The Finds Research Group AD700-1700

DATASHEET 37

A *c*.15th-*c*.16th-Century Copper-alloy Enigma

by

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In 1980 the author unearthed a small but substantial base-metal artefact of a class that a trawl of the archaeological and other record revealed was apparently unrecorded from elsewhere in Britain. This object, along with another, was first published by Read in *History Beneath Our Feet* (1988, fig. 11, nos 1-2), described together as 'belt-chapes', and republished in the 1995 revised second edition of the same book (nos 342-3), which included an additional three (nos 344-6) all reported as 'strap-ends'.

Since 1980, metal-detectorists have recovered a further eleven similar examples (some incomplete). With one exception, all were found in Devon (Figure 1): thirteen in the south of the county, one in the north and one in the south-east; the outlier came from near Walberswick, Suffolk. This seemingly restricted distribution to mainly the coastal belt of southern Devon - from Stoke Gabriel in the west to Otterton in the east - perhaps implies a common manufactory somewhere within this region.

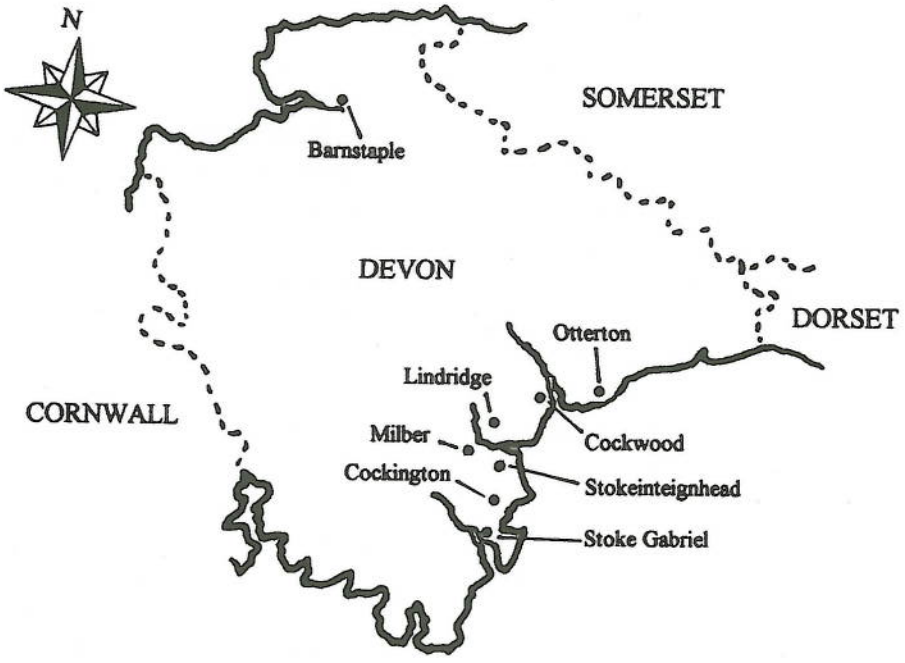

Figure 1: Distribution of artefacts. Barnstaple: 1 uninscribed; Cockington: 1 inscribed; Cockwood: 3 inscribed, 1 uninscribed; Lindridge: 1 inscribed; Milber: 1 inscribed; Otterton: 1 inscribed; Stokeinteignhead: 1 inscribed, 3 uninscribed; Stoke Gabriel: 1 uninscribed. Not shown: 1 inscribed of uncertain provenance in Devon; 1 inscribed from Walberswick, Suffolk.

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As Stokeinteignhead and Cockwood each revealed four of these artefacts, such a workshop may have been located in either place, though a larger centre like Newton Abbot, Totnes or Exeter is more probable. Continental coinage is ubiquitous for metal-detectorists searching Devon's hinterland, implying circulation as a direct result of local trade. Could these artefactual enigmas also have originated from across the Channel (pers. comm. G Egan)? (Walberswick is also a coastal settlement). Of course, if this *Datasheet* results in the revelation of more of these artefacts from elsewhere, such hypotheses will be questionable.

