

Bronze Age hoard unearthed

10 December 2011



Some of the 345 Bronze Age implements found in Boughton Malherbe. Pictures: Wayne Coomber



A hoard of Bronze Age items believed to be the biggest such find in Kent has been unearthed near Maidstone.

Two friends stumbled upon the rare and valuable discovery while out metal-detecting.

The impressive haul of 346 artefacts, which date from around 800BC, included swords, knives, scabbards, spears and an axe mould.

They were recovered from a farmer's field in Boughton Malherbe. The discovery by Wayne Coomber and Nick Hales, both from Headcorn, is also believed to be the country's fourth largest.

Mr Coomber said: "We couldn't believe it, the finds just went on and on."

The artefacts, which are currently being examined by the British Museum, may be coming to Maidstone Museum eventually.

The cache was officially declared treasure trove at an inquest on Thursday.

Festival of Archaeology 2014: Medieval rings, Bronze Age hoards and Iron Age discoveries

By Ben Miller | 16 July 2014

- [Interview](#) *EXCERPT*

Jennifer Jackson, the Finds Liaison Officer for Kent, chooses three formidable archaeological discoveries

The Boughton Malherbe hoard (1150-600 BC)



The hoard from Boughton Malherbe belongs to the carp's tongue complex, the terminal metalworking tradition of the phase of the Atlantic Bronze Age © Portable Antiquities Scheme

"This is the third-largest Bronze Age hoard ever found in Britain. It was found in 2011 but it's very recently been acquired and gone on display at Maidstone Museum – not all of it, because it's 252 objects, but the highlights are on display there at the moment so people can go and see it. Most of the objects are broken in some way. It's got things like the moulds to make the axes, which are made of copper alloy – the same metal as the axes, but with a slightly different composition. It shows how ancient metal skills were so sophisticated. They could make moulds that would hold metal of a different temperature and mould it 2,500 years ago.

They weren't messing around: they were highly efficient metal workers. You can see how they create three-part moulds for an axe, with a hole in the middle.

You can see where things have gone wrong in the casting and they've been thrown away and re-melted to start again. That sort of thing is fascinating because you can see the processes that they're using.

Unfortunately the finder had already dug up quite a lot of it when we got there but he told us how it was quite a small hole for so many objects.

It had these ingots of metal, to be traded. They're the size of dinner plates – very, very big, heavy objects. They were domed and capped over, and then all this metal was underneath.

It's taken three years but it's now in the museum. A lot of it was about raising the money to buy it.

Normally treasure is just one item, so processing this took a significant amount of time, actually working out what all the little bits were. There again, the Staffordshire Hoard will take 15 years to fully research."

<http://www.culture24.org.uk/history-and-heritage/archaeology/art490918-festival-archaeology-kent-iron-age-bronze-coin>

HOARD

Unique ID: KENT-15A293

Object type certainty: Certain

Workflow status: Published 

A Late Bronze Age carp's tongue complex hoard consisting of 352 objects.

At 352 objects and fragments, the Boughton Malherbe hoard is the third largest Bronze Age hoard ever found in Britain behind the Langton Matravers hoard, Dorset, with 777 objects and fragments dating to the Llyn Fawr metalwork phase (c. 800-600BC) (Roberts et al.: in prep.) and the Isleham hoard, Cambridgeshire, with over 6500 objects and fragments dating to the Wilburton metalwork phase (c. 1150-1000 BC) (Britton 1960; Colquhoun and Burgess 1988: pls. 152.B-157.A; Malim et al.: 2010). The Boughton Malherbe hoard comprises:

75 copper alloy weapon fragments

- 50 sword fragments (including 32 carp's tongue Type Nantes fragments, 6 Ewart Park fragments, 4 St. Nazaire fragments, 3 Auvernier/Tachlovice fragments and 5 miscellaneous fragments)
- 9 hogs backed knife fragments
- 15 socketed spearhead fragments
- 1 lozenge sectioned pommel piece

136 copper alloy tools and tool fragments

- 22 various double edged knives (including 4 socketed and 10 tanged and 8 miscellaneous fragments).
- 50 various socketed axes (including 47 Type South-eastern axes, wing- and pellet-decorated variants and socketed axe fragments, 1 Type Stogursey axe, 1 Type Sturry axe, 1 Type Meldreth axe)
- 57 other various axes (including 41 French end winged axes, 1 end winged adze, 3 palstave fragments and 12 miscellaneous axe fragments).
- 1 chisel
- 1 socketed hammer fragment
- 5 socketed gouge fragments

