A Late Bronze Age hoard from Norbury Park, Mickleham

DAVID WILLIAMS

with contributions by
ROGER BIRCH, JUDIE ENGLISH, LUCY FARR and STUART NEEDHAM

Following the discovery by a metal detector user of a group of three objects datable to c1150–1000BC an excavation was carried out on the find site. Evidence was found for the group to have been deposited deliberately beneath a small cairn of flint nodules within an area of ancient field lynchets. This paper discusses the bronzes as well as the field system and attempts to place the discovery into a wider context.

In November 2003, a small hoard of three complete bronze objects comprising two palstave axes and a sword-scabbard terminal or chape was found by Mr Martin Hay while using a metal detector on the edge of Norbury Park, Mickleham. The find was reported to the author as the local Finds Liaison Officer for the Portable Antiquities Scheme. The hoard was subsequently declared Treasure (DCMS 2003, T410) and was purchased in 2005 by Guildford Museum; the landowner, Surrey County Council, waived its share of the reward.

The hoard was found some 400m from the river Mole and the findspot lies at the foot of the steep chalk slopes that form the western side of the gap in the North Downs through which the Mole passes (figs 1 and 2). Above the findspot the slopes rise to a height of c 140m OD. A few days after the hoard was reported to the author the findspot (TQ 15915 53220) was visited and found to lie in woodland at c 65m OD. This woodland is mainly of recent generation and conceals a series of linear earthworks interpreted as field lynchets previously considered to be of medieval date but possibly prehistoric in origin (fig 2; see English, below; Dyer 1996). The hole from which the hoard was extracted was clearly visible as a roughly circular pit c 0.5m in diameter. It could readily be seen that the bronze objects had been recovered as a compact group from below a prominent layer of large flint nodules, thus confirming the finder’s description, and also that it had rested on an orange/brown soil some 0.3m below the present surface. In view of the precise findspot being clear it was considered important to take this rare opportunity to examine a hoard site in more detail by undertaking an excavation.

The excavation (figs 3 and 4)

Over the weekend of 28–29 November 2003 a trench, measuring 5 x 1.5m, was opened over the findspot on an east–west alignment following the line of the slope downhill, and at right angles to the visible Lynchets. Directly below a thin layer of leaf mould and humus (1) was a deposit, c 0.3m thick, of heavy and sometimes massive flint nodules held in a dark matrix of chalky soil (2). This layer of flints covered the whole trench and also contained a few pieces of gritty stone probably deriving from the Lower Greensand and part of a rhyolite pebble of non-local origin (see Birch, below). Below the flints was a deposit of orange/brown soil with occasional chalk grits and flint (4). Context 4 in turn overlay solid chalk and was c 0.4m deep in the western half of the trench. However, at the eastern end of the trench context 4 was extremely thin. Across the surface of 4 in the uphill, western, half of the trench was a thin discolouration – a darker, greyer, soil with a very few charcoal flecks (3). This discolouration, on which the bronzes appear to have rested, was absent in the eastern, downhill, part of the trench and was examined for pollen remains, unfortunately with negative results (see Farr, below). Apart from the bronzes and the pebble there were no other finds.
In order to trace the extent of the flint layer (2), a series of six small test pits was dug extending up to 10m to the south of the trench (three pits), up to 5m to the north (two pits) and about 5m to the west (one pit). In none of these was a similar flint concentration found although there were a few stray nodules. A survey with a metal probe was then made extending from the trench in all four compass directions. This appeared to confirm that the layer of flint nodules (2) was confined to an area centred on the trench. The flints appeared to continue down the hill beyond the trench for some 2–3m but nowhere else did the layer extend more than 2m from the trench. A metal-detector survey was also carried out in the...
vicinity of the trench and extended up to c 60m distant from it. No further finds of archaeological interest were recovered (finds comprised mostly spent cartridge cases and nails).

**The bronzes** (figs 5–7), by Stuart Needham

The hoard comprises three objects. All are in very fine condition with, in places, a thin covering crust of calcium carbonate.

