

The Chertsey Shield

Just before Christmas 1985 Mr Douglas Blake was operating a drag-line in a gravel pit at Abbey Meads, Chertsey, Surrey (TQ 0423 6792), when he discovered a bronze shield (fig 1 a, b). He immediately recognised its importance and brought it to the British Museum for identification: the Museum has now acquired the shield as a gift from the landowners, RMC Group plc.

Although in shape it is typical of a Celtic shield, it is most unusual in one respect: it is made entirely of bronze, the only bronze shield yet found in the Celtic world.

The Celtic shield was normally made of organic materials – wooden examples have survived – sometimes strengthened and ornamented with metal. It was oval and had a raised spine down the long axis, which expanded in the centre to form a spindle-shaped boss. The boss covered a central hole bridged by a horizontal handle, and would have protected the warrior's hand. Metal was sometimes used to bind the edges of the shield, and occasionally metal handles were fitted; some shields had broad metal straps across the front, securing the boss to the body of the shield; and rarely the entire boss was covered with metal. Only one shield of this typical Celtic shape had all the woodwork faced with bronze: it was found in the river Witham in Lincolnshire about 1826 and is now in the British Museum. But the new Chertsey shield stands alone in that it is made entirely of bronze – the metal is not a cover for a wooden shield.

Despite this unique feature the shield is a simple example of a type used for 500 years or so. It is not elaborately decorated and so not easy to date on stylistic grounds. But very fortunately there is a wooden core to the bronze handle, and the finder's prompt action in reporting his discovery has meant that the wood is perfectly preserved. Samples have been dated to 400–200 BC (2250±80 BP, OxA-993) by the Radiocarbon Accelerator Unit at the Oxford University Research Laboratory for Archaeology and the History of Art.

I M STEAD



(a)
Fig 1. (a) The front and (b) the back of the Chertsey shield. Length 836mm. (Photographs courtesy of the Trustees of the British Museum)



(b)