

A Romano-British lynch-pin head from Chelsham

The lynch-pin head recovered near Chelsham in 1995 (fig 1) belongs to a small group of Romano-British lynch-pins with the crescent-shaped head cast separately in copper alloy. One complete arm of the crescent survives, broken off at the edge of a square central moulding, and the tip is modelled in the shape of a phallus. The crescent is hollow-cast, with the thickness of the metal varying between 3 and 6mm at the top and sides. The metal is much thinner — between 1 and 2mm — at the back, where there are circular grooves indicating considerable wear, presumably from the motion of the wheel behind. Similar grooves have been noted on the head of the lynch-pin from Hassocks described below (Couchman 1927, 70).

Romano-British lynch-pins have been classified by Manning (1976, 32–4 and fig 9; 1985, 72–4 and fig 20) and the types with crescent-shaped heads form his Type 1; if the missing central moulding originally carried a square loop for a thong tying the pin to the axle, the lynch-pin would belong to Type 1c. The versions with copper-alloy heads had the top of the iron lynch-pin fitted into a socket at the centre of the head, and examples of such composite lynch-pins have now been recorded from several sites. Apart from a plain example from Cirencester recorded by Ward Perkins (1940, 367), all carry some degree of decoration, indicating that they come from vehicles of relatively high status. Four of them have the arms of the crescent decorated with fluting; of these, the one from Brading, Isle of Wight, has a simple square loop in front (Tomalin 1987, 77 and 83, F52), the one from Tiddington, Warwickshire, has a square loop with part of another, broken, element on top of it (Ward Perkins 1940, fig 4, no 2), the one from Caldecotte, Buckinghamshire, has a more rounded loop with the stump of what is probably again a broken element on top of it (King 1994, fig 78, no 201), and the one from Wootton, South Humberside, has a square loop decorated with a large projecting human thumb (Leahy & Henig 1988). A

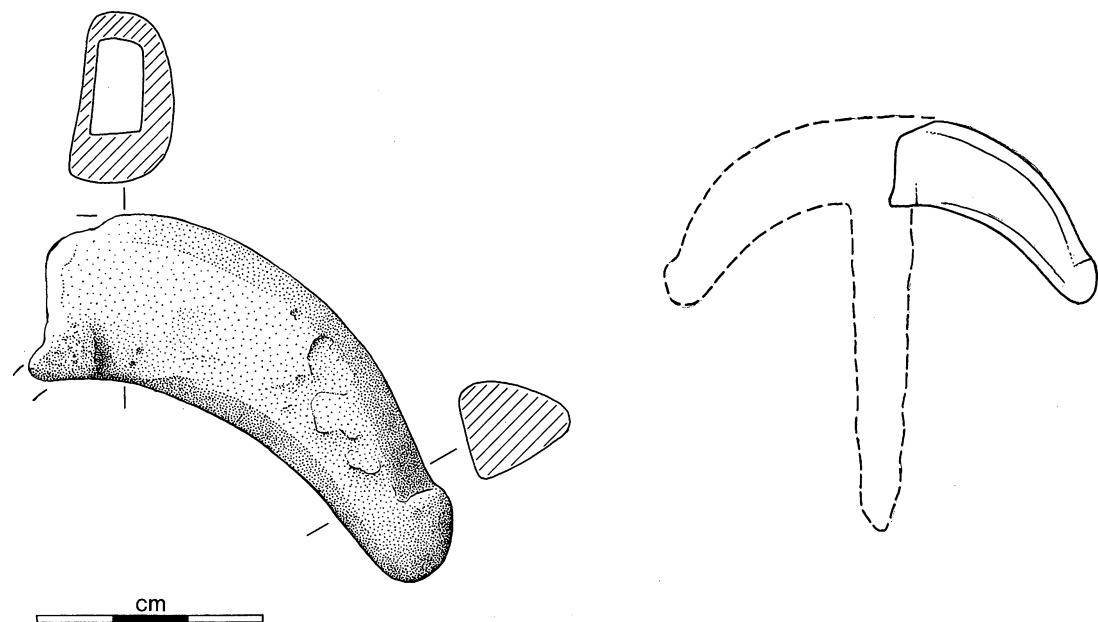


Fig 1 Romano-British lynch-pin head from Chelsham. (1:1)

variant of this style of decoration is shown on the example from Mansfield Woodhouse, Nottinghamshire, where the crescent arms carry ribbed decoration further ornamented with hatching to give a herring-bone effect; on this piece the projecting loop has a round hole (Oswald 1938).

Three further examples have animal terminals. The first, from Hassocks, Sussex, has ribbing along the arms of the crescent and enigmatic beaked heads — perhaps of dolphins or swans — at the ends, with lively incised detail added to the eyes, the beaks and the tops of the heads; the square moulding on the front of this piece has broken away (Couchman 1927). The second, from Camulodunum, has the heads of collared hounds as the terminals; here the loop is replaced with a projection ending in a small boar's head, round which the securing thong was presumably tied (Hawkes & Hull 1947, 331, and pl 99, no 7). The third example, from an unknown provenance and now in the British Museum, has ram's-head terminals (Ward Perkins 1940, 367). The heads of the lynch-pins from Camulodunum and Hassocks also have a shallow plain moulding on the top, perhaps a reinforcement for hammering the lynch-pin home, but the Chelsham example is too incomplete for it to be identified here.

The Chelsham piece adds the phallus motif to the decoration recorded on copper-alloy lynch-pin heads. The other arm of the crescent would have carried a second phallus or a clenched hand with the thumb projecting in the *mano fica* gesture, both of which motifs are common individually and together on crescent-shaped Roman pendants (eg Johns 1982, fig 57; Menzel 1986, *Tafn* 136–7). Johns points out that the phallus, hand and crescent were all lucky symbols, while the phallus was considered especially powerful against ill-fortune and the evil eye (1982, 60–75). In discussing the thumb projection on the Wootton lynch-pin, Leahy & Henig note the possibility of a phallic element in the imagery, providing additional protection to the wheel (1988, 321), and the Chelsham lynch-pin head shows a more overt use of this apotropaic symbolism.

No close dating is possible for this small group of lynch-pins. The Chelsham piece is a surface find, as were the examples from Wootton and Tiddington, while the Caldecotte one was in the excavation topsoil. Of the others, the lynch-pin from Camulodunum probably comes from Boudiccan destruction rubbish (ie after AD 60/61), the one from Hassocks was found in a pit with Roman pottery, and the one from Mansfield Woodhouse came from a ditch with pottery of the late 2nd to early 3rd century.

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