

# THREE IRON AGE BROOCHES FROM THE THAMES FORESHORE AT MORTLAKE, SYON AND WANDSWORTH

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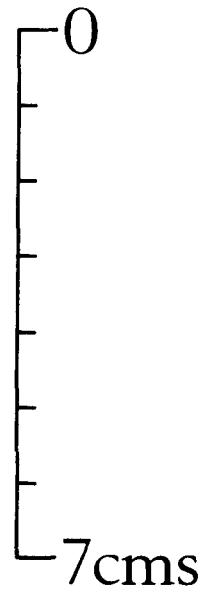
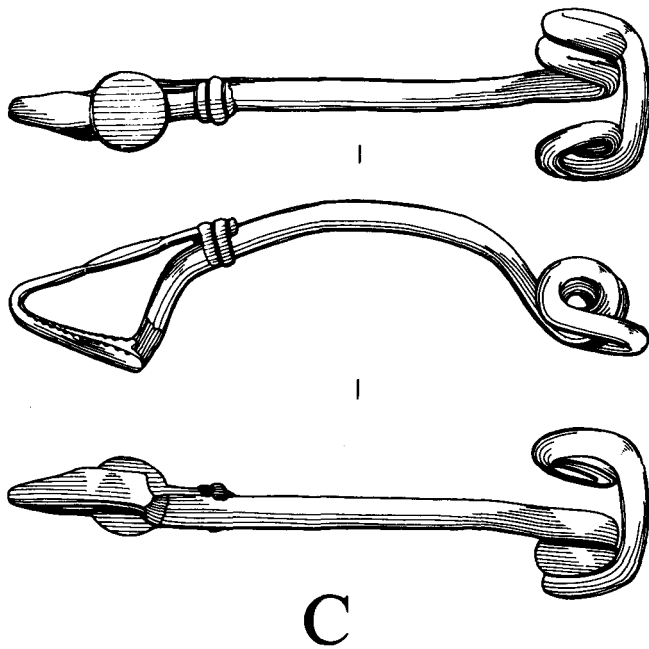
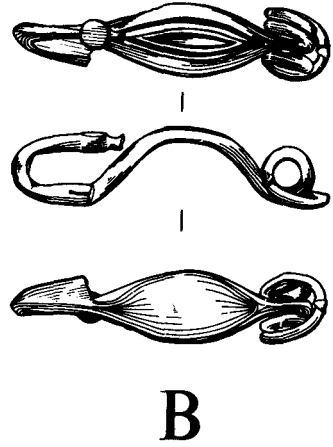
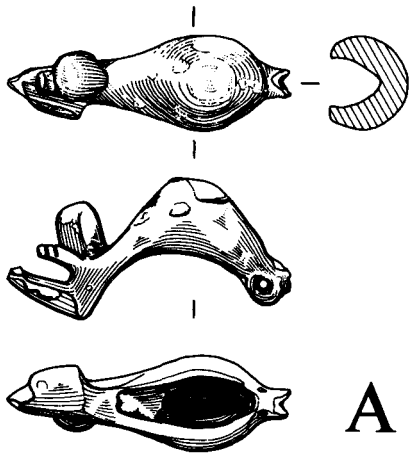
The three bronze fibulae form part of a series of scattered finds picked up between the tidelines on the Thames foreshore by Mr. John Gibson during the summer of 1975, and the spring of 1977<sup>1</sup>. A ribbed terret from the same collection was the subject of an earlier note<sup>2</sup>, and the three fibulae, like the terret, remain with the finder.

Fibula A was found on the Surrey foreshore at Mortlake in the spring of 1977. Measuring 37mm in length, it has a heavy, hollowed bow, with a raised, knobbed terminal surmounting a now broken, but originally recurving and simply decorated foot, which meets and joins the bow at an angle slightly below the horizontal. At the head of the fibula the casting is pierced through twice, once horizontally and once vertically (at which point the metal has fractured), and both piercings retain evidence of corroded iron. The pin mechanism and pin are missing.

This brooch belongs to a small insular group of experimental fibulae manufactured in the apparent absence of imported late Hallstatt models probably during the early 5th century B.C. Incorporating features characteristic of some continental late Hallstatt and early La Tène fibulae, each brooch in the group is unique, and two examples from the Thames valley are relevant to this discussion. The first, from the site of a 'pile-dwelling' on the Thames foreshore at Hammersmith<sup>3</sup>, is similarly incomplete but provides the closest parallel with multiple piercings through its head, while the second, from Woodeaton in Oxfordshire<sup>4</sup>, is particularly informative because it is complete. All three are generally similar in form, and share the heavy, hollowed bow, a feature not found on contemporary continental fibulae<sup>5</sup>, although the feet of the Mortlake and Woodeaton examples differ from that of the Hammersmith brooch, which has a ball-foot terminal adjacent to its catch-plate.