Description

None of the known examples has benefited from scientific analysis. All are manufactured from copper alloy, either possibly part cast and part sheet or entirely cast. Each comprises two sections - a front-plate and a back-plate - both of which may be of identical footprint or dissimilar, with a space between, held together with either two or four separate copper-alloy rivets, which on Nos 5, 9 & 15 (Figs 2-4) are long and bent-over. Three front-plates have anomalous back-plates, perhaps indicating replacements or repairs (see Nos 8, 10 & 11, Figs 3-4).

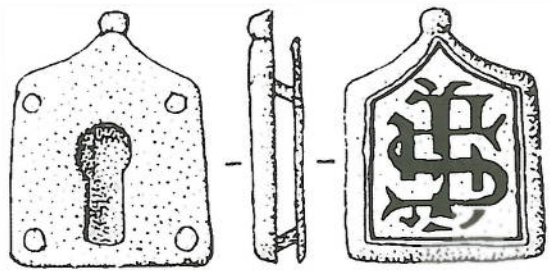
All are variations of the shield-shape, some with single or multiple knops: additional to knops, others have one or more edges cusped. Some front-plates are decorated with a Christian inscription; characteristically, the edges of these front-plates cant to the rear, thereby making them convex. Inscriptions are predominately variations of IHS - 'I(esus) H(ominum) S(alvator)' – 'Jesus Saviour of Mankind', or IHS within an M surmounted by an A; the latter two letters probably signifying 'Ave Maria'. The inscription on the Suffolk example is an M, with in the field a stalk, two leaves and a flower – probably a lily symbolizing the Virgin Mary. Script is either Blackletter, Lombardic or Renaissance Roman. Inscriptions are either niello on a white metal (probably tin) field, white metal on a possible niello field, or in-relief on a metal field. It is likely that the latter examples originally also had a niello field. On all bar one, inscriptions are within a shield-shaped border. Six front-plates are undecorated, one of which has a convex, hollow boss. Other than No. 10 (Fig. 4), which exhibits traces of white-metal coating (probably tin) on the outside surface of both front- and back-plate, front- and back-plates of undecorated examples are uncoated.

Despite similarities, none are identical, indicating that each front-plate - and perhaps back-plate – even when cast was produced in an individual mould. A feature common to all back-plates is a keyhole-shaped orifice, the circular section of which is oriented towards the top of the plate except for No. 10 (Fig. 4), which is anomalous. This means that relative to all others this orifice is upside down, which seemingly would not have adversely affected fastening (see below).

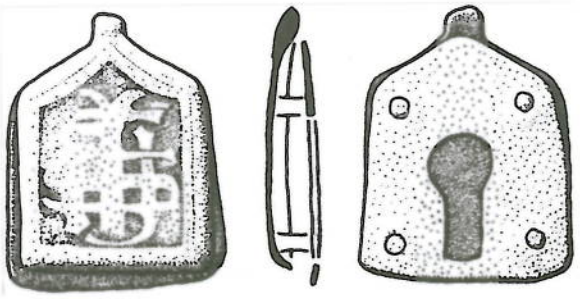
The back-plate of No. 11 (Fig. 4) has an additional four unused rivet holes, whilst No. 15 (Fig. 4) has two, suggesting reuse of metal or errors by the metalworker. Nos 5, 7 & 13 (Figs 2-4) retain a remnant of leather between the front- and back-plate, while the space between the plates of No. 14 (Fig. 4) is filled with an unidentified green, hard substance that is perhaps corrosion or copper carbonate-impregnated leather.

Discussion

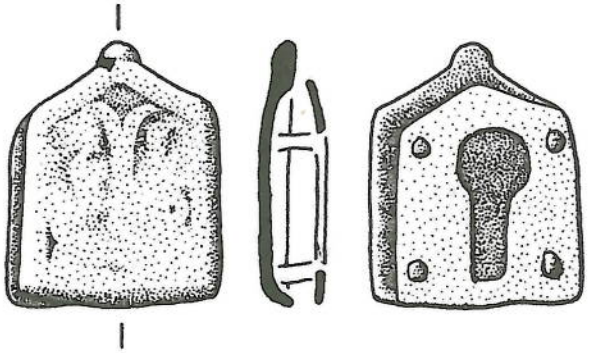
British Museum curatorial staff examined No. 1 (Fig. 2), the first to be recorded, and suggested it was a *c.*15th – *c.*16th-century strap-end made from a discarded lock; at the time, a plausible dating and identification. On stylistic grounds, a late medieval/early post-medieval date does seem appropriate, but the discovery of No. 13 (Fig. 4) cast doubt on the secondary use of a redundant lock theory, for its back-plate also had a keyhole-shaped orifice. As more examples came to light, this hypothesis seemed even more dubious. Of course, it is possible that 16 similar artefacts, 14 of which were found in relatively close geographical locations, represent reuse of old locks, especially if all came from the same workshop.