**PALSTAVE 1 (fig 5)**

A palstave with a gently flared and heavy blade ornamented with a stout trident rib design. The stop, at the blade/haft end junction, is massive and protrudes well beyond the linking flanges in profile. The side loop is unusually thick and has an octagonal cross-section. The septum floor is effectively flat with a sharp angle where it meets the inner flange faces.
Length 184mm; blade width 49mm; weight 623.5g

**PALSTAVE 2 (fig 6)**

The second palstave is rather different in style. The blade starts parallel at the top, then expands progressively towards the convex cutting edge. It too carries stout ‘decoration’, this time just a single medial rib on either face, giving the upper blade a hexagonal section. The stop shows similar protuberance relative to the flanges as seen on palstave 1, while the septum floor is again flat with strong angles along the flanges. The loop is slighter with a sub-oval cross-section.
Length 168mm; blade width 52mm; weight 492.1g
CHAPE (SWORD-SCABBARD TERMINAL) (fig 7)

A thin-walled socketed fitting, the socket of which continues to within 6mm of the terminal. The body of the chape is rhombic-sectioned with the addition of narrow flattened sides throughout its length. At the end it expands slightly into a sub-lozenge ‘button’ terminal. The mouth is very gently V-shaped in plan view. Two neat perforations on opposing faces provide for rivet fixings to the wood or leather lining of the scabbard.

Length 157.5mm; mouth width 40mm; weight 72.5g

IDENTIFICATION

The two palstaves, although different in detail, are united by features characteristic of the Late type. These include relatively narrow blades and the specific stop/flange/septum form. Late palstaves belong to the Late Bronze Age between c 1150 and 800BC. Associated finds suggest that there are some significant shifts in style between the earlier and later halves of this period, but the full range of variation as seen in extant axes is not yet represented in hoards. This gives considerable importance to the association in the Norbury Park hoard of two style variants with a more closely dated bronze type.

The chape belongs to the ‘tongue-shaped’ family. Long tongue chapes occur in both the Wilburton metalwork assemblage and in some early Ewart hoards (Blackmoor stage), the full potential span being c 1150–900BC. However, the near-straight mouth of the Norbury Park example is not found in the later group and so it, and the hoard itself, can almost certainly be attributed to the Wilburton stage, c 1150–1000BC.

The pebble, by Roger Birch

A large fragment of a pebble of non-local origin was recovered from the deposit of flint nodules (2).

The pebble has been identified as a rhyolite. It is pink; this indicates the mineral orthoclase feldspar, a mineral with potassium, silica and aluminium, which are very common in all rhyolites.

Snowdonia and Borrowdale are the well-known spots for rhyolite. Rhyolite also occurs in north Pembrokeshire, near where the Stonehenge bluestones originated. There are also a few outcrops in the Malverns and Leicestershire but these are very small. It is unlikely that
Fig 4 Norbury Park, Mickleham. Plan of trench and section along the southern side of the excavation.
this stone reached Surrey through glacial or other natural processes; human agency is probable.

**Soil sampling**, by Lucy Farr

One small bulk sample was taken from context (3), a dark soil discoloration directly underlying the layer of flint nodules. The results of the pollen analysis, revealed the preservation of no identifiable pollen grains. This is unfortunate, but not entirely unexpected, given the calcareous nature of the bedrock and the noticeable fragments of calcareous material within the sediment sample. It is widely accepted that such conditions are very unfavourable to the preservation of pollen and spores (Moore *et al* 1991).

