

Seventh Century Finds from Astwick

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SUMMARY

A resume of the seventh century finds from Astwick, recorded briefly by Ransom, but not previously given a modern consideration. The principal finds are four spearheads, a sugar-loaf shieldboss, a sword, and a lancehead. Appendix I considers a seventh century pot from Clifton.

INTRODUCTION

William Ransom of Hitchin collected many archaeological materials on his extensive travels, both in Britain and on the continent. His collections are now in the British Museum, Department of Medieval and Later Antiquities and Department of Prehistory and Roman Britain,¹ and the Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology, Cambridge.² These collections have long provided a quarry for students in many fields of archaeological research, but in general they are poorly published. Contemporary publication is almost non-existent, and where the items were published in the nineteenth century they reflect the standards of a nineteenth century dilettante. A case in point is the contemporary account of these seventh century finds from Astwick, sandwiched in a comparatively short paper between an account of a find of samian ware at Astwick and an equally terse note of a hoard of bronze axes from Cumberlow Green. The latter is then followed by a piece on the discovery of a Roman cremation cemetery at Great Wymondley, Herts.³

This brief conspectus of some of the contents of William Ransom's paper, 'An account of British and Roman remains found in the neighbourhood of Hitchin', read to the Hertfordshire Natural History Society at Hertford on 18 March 1886, serves to illustrate the wide range of this dilettante's cabinet. Beyond material already mentioned one can cite other objects of the Anglo-Saxon period: a great square-headed brooch from Kempston found in 1884⁴ and finds from a cemetery at Ashwell,

Herts.⁵ Roman finds are particularly well represented and an extremely representative collection of Roman glass from sites in France, now in the Cambridge Museum, deserves fuller study than it has hitherto received. Two items in the British Museum of note are a large collection of palaeoliths from a number of localities and a collection of medieval pottery from London.

THE ASTWICK FINDS

Anglo-Saxon material is comparatively poorly represented in the finds collected by Ransom. The principal items in Cambridge have already been mentioned and there is only one group of note in the British Museum. This is the group of seventh century finds from Astwick which is the subject of this paper.

Ransom recorded little in 1886⁶ beyond their existence and a note of the discovery at the same time (apparently) of a group of ten fine samian bowls.

Three or four miles eastward, near Astwick, in digging for coprolites, a large number of human skeletons were disinterred, and near these were ten Samian vessels, all quite perfect, with the potters' names distinctly legible on most of them. A sword and a number of spear-heads, with divided haft, indicative of Saxon workmanship as distinguished from the usually welded haft of the Roman weapons, were also found. One of these is of a very unusual type. There was also a boss of a shield, which was in fragments, but, when cleaned, the pieces were easily put together.

This unhelpful account is supplemented by a plate showing the principal items found, and the descriptions which follow give a concordance of that plate.⁶ The account does not even give the date of discovery and no details whatsoever are included of associations and grave positions. It is not even clear what the exact relationship between the large number of skeletons, the ten samian bowls and the Anglo-Saxon finds are.

The finds, it has been suggested, were made at about TL 216385.⁷

From the Anglo-Saxon finds it is possible to locate in the British Museum the sword, four spearheads, a lancehead, two knives, a stud, a fragment from the shieldboss and three bent iron rods.

DESCRIPTION OF OBJECTS

The Astwick finds are in the British Museum, Department of Medieval and Later Antiquities, register number 1915, 12-8, 353-365. Ransom illustrated most of the finds, *Trans Herts Nat Hist Soc* 4, 1886, pl 2, to which a concordance is given.