Most difficulty surrounds the interpretation of the function of the piercings at the head of the fibula, and some suggestions have been offered regarding the multiple piercings at the head of the Hammersmith example<sup>6</sup>. Thus, it seems likely that the broken vertical piercing originally held an iron pin which secured a second knobbed terminal, balancing the one cast onto the foot. Such decorative symmetry can be seen on the Woodeaton brooch, and is a feature of the continental early La Tène double-headed bird fibulae<sup>7</sup>, although in the present case the weight of the additional terminal seems to have placed too much strain on the casting, causing it to fracture at this point.

The horizontal piercing of the Mortlake fibula may also have held an iron rod, around which a bilaterally coiled spring mechanism was wound. The Woodeaton brooch was equipped in this way, as were the late Hallstatt cross-bow fibulae on the Continent<sup>8</sup>. The precise method by which the pin of the Mortlake fibula was sprung cannot be determined, but the simple pivot pin associated with the Hammersmith brooch and the disguised pivoted pin on the Woodeaton example suggest that it was perhaps similarly



equipped, and not sprung in the same fashion as the continental fibulae. Finally, a second horizontal piercing may have adorned its head, like the Hammersmith example, although due to the fracture of the casting the evidence has been lost.

The importance of the Mortlake brooch, as with the few others of its type, lies in its early date and innovative use of a combination of continental and insular features, a characteristic shared by the series of Thames daggers studied by Jope<sup>9</sup>. It should also be noted that two of the six Hallstatt D daggers recovered from the river are said to have come from Mortlake<sup>10</sup>. Further finds from this area, including a quantity of early Iron Age pottery, are recorded by Lawrence and others<sup>11</sup>.

Fibula B was found on the Middlesex foreshore at Syon ('Old England') in the summer of 1975. Measuring 41mm in length, it has a broad, low, cast bow ornamented with vesica- or almond-shaped decoration, a four coil spring with an external chord (which has been neatly repaired by the finder), a short catch-plate and a snouted horizontal foot which meets the bow straight on. The pin is missing, although when first discovered the finder noticed traces of corroded iron lodged in the catch-plate.

Lacking the high arched bow and large spring coils of the earliest, imported La Tène fibulae, the developed profile of the Syon example belongs to a later phase of the La Tène I brooch series, and may probably be dated to the 4th-3rd centuries B.C. It can be added to a small but distinctive group of insular fibulae recently recognised by Hodson<sup>12</sup>, and characterised by a 'non-functional skeuomorphic spring', short catch-plate, horizontal foot profile, and vesica decoration on a broad, low bow, whose distribution is largely restricted to the Thames valley and centred on the Hammersmith area. In addition to the three fibulae mentioned by Hodson in his discussion of the type<sup>13</sup>, others are known from Abingdon, Oxfordshire<sup>14</sup>, Ewell, Surrey<sup>15</sup>, the site of the Hammersmith 'pile-dwellings'<sup>16</sup>, and 'The Thames, Middlesex'<sup>17</sup>, with an outlier from Barrington, Cambridgeshire<sup>18</sup>.

The pins of these fibulae are not sprung in the true sense, but pivoted on a rod held in place by the coils of a skeuomorphic spring. This arrangement was initially thought to be evidence of later repair, but it now seems clear that the technique represents an original constructional feature, and one perhaps derived from earlier British fibulae of the type discussed above<sup>19</sup>. The corroded iron in the catch-plate of the Syon example suggests that it had an iron pin, and a similar combination of a bronze brooch with an iron pin was noted on a La Tène I brooch from Cowlam, Yorkshire<sup>20</sup>.

The Syon foreshore at Old England is probably best known for finds of late Bronze Age metalwork and Romano-British wattle-floored 'huts'<sup>21</sup>, although Iron Age material was found in the last century during the digging of Brentford Dock c.350m downstream<sup>22</sup>, and other single finds are recorded by Lawrence<sup>23</sup>. Sherds of early Iron Age pottery have been found stratified in the layers that constitute the modern foreshore at several points<sup>24</sup>, although recent work suggests that much of the material now recovered is being washed from the river bank by tidal action<sup>25</sup>.