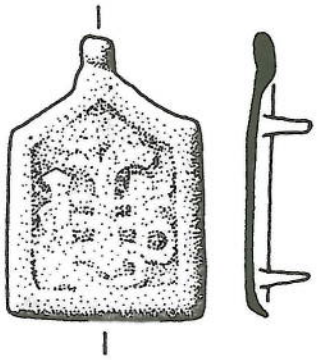
No. 1: Blackletter niello inscription IHS on a white-metal field; four rivets; H35mm W27mm. *Cockington.*



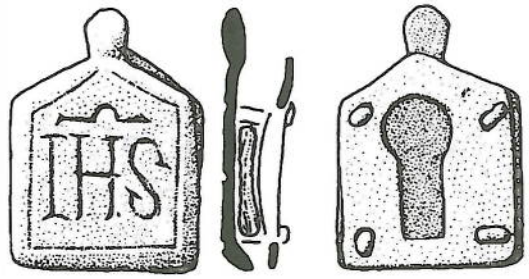
No. 2: Abraded blackletter in-relief inscription IHS on a (?) niello field; four rivets; H38mm W29mm. *Otterton.*



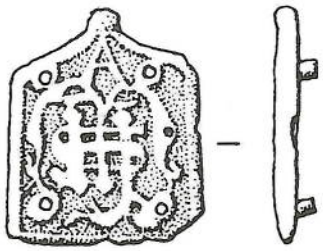
No. 3: Much abraded blackletter in-relief inscription on a (?) niello field; four rivets; H35mm W27mm. *Cockwood.*



No. 4: Much abraded blackletter in-relief inscription on a (?) niello field; four long rivets; H 37mm W26mm; incomplete, back-plate missing. *Milber.*



No. 5: Renaissance Roman niello inscription IHS on a metal field; four long bent-over rivets; remnant of leather inside; H36mm W 25mm. *Cockwood.*

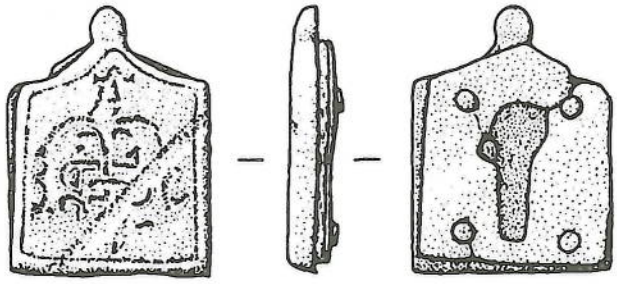


No. 6: Lombardic in-relief inscription IHS within an M surmounted by an A on a metal field; four rivets; incomplete, back-plate missing; H32.5mm W27mm. *Uncertain South Devon provenance.*

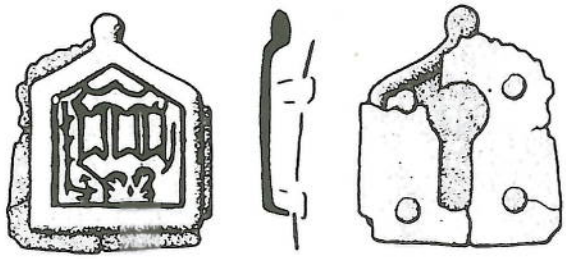
Figure 2: Inscribed examples Nos 1-6. Drawings are approximately at a 1:1 scale.

For such a reasoning to be acceptable, one must assume that the metalworker had access to a plenteous supply of defunct locks. Was he therefore a locksmith who turned his hand to making other base-metal small wares? If so, it is perplexing to understand why he did not make (as far as we know) the occasional example from scrap metal without an orifice. An argument against a single manufactory is the obvious difference in the moulding of front-plates: it is a reasonable assumption that a common source would have reused moulds at least several times. For the author, the reused lock suggestion is refutable - the keyhole-shaped orifice has a purpose, but for what?