42 copper alloy ornamentation (including personal dressage and animal harnessing)

- 2 bugle shaped objects
- 1 Looped decorative end piece
- 1 bucket neck fragment
- 1 decorated slotted box end piece
- 1 large oval-headed nail
- 1 hub cap
- 5 decorated plaques
- 1 grooved sheet fragment
- 5 varied buttons
- 24 solid and hollow cast rings and bracelets

71 copper alloy production objects and fragments

- 3 end winged axe moulds
- 58 ingot fragments

- 10 casting waste fragments
- 28 copper alloy miscellaneous objects and fragments
- 23 miscellaneous sheet fragments
- 5 miscellaneous objects

The hoard from Boughton Malherbe belongs to the carp's tongue complex, the terminal metalworking tradition of the final phase of the Atlantic Bronze Age which had its centre in northwest and northern France, and is now dated c. 950-800 BC. In Britain the complex appears to be intrusive or specialised, occurring alongside the indigenous Ewart Park metalwork tradition in southeast England, and is largely represented by hoards of fragmented bronze objects. The dating of these hoards within this phase is problematic but are held to indicative of the latter part, c. 875-800 BC (Brandherm and Burgess 2008: 151).

Savory (1948) was the first to identify 'the sword-bearers' of carp's tongue type as Atlantic, and its accompanying suite of bronze objects as largely indigenous of northwest Europe rather than of central European origin, as earlier researchers believed (Evans 1930). Briard (1965: chap. XII) and Burgess (1968: 17-19, figs. 13-14, app. V) described in detail the full extent of this complex, in northwest France and southern England respectively. Despite the very great number of carp's tongue hoards in these regions (Brandherm and Burgess 2008: 155-162, lists. 7-11, 16, 21), what is or is not a carp's tongue hoard, in Britain at least, is far from unproblematic, despite the comprehensive lists of bronze types associated with these hoards provided by Briard (1965) and Burgess (1968). It would be inaccurate, however, to define each of these types in Britain specifically as a carp's tongue type. Some are, on account of being identical to examples found in France, whilst some are indigenous copies of such foreign bronzes, and others are wholly indigenous Ewart Park types. There has been some considerable difficulty in distinguishing one from the other, particularly in the case of socketed axes (Butler and Steegstra 2001/2002: 279-282), which has resulted in many an indigenous hoard being mis-associated with this complex (e.g. Isle of Harty, Kent: Smith 1956; Worthing, Sussex: Smith 1957).

Based on a study conducted by one of the authors (SM) of commonly recurring types in hoards from France and Britain, a limited number of essential or 'primary' carp's tongue types has been identified, and it is their presence that denotes a hoard belonging to the carp's tongue complex in Britain. These are the classic carp's tongue sword of Type Nantes (Brandherm and Burgess 2008: 136, 143-146, fig. 1.d-f), the lozenge sectioned pommel pieces (Burgess 1968: fig. 13.25) that would have likely capped the terminal of such swords, bugle shaped objects (ibid.: fig. 13.20-22), which appear to have acted as a strap fitting for the scabbard of these swords, and finally the hogs backed knife (ibid.: fig. 13.10), which may themselves have once have been sword blades now remodelled. These primary types clearly constituted a coherent weapon assemblage, so reminiscent of that known from the preceding Atlantic Wilburton-Brécý-Hío phase, c. 1075-950 BC, that stretched from southern England into France and as far south as Iberia (Coombs 1988: figs. 1-4). On the basis of the presence of one or more of these primary types, there are some 55 carp's tongue hoards in Britain. All of these are from England, with the majority, almost 90%, from the southeast. The greatest concentration of these hoards, some 21 examples, is in Kent and includes that from Boughton Malherbe. The majority of these hoards are found in the northeast of Kent, along the mouth of the Thames estuary, and are mirrored by a similarly dense concentration in southeast Essex. These hoards, whilst greater in number than those of the preceding Atlantic Wilburton phase, have a much more restricted distribution within England and in Western Europe as a whole (Coombs 1988: figs. 1-4; Brandherm and Burgess 2008: fig. 5). The extent of the carp's tongue complex in England, however, can be extended beyond the southeast on the basis of the distribution of single finds. Whilst these are not many, as evidenced by the small number of unassociated carp's tongue swords of Type Nantes (Colquhoun and Burgess 1988: pls. 98-100, nos. 669-674, 692-695), the distribution of these and other types extends the complex into the Upper Thames Valley and further west into southern Wales, Devon and Cornwall (Pearce 1983).