Fibula C was found on the Surrey foreshore at Wandsworth in the spring of 1977. Measuring 84mm in length, it has a simple elongated 'wire' bow, a four coil spring with an external chord, a short catch-plate ornamented with notched decoration, and a recurving disc-foot which aligns with the curve of the bow and is held in position by means of an ill-fitting three-stranded collar. The pin is missing, and the junction of bow

and catch-plate has since been repaired by the finder. As with Fibula B, the finder noticed traces of corroded iron lodged in the catch-plate when first discovered.

Although typologically of La Tène II form, and with an insular skeuomorphic spring of the type mentioned above, this fibula has much in common with a number of earlier continental examples; compare for instance the fibulae with similarly long, low bows, short catch-plates and angled disc-feet that appear during the Ib (Early) stage in the La Tène cemetery at Münsingen-Rain, near Berne<sup>26</sup>. Several examples of this continental type have been found in this country, most notably the iron brooch from Findon Park, Sussex<sup>27</sup>, and these fibulae may provide the starting-point from which the insular series of La Tène II 'flattened-bow' and 'involute' brooches subsequently developed<sup>28</sup>. Typologically earlier than these, the Wandsworth example is likely to fall within the same 3rd-1st century B.C. date-range, although Mackreth notes the use of certain types of La Tène II fibulae by the legions of the Rhine army as late as the middle of the 1st century A.D.<sup>29</sup> The corroded iron noticed in the catch-plate of this brooch – suggestive of an iron pin – is significant in view of the numbers of iron fibulae of La Tène II type found<sup>30</sup>.

The Thames at Wandsworth has produced an impressive array of Iron Age material, including pottery, La Tène I dagger scabbards and an iron sword in an iron sheath<sup>31</sup>, although the area is best known for the two splendid bronze shield bosses which were found in 1849<sup>32</sup>. These latter objects are amongst the finest pieces of late Iron Age decorative metalwork to have come from the river in west London, and together with the Battersea shield, Brentford 'horn-cap' and the horned helmet from Waterloo Bridge, they represent the culmination of perhaps 1500 years of inventive and skilled metalworking in the Thames valley<sup>33</sup>. The three fibulae considered here are a modest part of this same tradition, and serve to demonstrate the wide-ranging interest in functional and decorative innovation on the part of their makers – an interest not solely confined to the largest and most prestigious objects.

#### ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

My thanks are due to the finder for allowing the brooches to be placed on record; to Gareth Griffiths, Alison Laws and Jean Macdonald for kindly supplying unpublished information; to Professor Christopher Hawkes for his correspondence; and to Professor Roy Hodson and Dr. Ian Stead for their patient help and advice. I am further indebted to Professor Hodson, Alison Laws and Dr. Hugh Chapman for reading and commenting on the text.

#### NOTES

1. Precise details of the findspots have been deposited with the Museum of London, and may be consulted there.
2. J. F. Cotton 'An Iron Age Terret from the Thames Foreshore at Isleworth, Middlesex' *Trans. London Middx. Archaeol. Soc.* 29 (1978) 151-153. Fibulae B and C are the two brooches mentioned here (*ibid.* note 1).
3. F. R. Hodson 'Three Iron Age Brooches from Hammersmith' in (ed) G. de G. Sieveking *Prehistoric and Roman Studies* (British Museum 1971) 50-53, Pl. 13 A.
4. D. W. Harding *The Iron Age in the Upper Thames Basin* (Oxford 1972) Pl. 74 H.
5. It does, however, occur on some earlier Italic fibulae (D. B. Harden 'Italic and Etruscan Finds in Britain' in *Atti del I° Congresso Internazionale di Preistoria e Protohistoria Mediterranea* Firenze-Napoli-Roma (1950) 315-324 and references therein).
6. Hodson *op. cit.* in note 3, 51.
7. *Ibid.* 51; P. Jacobsthal *Early Celtic Art* 2 (Oxford 1944) Pls. 153-155.
8. Hodson *ibid.* 51.
9. E. M. Jope 'Daggers of the Early Iron Age in Britain' *Proc. Prehist. Soc.* 27 (1961) 307-343; see now also J. Macdonald 'An Iron Age Dagger in the Royal Ontario Museum' in (eds) J. Bird, H. Chapman and J. Clark *Collectanea Londiniensia* London Middx. Archaeol. Soc. Special Paper No. 2 (1978) 44-52.
10. Both are sheathed examples from the Layton Collection, Jope *op. cit.* in note 9, 329-330, Catalogue Nos. 1 ('presumed Mortlake') and 2 ('from Thames ballast at Mortlake'). Of the other four, two come from the Thames at Battersea; one is from 'The Thames'; while the fourth is from the