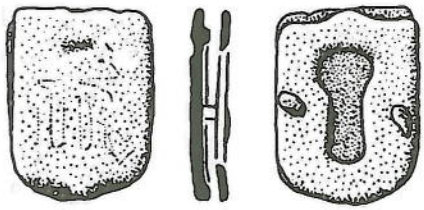
Use as strap-ends is plausible, as suggested by the fragments of leather, possibly remains of straps, trapped between the plates. If correct, those ornamented with an inscription were unlikely to have been used on girdles having a short end, for the inscriptions would have lain side on.



No. 7. Lombardic in-relief inscription IHS within an M surmounted by an A on a metal field; front-plate gouged; back-plate split in three places; four rivets; fragment of leather inside; H37mm W27mm. *Cockwood.*



No. 8. Back-plate possibly anomalous with front-plate; blackletter white-metal inscription, an M with a stalk, two leaves and a flower on a (?) niello field; four rivets; broken and split sheet back-plate; H29.5mm W23mm. *Walberswick, Suffolk.*



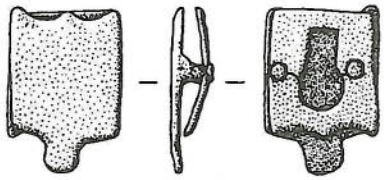
No. 9. Much abraded blackletter niello inscription. IHS on a metal field; two rivets; H27mm W20mm. *Stokeinteignhead.*

Figure 3: Inscribed examples Nos 7-9

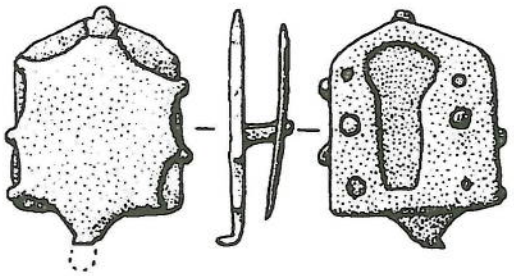
The blocked orifices seemingly negate an alternate theory that they are female sections of two-part clasps used for fastening leather satchels or pouches, for example. Another suggestion is that they are clasps used on leather-bound prayer books (pers. comm. R Butler). However, since the advent of the metal detector, literally hundreds of late medieval and early post-medieval book-clasps are now available for study, none of which resemble the artefacts discussed here. Also, it is noteworthy that a search of antique-book collections, e.g. the British Library and Hereford Cathedral Library, produced a nil return for books with this style of metal-fitting. To act as a clasp, the female keyhole-shaped orifice would have accepted a male member with an enlarged discoidal terminal - somewhat similar to certain early post-medieval toggle-fasteners, but with a longer neck - that fitted into the circular part of the orifice and then slid down the slot, thereby securing it closed (see Fig. 5, Nos 17-19).

Reinforcing the argument for not being clasps is the apparent complete absence from the known record of corresponding recognised male fittings. These presumably would mirror, though not necessarily so, the females in shape and ornamentation. To be used as such a clasp, one would assume the leather obscuring the orifice would require removal by cutting. Notwithstanding, use of sufficiently pliable leather may have allowed insertion of a male member, thereby facilitating use as clasps. If so, friction between the male member and the leather may have prevented accidental uncoupling of the two sections.

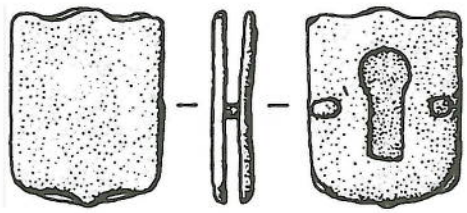
It is possible that the final assembly, i.e. the riveting together of front- and back-plates of a clasp, was not executed in the metalworker's workshop, but in the leatherworker's, or even distant from such a place. This may provide a reason for the open country find-spots.