- 1 Sword, iron, in fair state of preservation, though edge is severely damaged in part, now in six pieces. Hilt extant with considerable traces of wood. Pommel at end of hilt, iron, and cast with the sword. Length overall 838mm. Length of blade 730mm. Width of blade 44mm maximum, 37mm minimum. X-Ray shows blade has pattern-welding of a mixed type (at 'A' and 'B'). No pattern-welding on pommel. (Ransom fig 1; British Museum, 1919, 12-8, 353).
- 2 Spearhead, iron, short blade, length 168mm, blade 104mm, width 22mm, retains some wood in the socket. (Ransom fig 2; British Museum, 1915, 12-8, 354; on loan to National Museum of Wales, Cardiff).
- 3 Spearhead, iron, broad blade, broken socket, length extant 245mm, blade 180mm, width 43mm. (Ransom fig 3; British Museum, 1915, 12-8, 355).
- 4 Spearhead, iron, broad flat blade, closed socket, length 337mm, blade 205mm, width 65mm. (Ransom fig 4; British Museum, 1915, 12-8, 356).
- 5 Spearhead, iron, socket broken at end and edges of blade damaged, length extant 290mm blade 206mm, width 40mm. (Ransom fig 5; British Museum, 1915, 12-8, 357).
- 6 Knife, iron, length 176mm. (Ransom fig 6; British Museum, 1915, 12-8, 358).
- 7 Lancehead, iron, long socket, split at end with small, very narrow blade. Length extant 288mm, blade 80mm, width 25mm. Comparison with Ransom's figure suggests that the

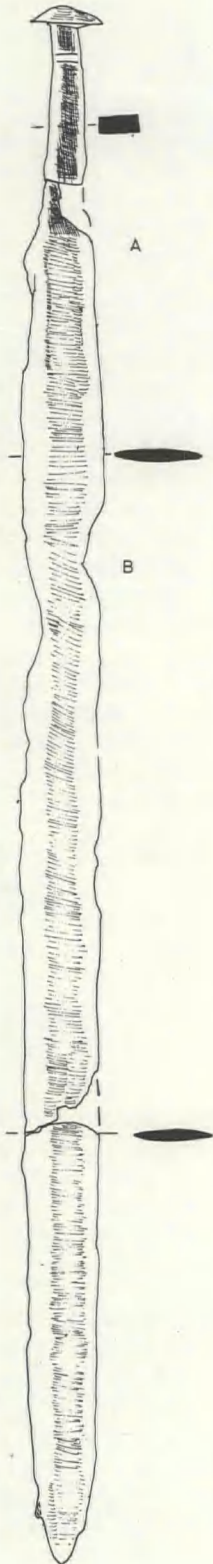


Fig 1 (left) Sword from Astwick. Pattern welding is visible on an X-ray photograph at 'A' and 'B' but definition is too indistinct for it to be shown diagrammatically. (Scale $\frac{1}{4}$)

- blade was rather longer and ended in a much sharper point. About 40mm appears to have been lost. (Ransom fig 7; British Museum, 1915, 12-8, 359).
- 8 Knife, iron, length 185mm. (Ransom fig 8; British Museum, 1915, 12-8, 360).
 - 9 Rod, iron, curved at one end, length 135mm, (Ransom fig 9; British Museum, 1915, 12-8, 361).
 - 10 Disc with rivet beneath, iron, diameter 38mm. (Ransom fig 11; British Museum, 1915, 12-8, 362).
 - 11 Rod, iron, length 260mm. (Not illustrated by Ransom; British Museum, 1915, 12-8, 363).
 - 12 Rod, iron, length 221mm. (Not illustrated by Ransom; British Museum, 1915, 12-8, 364).
 - 13 Shield boss, reported as found in fragments, of which five co-joined have been traced (lacking a British Museum number). From their shape and its resemblance to Ransom's illustration and that of Miss Evison may be safely assumed to be the Astwick boss. Approximate diameter 140mm, height extant 111mm. Straight-sided, conical boss, lacking a carination and with a narrow rim. One rivet extant on the rim. (Ransom fig 10; Evison, 1963, fig 22 a-c; British Museum, 1915, 12-8, 365).
 - 14 Shield grip, presumably iron. (Ransom fig 12; Evison, 1963, fig 22 c; not accessioned by the British Museum).

