

## A Romano-British clasp-knife from North Holmwood

The clasp-knife from North Holmwood (fig 1) was a chance find recovered in 1995. The surviving portion consists of most of the copper-alloy handle, and now measures a maximum of 61mm long × 13mm high × 10mm thick. The handle is in the shape of an animal's head and shoulders which emerge from a rectangular terminal; the slot for the blade runs beneath the animal's throat and chin, and part of the iron blade is still present. The handle itself is incomplete and corroded, but enough survives to show that the terminal is decorated with vertical mouldings, while the features of the head indicate that it is a hound, an animal frequently shown on decorative Romano-British objects. Traces of the pivot for the blade can be seen at the broken end of the terminal.

The long nose and the position of the eyes closely resemble those on a handle from a fixed-blade knife found at Richborough which is in the shape of the head and upper body of a collared hound (Henderson 1949, 129, and pl 36, no 117). On the Richborough handle the hound's chin lies directly on its outstretched paws, and it is likely that the North Holmwood head was similarly placed. An exceptionally well-preserved clasp-knife in the British Museum has the head and shoulders of a hound emerging from a foliate terminal; the nose is rather shorter but still touches the outstretched paws, in which a small hare is held (British Museum 1929, fig 157, d). Unfortunately it is not possible to calculate how much of the lower edge has been lost from the North Holmwood knife, or whether a similar hare may originally have been present.

Clasp-knives with decorative openwork handles have been recovered from a number of Romano-British sites. Liversidge suggests that they were used as dinner-knives (1968, 156), while Boon prefers to interpret them as personal toilet instruments, the *cultellus tonsorius* (1991, 22–4, and fig 1). Animals and hunting scenes modelled in the round were particularly popular on both folding and fixed knives, and one of the commonest designs shows the complete figures of a dog chasing a hare. Clasp-knives with this motif have been found in copper alloy (eg London Museum 1930, fig 19, no 4, from London) and in bone (eg Liversidge 1968, fig 66, c, from Great Chesterford).

It is rarely possible to date such objects closely. The Richborough handle noted above comes from a context dated *c* AD 50–80; a similar clasp-knife from Verulamium, decorated with an erotic scene, comes from a 4th century soil level (C Johns, in Goodburn 1984, 58–9), though its close affinity with a samian-ware figure-type may indicate a somewhat earlier date for its manufacture.

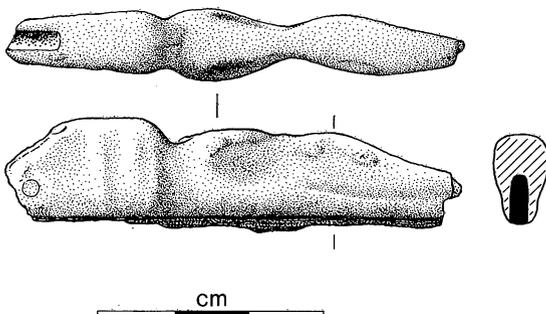


Fig 1 Romano-British clasp-knife from North Holmwood. (1:1)

### ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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