- Thames at Westminster Bridge. A further fragmentary scabbard is also said to have come from the Thames. See Jope *ibid.*, Catalogue Nos. 3-6, and Macdonald *op. cit.*
11. G. F. Lawrence 'Antiquities from the Middle Thames' *Archaeol. J.* 86 (1929) 84; *The Victoria History of the Counties of England, Middlesex I* (1969) 51, 58-59.
  12. Hodson *op. cit.* in note 3, 54-56.
  13. *Ibid.*; the three examples mentioned are from Hammersmith (*ibid.* Pl. 13 C), the Thames at London (*ibid.* Pl. 13 D) and Woodeaton (see Harding *op. cit.* in note 4, Pl. 74 E). Although morphologically distinct, a second brooch from Hammersmith (Hodson *ibid.* 54, Pl. 13 B) shares the skeuomorphic spring and vesica motif characteristic of this group.
  14. M. Parrington *The Excavation of an Iron Age Settlement, Bronze Age Ring-Ditches and Roman Features at Ashville Trading Estate, Abingdon (Oxfordshire) 1974-76* C.B.A. Research Report 28 (1978) 78, Fig. 59 No. 11.
  15. *Surrey Archaeol. Soc. Bull.* 154 (February 1979) 5.
  16. Unpublished example from the old Guildhall Museum Collection (Accession No. 91), now in the Museum of London. Information from Jean Macdonald.
  17. Unpublished example in private possession. Information from Gareth Griffiths.
  18. C. Fox *The Archaeology of the Cambridge Region* (Cambridge 1923) 75, Pl. 18 No. 3
  19. See Hodson *op. cit.* in note 3, 55-56.
  20. W. Greenwell *British Barrows* (Oxford 1877) 209, Fig. 111.
  21. R. E. M. Wheeler '“Old England”, Brentford' *Antiquity* 3 (1929) 20-32; R. Canham *2000 Years of Brentford* (H.M.S.O. 1978) 32-34 and references therein.
  22. Museum of London Archaeological Finds Index (E 206).
  23. Lawrence *op. cit.* in note 11, 80.
  24. Wheeler *op. cit.* in note 22, 27, 30-31; I. N. Hume 'Iron Age and Roman Discoveries in Syon Reach' *Port of London Authority Monthly* (August 1956) 228.
  25. Information from Alison Laws.
  26. F. R. Hodson 'The La Tène Cemetery at Münsingen-Rain' *Acta Bernensia* 5 (1968).
  27. C. Fox 'A La Tène I Brooch from Wales : with Notes on the Typology and Distribution of these Brooches in Britain' *Archaeol. Camb.* 82 (1927) 87 and Fig. 20. Other examples come from Wallingford, Berkshire and from the Thames at London (B. W. Cunliffe *Iron Age Communities in Britain* (London 1974) 146).
  28. See E. M. Jope 'Iron Age Brooches in Ireland : A Summary' *Ulster J. Archaeol.* 24-25 (1961-1962) 25-28 and D. Dudley and E. M. Jope 'An Iron Age Cist-Burial with Two Brooches from Trevone, North Cornwall' *Cornish Archaeology* 4 (1965) 18-23 for discussion of these types.
  29. D. Mackreth *Roman Brooches* (Salisbury and South Wiltshire Museum 1973) 11.
  30. E.g. all of the La Tène II fibulae from the hillfort of Croft Ambrey in Herefordshire were of iron (S. C. Stanford *Croft Ambrey* (1974) 162-165, Fig. 75).
  31. For the pottery see V. C. H. *Middlesex I*, 62; for the dagger scabbards see Jope *op. cit.* in note 9, 335-337, Catalogue Nos. 19 and 22; for the iron sword and sheath see N. Farrant 'Two Weapons from the Thames' *Trans. London Middx. Archaeol. Soc.* 24 (1973) 157-158.
  32. Now conveniently re-published in J. W. Brailsford *Early Celtic Masterpieces from Britain in the British Museum* (British Museum 1975) 14-24.
  33. R. Canham 'Some Priorities and Problems in the Prehistoric Archaeology of the Thames Basin' in (eds) Bird, Chapman and Clark *op. cit.* in note 9, 36.