Three possible finds from Astwick, are illustrated:

- a Spearhead, length 420mm, blade 260mm, width 22mm. (British Museum, 1915, 12-8, 350).
- b Spearhead, broken at socket, length extant 258mm, blade 160mm, width 27mm. (British Museum, 1915, 12-8, 351).
- c Spearhead, iron, length 180mm, blade 95mm, width 24mm, wood in socket. (British Museum, 1915, 12-8, 352).

DISCUSSION

The material from the Astwick cemetery is meagre but the range of finds includes several objects diagnostic of seventh century cemeteries in the south-east Midlands. Particular attention may be paid to close relationships with other cemeteries in Bedfordshire and with cemeteries in Hertford-

shire and Cambridgeshire, where several of the objects may be easily paralleled.

Sword

The Astwick sword (1) is a short sword, requiring only one hand to wield it. Many Anglo-Saxon swords are large, two-handed swords, as for example the most notable of the Kempston swords, that from grave 75 (found 2 February 1864), a late sixth century sword with a 'Linton Heath type' scabbard mount.⁸ A much closer comparison to the Astwick sword is that from grave 3 at Harrold,⁹ and a fragment from Kempston is only 32mm wide.¹⁰ The presence of seventh century finds at Kempston is well-known and the associations of the Harrold sword place it late in the Anglo-Saxon graves with accoutrements. It may prove on more intensive examination that the short sword, single handed and with a narrow blade is a characteristic seventh century type. As yet insufficient work has been done to prove this.

Spearheads

Four spearheads are extant from Astwick (2-5) and these present a perplexing mixture of types. One (2) is a type found in contexts of widely differing dates, but the three others seem all to be variants of what is probably a seventh century type. The spearhead with the broad flat blade has been found locally at Melbourn, Cambs., grave 12,¹¹ associated with a sugar-loaf shield-boss, and elsewhere in Bedfordshire. That from Biscot Mill has no associations,¹² but one from grave B 11 at Marina Drive, Totternhoe, had an iron knife with it.¹³ This grave, however, was found by workmen and not in the course of excavation. On one from Harrold grave 3⁹ were short chevron grooves either side of the join of blade and socket. Though larger than any other cited weapon, this does have very late associations.

Lancehead

The lancehead (7) is an unusual object, difficult to parallel in English material. It is, however, common in Germany. A group of lanceheads at Krefeld-Gellep, graves 258,¹⁴ 759¹⁵ and 947,¹⁶ can be compared with examples from Eisenach grave 07/10¹⁷ and Rittersdorf graves 102¹⁸ and 142.¹⁹ These have been dated to the late fifth or early sixth century, but this dating may well not be applicable to England. Even in Germany some