The hoard at Boughton Malherbe contains all four of these primary types:

- 32 carp's tongue Type Nantes sword fragments (2 x hilts, possibly of variant Amboise: nos. 22. 24; 2 x grip and terminal fragments, most likely relating to the hilts: nos. 262. 263; 28 x blade fragments: nos. 12. 29. 31-33. 34. 37-40. 42. 43. 45-47. 49. 52-54. 57. 60. 62. 67. 69. 76-78. 239)
- 1 lozenge sectioned pommel piece (no. 240)
- 2 Bugle shaped objects (nos. 256. 257)
- 9 Hogs backed knives (nos. 25. 26. 27. 28. 83-85. 237. 238)

The number of carp's tongue sword fragments alone in this hoard is more than double that known from the only other significant hoard of this complex in England, at Grays Thurrock I, Essex (Turner 2010: vol. 2, 3-51), which contained

16 examples. Of the 46 carp's tongue hoards that contain the eponymous sword type, only 5 of these contained more than 10 fragments.

These primary types usually occur alongside a larger series of secondary or tertiary types (Burgess 1968: fig. 13, app. V: b, d, g-t), most commonly represented by a wide range of socketed axes, including the variant wing- or pellet-decorated South-eastern type, different forms of knives and razors, rings and bracelets of myriad form, casting debris and tin-rich ingots, and decorated plaques which, along with various other types present in these hoards, may once have decorated the scabbards of our carp's tongue swords. However, unlike the primary weapons complex types, these tertiary types need not be foreign imports, and frequently occur as regionally produced local types tailored to match the carp's tongue types more commonly found on the Continent. This is particularly evident amongst the socketed axes. The majority of these tertiary types are represented at Boughton Malherbe, including:

- 15 Socketed spearheads (nos. 1-5. 7-11. 70. 72-75)
- 18 sword fragments, including 6 Ewart Park (1 hilt: no. 23; 5 blade fragments: nos. 48. 55. 56. 59. 68), 4 St. Nazaire (blade fragments: nos. 30. 35. 51. 64), and 3 Type Auvernier/Tachlovice (blade fragments: nos. 36. 41. 44), 3 miscellaneous blade fragments (nos. 61. 63. 259) and 2 shoulder-grip transition fragments (nos. 327. 328)
- 5 Socketed gouges (nos. 243-245 (?). 252 (?). 258)
- 3 Palstave fragments (nos. 102. 125. 127)
- 1 Chisel (no. 293)
- 1 Socketed hammer (no. 178)
- 41 end winged axes (nos. 86-90. 92-101. 103-124. 179. 329. 332. 333) and 1 end winged adze (no. 91)
- 50 socketed axes, including 47 Type South-eastern socketed axes, including wing- and pellet-decorated variants and other miscellaneous fragments (nos. 6. 138-145. 147-154. 156-176. 218. 248-251. 253-255. 341), 1 south Welsh Type Stogursey axe (no. 155), 1 Type Sturry axe (no. 177), 1 Type Meldreth axe (no. 146), and 12 miscellaneous axe fragments (nos. 126. 128-137. 180)
- 22 various double edged knives, including 4 socketed knives (nos. 13-15. 241), 10 riveted tanged knives (nos. 16-21. 58. 79. 81. 82), and 8 miscellaneous blade fragments (nos. 50. 65. 66. 71. 80. 309. 344. 294)

Carp's tongue hoards also often contain an eclectic admixture of decorative pieces, ornamentation in the form of rings and bracelets, pins, and various pieces of sheet metalworking, both plain and decorated, and occasionally bronze vessel fragments. This often fragmented admixture of material is usually referred to as bric-a-brac (Burgess 1968: 39). The purpose of much of this material is often not clear, and much appears to be intrusive, yielding from central Europe. This bric-a-brac is not as commonly occurring in the English hoards as it is in France (Briard 1965: chap. XII) but is heavily represented at Boughton Malherbe:

- 24 miscellaneous solid and hollow cast rings and bracelets (nos. 265-284. 295. 296. 316. 335);
- 1 Decorated sub-rectangular slotted end piece (no. 320)
- 1 Large oval headed nail (no. 321)
- 1 Hubcap (no. 242)
- 1 Looped decorative end piece (no. 285)
- 5 Buttons (nos. 261. 324-326. 334)
- 1 Urnfield bucket neck and shoulder fragment, including remains of a handle (no. 264)
- A large incomplete linear plaque decorated with concentric circles and round perforations, which survives as 4 fragments (nos. 322. 323. 342. 347)
- A further separate plaque decorated with concentric circles (no. 319).
- 1 Grooved sheet fragment (no. 292)
- 14 Miscellaneous sheet fragments (nos. 286-291. 297-301. 339. 345. 351)
- 9 Miscellaneous curved sheet fragments (no. 302-304. 311. 312. 317. 318. 348. 352)