**Field systems in the Norbury Park area**, by Judie English

The agricultural terrace on which the cairn appears to have been constructed is one of a series of contour lynchets on the southern and eastern slopes of the chalk downs on the western side of the Mole Gap surveyed between 1990 and 1994 (Dyer 1996). Such flights of lynchets can frequently be found on the lower downland slopes; they are usually considered to be medieval in date and to represent a response to the need for greater arable production as population increased (eg McOmish *et al* 2002, 115). On both sides of the Mole Gap, as elsewhere, the high downland was reserved as grazing land in the medieval period. The plateau on the western side, above the site described here, was open land used for grazing sheep and was disputed between the lords of the manors of Fetcham and Mickleham in 1305.
(Blair 1978, no 9). To the east of the river, on Mickleham Downs, a similar use is suggested by the name *Shepehale* current in 1303 (Blair 1984, no 261). This usage allowed preservation of the fragmentary remains of a probable prehistoric coaxial field system visible as standing earthworks on Fetcham Downs (Dyer 1996) and Mickleham Downs (Currie 2000; English in prep). Any portion of this field system that had existed on the lower slopes was thought to have been truncated by later ploughing, as evidenced by the contour lynchets. However, it would appear that the lynchet underlying the hoard described here originated during the Late Bronze Age or earlier and may then have been incorporated into a medieval contour lynchet. Whether or not other apparently medieval boundaries in the same area also had an earlier origin remains uncertain. Potentially similar developmental sequences have been identified between Charlton and Compton, and on the Higher Plain at Middleton near Warminster, both on Salisbury Plain (McOmish et al 2002, 95, fig 4:10; 115). In the former example, sub-rectangular ‘Celtic’ fields increasingly have their cross-boundaries ploughed out, possibly when re-used by a Romano-British settlement, and eventually take the form of contour lynchets associated with the medieval settlement at Compton. On the downland slopes at Middleton, narrow strip lynchets utilised one axis of the boundaries of ‘Celtic’ fields, the other being ploughed out, but the earlier sub-rectangular fields remain extant on the top of the downland plateau. However, strip lynchets originating in the prehistoric period have been noted elsewhere (Simon Crutchley, pers comm) and the date of the generality of such lynchets in the Mole Gap must remain uncertain.

**Discussion**

No pit or any other feature was found into which the hoard had been placed nor, with the possible exception of context 3, was a buried soil found below the layer of flints (2). Context
Fig 7  Norbury Park, Mickleham. Scabbard chape (scale in cm). (Drawing by David Williams)

3 may represent a truncated soil horizon and (4) appears to be a colluvial deposit overlying the natural chalk. The creation of the lynchet crossed by the excavation trench might explain the apparent truncation (by ploughing) of (4) at the eastern end of the trench. The layer of flints (2) was clearly shown to be confined to an area centred on the trench and on the hoard itself. The implication here is that the flints were deliberately collected and placed as a cairn on top of the hoard just above the slope of a lynchet and that the cairn subsequently spread and tumbled downhill.

As English notes above, the hoard lies within an area of field lynchets that survive along this side of the valley as well as further afield beyond the Mole Gap. Although the hoard is later than the apparent lynchet it is reasonable to suppose that both lynchet and hoard may be connected (the lynchet can hardly be much earlier than the proposed date for the hoard of c 1150–1000BC). If this is indeed the case then it is possible that the flints might have derived from field clearance, possibly at the time that fields were first created on these slopes. Although it remains possible that the hoard represents a loss, buried accidentally beneath a field clearance cairn, the grouping of two little-used (indeed perhaps unused) axes together with an object unrelated to agricultural use, an unusual combination anyway, makes the intentional, and probably votive, deposition of the hoard much more likely. Associations of hoards of metalwork with lynchets that form the visible remains of ancient field systems are not unknown (eg a hoard of bronze bracelets and a bronze torc from a field system at Ebbesbourne Wake, Wiltshire (Shortt 1949)). The rhyolite pebble of distant origin might also have been intended as a votive offering. Similarly far-travelled pebbles have been recognised.
at two later Surrey sites: the possible 1st century AD shrine enclosure at Betchworth (Williams in prep) and the Roman temple site at Wanborough (Williams 2007, 251–2).

Hoardss of this date (the Wilburton phase) are not common in this area. Hoards of mainly fragmentary metalwork are, however, a recurring feature of the Late Bronze Age, and not only in south-east England. These fragments were arguably intended for recovery and melting down, although there is a body of opinion which suggests a votive intention for at least some of these hoards (eg Brück 1999, 156–7). However, the earlier Norbury Park hoard remains unusual by its small size, the completeness of its components and the unusual combination of objects, as well as by its apparent association with a cairn and fields. Similar relationships, particularly with a constructed cairn, do not seem to be recorded for the Bronze Age in south-east England. These deposits may suggest a measure of planning in the contemporary landscape or the recognition of significant geographical features, or of notable events. Such an interpretation may account for the deposition of the Norbury Park hoard beneath its cairn. In visual terms the findspot lies approximately centrally within the arc of a C-shaped re-entrant of the ridge bordering the western side of the valley and within which is the present sinuous course of the Mole. It may be that the findspot was chosen after recognition of these features.

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