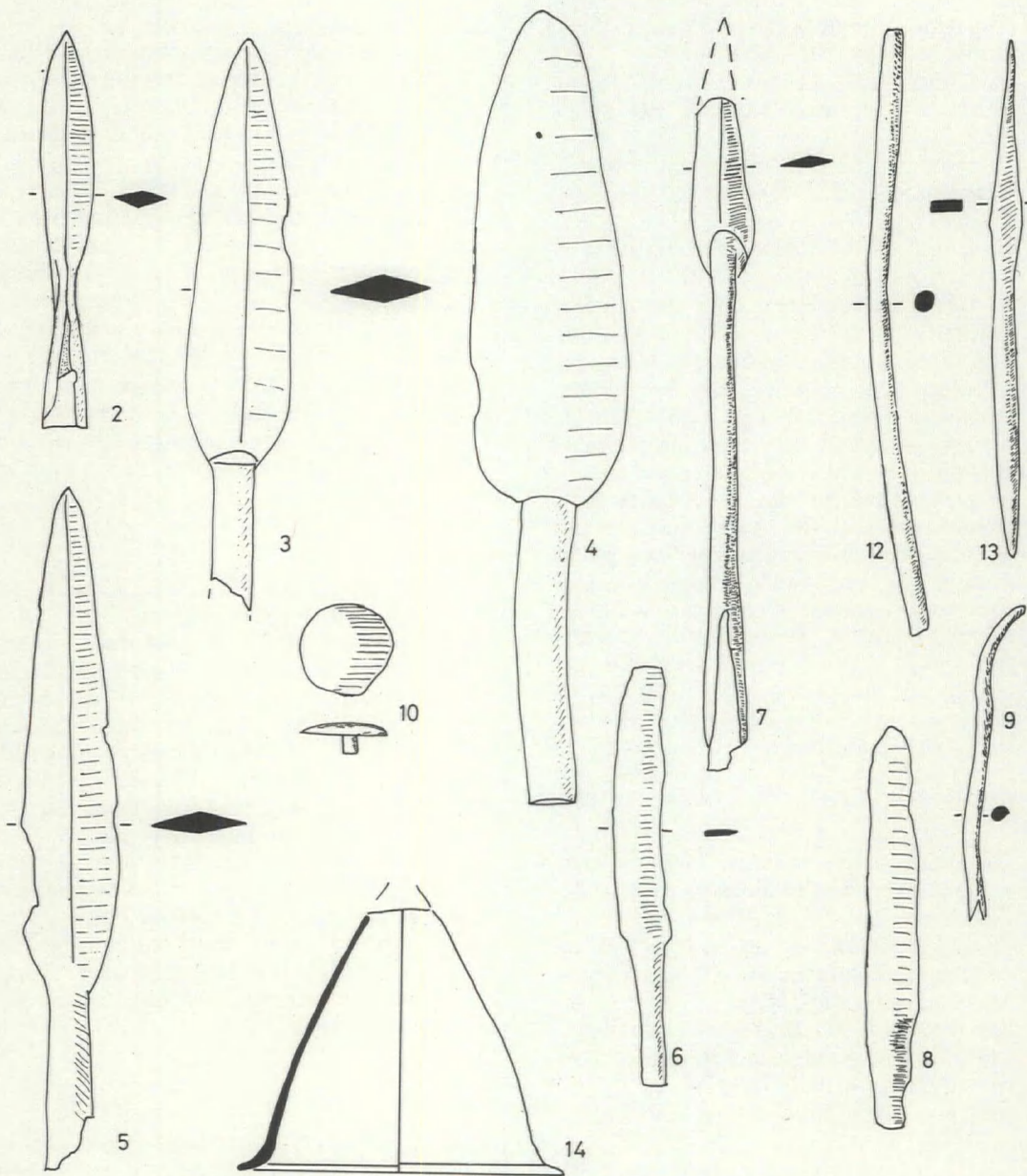


Fig. 2 Metal work from Astwick.

examples are given late sixth century dates and many ideas whose German origins are late in the fifth century do not reach England until some later date. The complexities of the inter-relationships of the English and German shores of the North Sea in the later *Volkwanderungszeit* have yet to be examined in full. A more close examination of both English and continental material may yet prove that the lancehead is an accredited component of the seventh century weapon complex in England, but that its origins in the Rhineland are earlier.

Shieldboss

Miss Evison first drew attention to the sugar-loaf shieldboss (13) in her 1963 survey.²⁰ This fairly simple cone, with straight sides is comparable to a boss from grave 6 at Portsdown, Hants.²¹ The disc (10) has been suggested as a disc on top of the boss. Several bosses do have a button top: lost examples from Breach Down, Kent,²² and that found in grave 12 at Melbourn, Cambs.²³ However, it is argued below that the disc at Astwick was more probably a shield ornament. The lack of a carination on a sugar-loaf shieldboss is unusual. Sugar loaf shieldbosses since Miss Evison's survey have long been recognised as characteristic of the seventh century.