Manufacturing debris and paraphernalia, as at Boughton Malherbe, are also usually present:

- 3 Moulds for end winged axes (nos. 246. 247. 260)
- 58 Ingot fragments (nos. 181. 182-217. 219-236. 305. 310. 343)
- 5 fragments of casting waste (nos. 313-315. 330. 331)
- 5 miscellaneous cast sockets (nos. 336. 340. 346. 349. 350).
- 5 Miscellaneous objects (nos. 306-308. 337. 338)

It is not yet at all clear how economically or socially specialised an industry the carp's tongue complex was in northern and northwest France, where all hoards can be characterised as carp's tongue. In northwest France there are approximately 80 hoards (Briard 1965; Brandherm and Burgess 2008), of which 70 contain the primary weapons types. Although the contents of many of these hoards are difficult to confirm, approximately 13 of these hoards contain all four primary weapon types. In England, however, the complex is contemporary with hoards of the indigenous Ewart Park tradition, and represents only 16% of the total known for this phase, which number upwards of 339 hoards (Maraszek 2006), and continues to grow rapidly. From its contents it is obvious that the hoard from Boughton Malherbe in Kent is not an English carp's tongue hoard. Indeed, it is the only hoard in which we find all four of the primary weapons complex types together. This hoard is instead a proper carp's tongue hoard, comparable in size and content to those found in northwest and northern France.

This fact raises one of the hardest questions to answer about the complex, in respect of whether or not it was active in southern England as a local manufacturing industry (Needham 1990: 73-74), producing metalwork types associated with the complex, or if its presence in England is represented almost entirely by carp's tongue types imported as scrap (Savory 1948: 164). A two-way traffic in scrap between southern England and France has always been envisaged (Burgess 1968: 19), on the basis of fragmented Ewart Park swords and English socketed axe types found in French carp's tongue hoards. However, it is noteworthy that fragments of both Type Nantes and Ewart Park swords that refit are generally only ever found in France (e.g. Coffyn, Gomez and Mohen 1981: pls. 2.16, 3.1-2, 4.1, 5.19). The much smaller number of sword fragments of both these types in English carp's tongue hoards and the absence of any refits suggests that the direction of scrap was very much one-way and lends credence to the notion that upon its arrival in England these larger scrap piles were broken down into smaller assemblages and redistributed (Needham 1990: 132-133). Here we find a plausible explanation for the qualitative difference between so many of our English carp's tongue hoards and that from Boughton Malherbe, being largely intact and yet to be redistributed into smaller stock piles and mixed with local Ewart Park types. Given the unfinished condition of some Ewart Park swords found in the French hoards, and the fact that the fragments can be refitted, suggests that this type was also being manufactured there. Consequently, many of our Ewart Park sword fragments found in English hoards may actually be of French origin. Finally, whilst the presence of socketed axes, such as south Welsh axes of Type Stogursey (Schmidt and Burgess 1981: 239-241), in these French hoards might also hint at two-way traffic, it is more likely that these axes made their way to France by other exchange mechanisms, at an earlier date in the phase. In the case of Stogursey axes, this is suggested by their distribution in France (Eluère 1979: fig. 5), which mirrors the westerly distribution of the type in England. Their presence in these carp's tongue hoards suggests a final return journey home, as obsolete scrap. It may be then that the largest carp's tongue hoard ever found in England may lead us to conclude that the carp's tongue complex in England was actually far smaller and more restricted than their hoards suggests.

Conclusion

The objects qualify as Treasure under the stipulations of the Treasure Act (1996) (Designation Order 2002).

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Notes:

A full catalogue is available on request from the Department of Portable Antiquities and Treasure at the British Museum

Subsequent actions

Subsequent action after recording: Submitted for consideration as Treasure

Treasure details

Treasure case tracking number: 2011T464

Chronology

Broad period: BRONZE AGE

Period from: BRONZE AGE

Date from: Circa 875 BC

Date to: Circa 800 BC

Dimensions and weight

Quantity: 352

Personal details

Recorded by: Miss Jennifer Jackson
Identified by: Mr Ben Roberts

Other reference numbers

Treasure case number: 2011T464

Materials and construction

Primary material: Copper alloy

Completeness: Complete



Not to scale