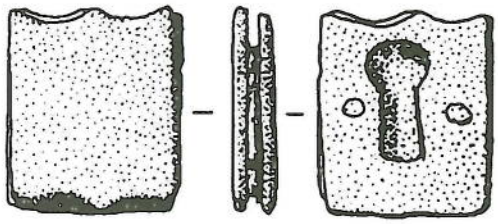
No. 10: Back-plate anomalous with front-plate; traces of white metal coating on front- and back-plate; two rivets; split in back-plate; H22mm W18mm. *Cockwood.*



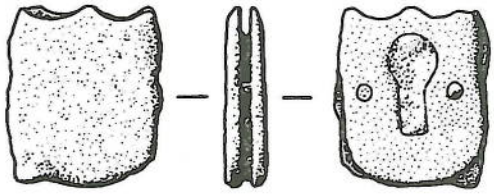
No. 11: Back-plate anomalous with front-plate; acorn-shaped top knop; basal knop bent outwards; three knops each side; two rivets; four unused rivet holes; H36mm W29mm. *Lindridge.* (erroneously recorded as *Poltimore* in *HBOF*)



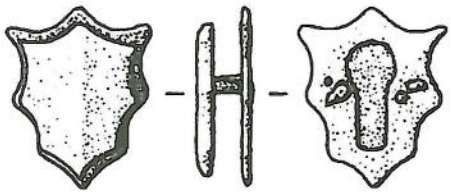
No. 12: Two rivets; H27mm W21mm. *Stokeinteignhead.*



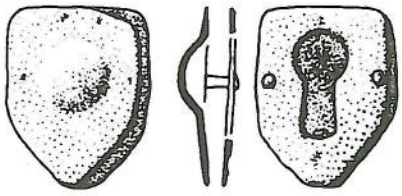
No. 13: Two rivets; remnant of leather inside; H29mm W23mm. *Stokeinteignhead.*



No. 14: Two rivets, ? corrosion or ? copper carbonate-impregnated leather inside; H25mm W21mm. *Barnstaple.*

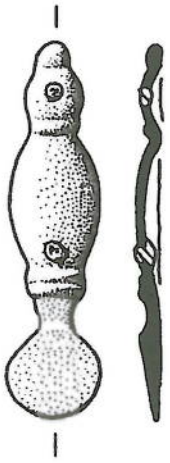


No. 15: Two long bent-over rivets; two unused rivet holes; H25mm W20.5mm. *Stoke Gabriel.*

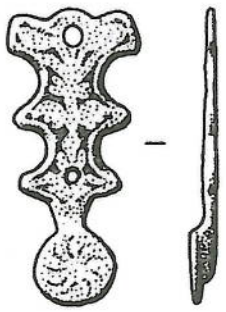


No. 16: Two rivets; H24.5mm W18mm. *Stokeinteignhead.*

Figure 4: Uninscribed examples Nos 10-16



No. 17: A male member of a *c.*15th – *c.*16th-century cast copper-alloy toggle fastener; remnants of two iron rivets; L50mm W12.5mm. *Dorset.*



No. 18: A male member of a *c.*16th-century cast copper-alloy toggle fastener; L40mm W17.5mm. *North Dorset.*

No. 19: A female member of a *c.*16th-century cast copper-alloy toggle-fastener; L42mm W23mm. *South-West Wiltshire.*

Figure 5: Two types of toggle fastener from sword belts Nos 17-19

Feedback on the function of these curiosities and other known examples, especially from datable contexts, and also corresponding male fittings, will be gratefully received by the author.

Disposition: Nos 1 & 13 in Torquay Museum; remainder in private collections.

Acknowledgments

My thanks to Richard Berry, Andy Down, Ron Gibson, Ian Griffin, Brett Hammond, Robert Lovett, David Martin, John Martin, Patrick Read, Hugh Vincent and Ross Whitehead, the metal-detectorists who willingly allowed their finds to be recorded and published here. For proof-reading the draft, advising on inscriptions and constructive advice, my gratitude to Roderick Butler, Geoff Egan, Nick Griffiths, Kevin Leahy, Val MacRae and Paul Robinson, and to Patrick Read (Figs 2-5, Nos 1-18) and Nick Griffiths (Fig. 5, No. 19) for their illustrations.

Bibliography

Read, B A, *History Beneath Our Feet* (Merlin Books Ltd, 1988; Anglia Publishing, 1995)