Disc

Ransom, and following him, Miss Evison, illustrated the disc (10) a button top to the shield boss. However, its size, diameter 38mm, suggests an alternative explanation of its function. Among the material from Kempston is an iron disc, diameter 35mm,²⁴ with a rivet on the underside. Comparison of the two pieces suggests that the interpretation of the Kempston piece, as a disc on the face of a shield, would be equally applicable to the Astwick disc. Shield ornaments are found in a number of sizes and a variety of shapes.²⁵ A circular disc, usually but not always, capped with silver, with a diameter of 35-40mm, is probably the most common form.²⁶ The Kempston piece quoted is part of the rich 'fish badge grave', grave 52 (grave found 11 December 1863).²⁷ Associated in this grave are a sharply carinated shieldboss, with a high angled rim, now only partly extant.²⁸ The rivets on the shieldboss rim were capped with silver, and there is a silver-capped disc which fits the wide button top of the boss exactly.²⁹ The shield had a bronze binding³⁰ and silver rivets on the face.³¹ The fish-badge and three rivets, all of tinned bronze,

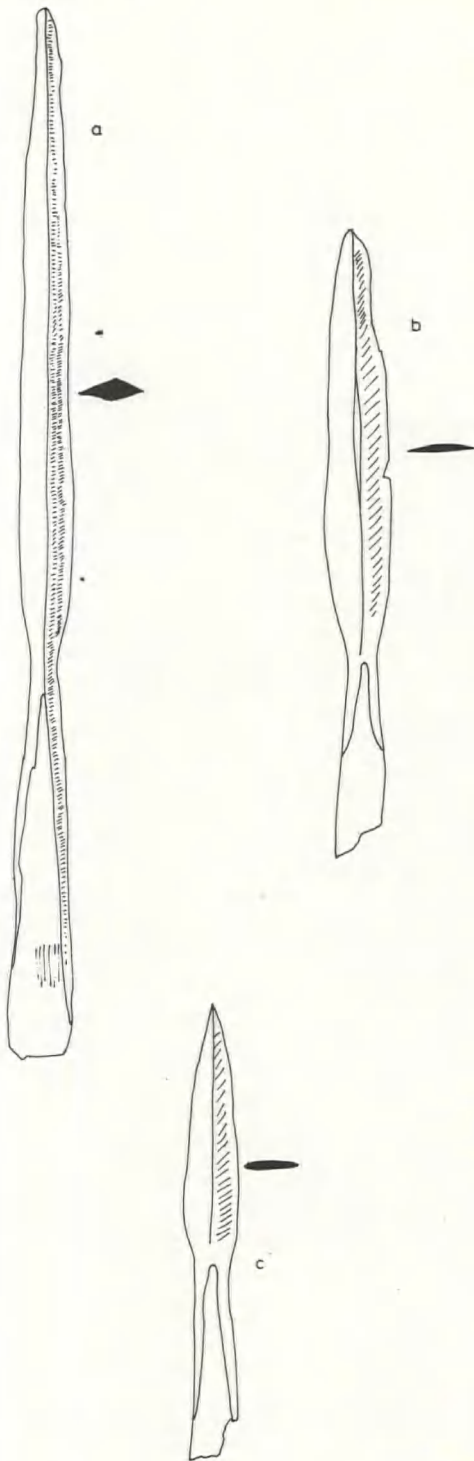


Fig. 3 Spearheads, perhaps from Astwick.



Fig. 4 Pot from Clifton

complete the known accoutrements of the shield.³² Kempston grave 52 is probably late sixth century, but in England silver rivet heads on shieldboss rims are also found well into the seventh century, as with the Holdborough type boss found in grave 151 (grave recorded 20 December 1864) associated with a circular bronze pouch mount.³³ There is no reason why a poorer shield of the seventh century should not have an iron disc on the face.

The Astwick Cemetery

The discussions have emphasised that the main body of finds from Astwick are seventh century in character. The sugar-loaf shieldboss and the spearhead with the broad blade are both well-attested members of the seventh century corpus of Anglo-Saxon material. Further research may prove that the same is equally true of the angon and the short, single-handed sword. A shield disc of iron, probably one of several on the shield face, is not out of place in such a cemetery.

