

# From the Museum

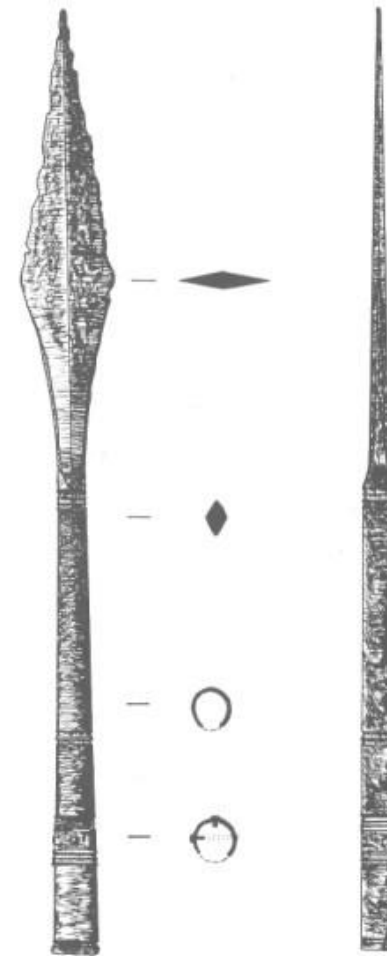
by Martin Howe

The Viking descent upon the lands of Western Europe was seen by contemporary commentators as a retribution for past sins. The English scholar Alcuin wrote that 'never before has such terror appeared in Britain as we have now suffered from a pagan race, nor was it thought that such an inroad from the sea could be made'. Thus the present-day reader could be forgiven if, after having read these rather hysterical writings, he had a view of Britain in the ninth and tenth centuries as being over-run by vast Viking hordes. In reality the Vikings have left little to archaeology outside the large centres of settlement such as York.

However, the subjects of this note are a spearhead (fig. 7) and axe (fig. 8) of Viking origin which bear witness to a Viking presence in the Peterborough region.

The spearhead (L 567) entered the Museum's collections in 1912. It had been discovered at Horsey Toll (TL 23209960) during the course of ditching works and was accompanied by a skull. It is thus probable that the spear was grave-furniture in the burial of a pagan Viking warrior, but the account of the discovery, noted by J.W. Bodger (the donor), is terse. The spearhead measures 549 mm in length (fig. 7), the blade measuring 280 mm and the socket 269 mm. The latter has a deep slit on its underside which runs to the base of the spear blade, a noted feature of Viking Age spearheads. The blade shows corrosion along its cutting edges which suggests that these were probably case-hardened and thus more susceptible to rust. In general, however, the spear is very well preserved and shows the characteristic black-brown colour of iron objects which have been exposed to iron-rich water. The junction of the blade and socket is successfully achieved by giving the shaft an oval section which is decorated with three deeply incised lines. This decorative arrangement is repeated a further three times on the socket, the lower two sets of lines bordering the three rivets which secured the head to its shaft. These 'rivets' are of interest as they were probably not rivets in the strict sense of the term. When viewed in section there is insufficient room for them to traverse the shaft without some arrangement for one to pass over the other. As such an arrangement is technically difficult to produce and would weaken the shaft to an unacceptable degree it is more likely that the 'rivets' were in fact nails.

The Horsey Toll spearhead belongs to Petersen's type M (Petersen (1919), 34) and is readily paralleled in form by an example from Halsteinshov, Loiten, Hedmark, Norway. The Norwegian example does not have such a long socket, but closely resembles the blade form of the Horsey Toll



Shown at 1/4 scale

Fig 7 A Viking spearhead from Horsey Toll

example. Petersen assigned the type M spears to the early eleventh century and there seems to be no reason, recalling the activities of Cnut and his Vikings, to doubt that the Horsey Toll example belongs to this period.

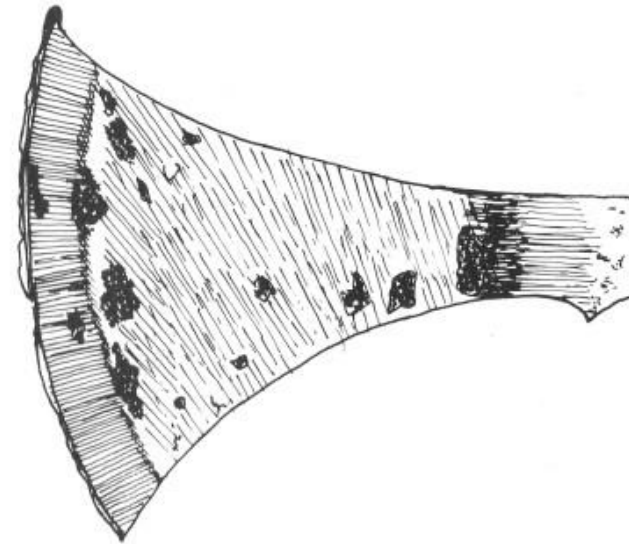
The exact provenance of the axe head (fig. 8) is unfortunately not clear. It was donated to the collections on the 7th March 1916 by a Miss Laurance and is attributed to Whittlesey (TL 270970). However, its exact location is not known beyond the fact that it comes from somewhere on the gravel islands between Whittlesey and Horsey Toll. The axe (L 564) measures 185mm in length and is surprisingly thin in section (1.5mm). It thickens out noticeably at the cutting edge and the edge was welded on to the body using a harder steel which would produce a more trenchant edge combined with a flexible core. The blade has the graceful curve of the classic Viking 'bearded axe'. However, this shape evolved not for any aesthetic reason, but to produce a weapon that could inflict the maximum amount of damage upon an adversary. When brought down from a height, the blade made contact at its lowest point and the velocity of the blow coupled with the precise angle of the cutting edge ensured that the axe would shear its way through anything but armour of the best quality. The efficacy of such weapons is graphically demonstrated by the illustration of Harold's Huscarles using similar axes on the Bayeux Tapestry. The Whittlesey axe falls into Petersen's type M (Petersen (1919), 45). He illustrates the type with an axe from Homerstad, Stange, Norway (Petersen (1919), 45, fig.45) and the type can be readily paralleled in England by examples from the Old London Bridge Group in the Museum of London. The best known axe in this group is illustrated by Wheeler (Wheeler (1927), fig.3) and still retains its socket-liner which is made of copper alloy.

The liner is of particular interest as it gives some indication of the thickness of the handles of Viking axes. It has always been the case that reconstructions of axes have very thick handles as it is felt that a thick handle was vital to ensure the maximum effect of the weapon. However, the socket-liner from the Old London Bridge Group indicates that the handle of the axe was approximately 40mm in thickness. It was the mechanical design of such axes that gave them their efficacy and not thick handles and heavy blades.

Petersen attributed a late tenth- to early eleventh-century date to the type M axes and this would seem to be confirmed by the presence of 'Ringerike' style decoration on the socket-liner from Old London Bridge. The Whittlesey axe closely resembles the Homerstad and Old London Bridge axes and a late tenth- to early eleventh-century date would be appropriate for it.

## Bibliography

- Petersen (1919) J. Petersen, *De norske Vikingesverd: en typologisk-kronologisk Studie over Vikingetidens Vaaben*, 1919.
- Wheeler (1927) R.E.M. Wheeler, *London and the Vikings*, 1927.



Shown at 1/2 size.

Fig 8 A Viking axe from Whittlesey