The size of the cemetery was probably small. The known metalwork suggests five graves were accompanied by weapons. It is rare to find graves with two spearheads and it seems logical to suppose that in the poorly-recorded circumstances of the Astwick finds the number of spearheads is equivalent to the number of male graves with weapons. Certainly this would represent the maximum. If the three possible spearheads are included the number rises to eight.

Ransom specifically records:³⁴

a large number of human skeletons.

In these circumstances and knowing, as we do, that many Anglo-Saxon burials are unaccompanied by any accoutrements or at best have only a knife, it seems logical to suppose that the number of burials at Astwick was much larger. It is difficult to raise arguments of size from one cemetery at another,

but the local proportions of accompanied to unaccompanied graves would suggest that twenty or more was a probable number of burials at Astwick.

At Biscot Mill, Luton, some eleven burials have been found over the years.³⁵ Of these three had grave goods. At Blackhorse Road, Letchworth, four burials out of the ten had grave goods.³⁶ Marina Drive³⁷ had a higher proportion of accompanied graves, but many of the thirty two burials with grave goods had only a knife, and seventeen more were unaccompanied. A high figure of accompanied burials is to be found at Melbourn, Cambs.,³⁸ but many of these had only a knife. Similarly at Shudy Camps, where 148 burials were found, seventy seven had grave goods, mostly only a knife.³⁹

However, at Astwick, there are only two knives extant, and it is quite probable that there were several not salvaged. Direct comparisons, difficult at most times, are thereby rendered almost impossible. One can, though, appreciate that a large number of Anglo-Saxon burials of all dates, but particularly of the seventh century, have at best a knife and are often unaccompanied. In such circumstances a find of five (or eight) spearheads, a shieldboss and a sword could well represent a much larger number of burials.

APPENDIX I

A seventh century pot from Clifton (fig 4)

This vessel, in the Ransom collection of the British Museum, Department of Medieval and Later Antiquities, is illustrated here for the first time. The vessel was found by Ransom at either Clifton or Henlow, which is not certain. It is a jar of grey ware, with a flared neck above a gentle shoulder to a bulbous body. Height 158mm, rim diameter 84mm. (British Museum, register number 1915, 12-8, 207).

This is a typical seventh century vessel with several local parallels. Bedford Museum has four from Kempston.⁴⁰ There is one from Biscot Mill, Luton,⁴¹ and the shape is that of the decorated vessels from Chamberlains Barn grave 18⁴² and Marina Drive grave G2.⁴³

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NOTES

- 1 These two collections are accessioned under the numbers, 1915, 12-8, 1-365.
- 2 This collection was received in 1923, and is the bulk of the 1923 accessions of the museum.
- 3 W Ransom, 'An Account of British and Roman Remains found in the neighbourhood of Hitchin', *T Herts N H S* 4, 1886, 39-48: hereafter cited as Ransom.
- 4 E T Leeds, *A Corpus of Early Anglo-Saxon Great Squareheaded Brooches*, 1949, no 141; D H Kennett 'The Anglo-Saxon Cemetery at Kempston, Bedfordshire' (1968, unpublished, available in Dept. Medieval and Later Antiquities, the British Museum) object 360, with full discussion. (The latter work is hereafter cited as Kennett, *Kempston*).
- 5 Principally, a pair of 'Kempston type' applied saucer brooches (*P Camb A S* 63, 1971, 27-29) and a shield mount in the form of a goose (see n.26 below).
- 6 Ransom, 40, and pl 2.
- 7 A L Meaney, *A Gazetteer of Early Anglo-Saxon Burial Sites*, 1964, 35. The site is omitted by Morris, *Beds Arch J* 1, 1962, 58-76.
- 8 Kennett, *Kempston*, object 75, British Museum, register number, 1891, 6-24, 75. For a discussion of the scabbard mount type see D H Kennett, 'Graves with swords at Little Wilbraham and Linton Heath', *P Camb A S* 63, 1971, 9-26, esp 13-15 and 24-25.
- 9 BN Eagles and V I Evison, 'Excavations at Harrold' *Beds Arch J* 5, 1970, 39 and 42-44, with fig 12.
- 10 British Museum, register number 1891, 6-24, 80; Kennett, *Kempston*, object 80.
- 11 D M Wilson, 'The Initial Excavation of an Anglo-Saxon Cemetery at Melbourn', *P Camb A S* 49, 1955, 35 and fig 3.
- 12 R K Hagen, 'Anglo-Saxon Burials in the vicinity of Biscot Mill, Luton', *Beds Arch J* 6, 1971, 23 and fig 2.
- 13 C L Matthews, 'The Anglo-Saxon Cemetery at Marina Drive,' *Beds Arch J* 1, 1962, 29 and fig 2.3.
- 14 R Pirling, *Das Romisch-Frankische Graberfeld von Krefeld-Gellep*, 1966, 40, taf 23.15.
- 15 Pirling, 1966, 99, taf 70, 1, associated finds taf 70.2-6.
- 16 Pirling, 1966, 113, taf 78.1, associated francisca, taf 78.2.
- 17 K Bohner, *Die Frankischen Altertuer des Trierer Landes*, 1958, 146-160, Lanzenspitzen, with taf 28.7, also band 2, 33.
- 18 Bohner, 1958, band 2, 128, taf 28.2.
- 19 Bohner, 1958, band 2, 131, taf 28.9.
- 20 V I Evison, 'Sugar-loaf Shieldbosses', *Ant J* 43, 1963, 43 and fig 22.a-c (with 38-96 *passim* for a general discussion of the type).
- 21 Evison, 1963, 44, and fig 22.d.
- 22 Evison, 1963, 44, fig 23.g.
- 23 Evison, 1963, 42-43 and fig 17.d-h.
- 24 British Museum, register number 1891, 6-24, 71; Kennett, *Kempston*, object 71.
- 25 Several shield ornaments are illustrated in the figures to Evison, 1963.
- 26 In connection with the forthcoming paper on the Kempston 'fish-badger grave', the present author is collecting a corpus of shield fittings. It is expected that the main types of shield fittings will be illustrated therein.
- 27 S E Fitch, 'Discovery of Saxon Remains at Kempston', *A A S R*, 7, 1863-64, 290, reprinted in *Collectanea Antiqua* 6, 1868, 207-208; see also J Wyatt, *ibid* 169. The complexities of this grave are discussed in Kennett, *Kempston*, hence n.26 above.
- 28 British Museum, register number, 1891, 6-24, 60, Kennett, *Kempston*, object 60.
- 29 British Museum, register number, 1891, 6-24, 70, Kennett, *Kempston*, object 70.
- 30 British Museum, register number, 1891, 6-24, 182/183/185; Kennett, *Kempston*, objects 182, 183, 185. One of these is from grave 38 (grave of 11 November 1863), which is not yet certain.
- 31 British Museum, register number, 1891, 6-24, 72/73/74; Kennett, *Kempston*, objects 72, 73, 74.
- 32 British Museum, register number, 1891, 6-24, 296-299, Kennett, *Kempston*, objects 296-299.
- 33 Fitch, 1864, 299; British Museum, register number 1891, 6-24, 65 (shieldboss) and 197 (pouch mount).
- 34 Ransom, 40.
- 35 Hagen, 1971, 23-26.
- 36 J Moss-Eccardt, 'An Anglo-Saxon Cemetery at Blackhorse Road, Letchworth', *Beds Arch J* 6, 1971, 27-32.
- 37 Matthews, 1962.
- 38 Wilson, 1955.
- 39 T C Lethbridge, *Shudy Camps Cambridgeshire*. Bedford Museum, accession numbers, 3775, 3776, 3779 and BM 96; respectively Kennett, *Kempston*, objects 375, 376, 379, 453.
- 40 Hagen, 1971, 24 and fig 3.3.
- 41 M Hyslop, 'Two Anglo-Saxon Cemeteries . . .', *Arch J*, 120, 1963, 177 and fig 11.a, with 195.
- 42 Matthews, 1962, 32 and fig 5.4.

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