

METALWORK AND WORKED BONE, ST JOHNS COLLEGE LIBRARY, OXFORD (OXJL16)

by Leigh Allen (religious buttons/badges identified by Ian R Scott)

A total of 379 metal objects and 3 worked bone objects were recovered from the excavations at St Johns College Library (Table 1). The metalwork assemblage comprises 127 copper alloy objects, 243 iron objects and 9 lead objects. The copper alloy and iron objects have been x-rayed to aid identification. A number of miscellaneous (unidentifiable) fragments of sheet and strip were recovered but they are not reported on here, a full list will be deposited with the archive. The remaining identifiable objects comprise 120 copper alloy objects (including 45 lace tags and 59 pins), 227 iron objects (including 168 nails) and 5 lead objects. Items from the following functional categories have been identified; dress accessories, objects associated with books and writing, domestic items (including knives), lock furniture, horse-gear, tools, fixtures and fittings, craft/industry, weights and measures, ammunition and structural objects (including nails).

Table 1: Summary of the assemblage

	Phase 3 13th–14thC	Phase 4 15th– M16thC	Phase 5 M16th– 17thC	Phase 6 M17th–18C	Phase 7 19thC+	Total
Dress accessories	5 (3=pins)	12 (4=pins, 7=lace tags)	32 (5=pins, 21=lace tags)	69 (47=pins, 17=lace tags)		118 (59=pins, 45=lace tags)
Books and writing			2			2
Domestic (incl. knives)			10	1	1	12
Lock furniture	1		1	2		4
Horsegear	2	3	6	5		16
Tools	1			2		3
Fixtures and fittings		1	1	13		15
Craft/industry			2			2
Weight and measures					1	1
Ammunition			1			
Structural (incl. nails)	5 nails	10 nails	60 (54=nails)	91 (89=nails)	14 (13= nails)	180 (171=nails)
Total	14	26	111	183	8	350

The earliest finds from the site come from phase 3 quarry pits dating to the 13th–14th century they include horseshoe nails and a goad for guiding livestock and indicate the use of land in the vicinity for agricultural purposes. Phase 4 contexts produced only nails (including horseshoe nails), pins and lace tags. The bulk of the assemblage came from phases 5 and 6 mostly from pit fills dating to the mid-16th–18th centuries. Phase 5 saw a huge increase in pit digging compared to earlier phases and the subsequent infilling of these pits with refuse. Structural nails, relating to the rebuilding and refurbishment of college buildings during this period, were recovered in large quantities. Numerous lace tags and pins were also recovered; these dress accessories are common finds in Late Medieval and Post Medieval contexts. Phase 5 pits also produced objects associated with books and writing, riding, dining, and lighting; items relating to college life in the 16th and 17th century. Two small badges/button covers decorated with religious motifs are a reminder that St Johns College was founded in 1555, during the reign of Mary Tudor for the express purpose of training Catholic priests. Phase 6 contexts produced the largest number of finds from the site, all from three substantial pits used for the disposal of an exceptional amount of rubbish. Nails,

pins and lace tags are again the most common finds. Structural items, fixtures, fittings and lock furniture (presumably from college buildings) predominate. There are no items in the assemblage that could be considered as high status, and the number of dress accessories, excluding lace tags and pins, is small. Items often found on collegiate sites such as writing implements and objects associated with musical instruments, are absent.

Phase 3: 13th–14th century (14 objects)

Objects from phase 3 comprise 5 nails, 2 horseshoe nails, 3 pins, 2 mounts, a lock bolt, and a goad. The structural nails are mostly incomplete; the one complete example from quarry pit 393 has a round flat head just wider than the shank. Two horseshoe nails of different forms came from quarry pit 348 and ditch 651 the first, a 'fiddle key nail' has a semi-circular head and was used on Medieval horseshoes (Clarke 1995, type 2) with circular nail holes in a lozenge shaped countersinking. The second has a solid square head and was designed for late Medieval horseshoes with rectangular nail holes (without countersinking) and would have stood proud of the shoe (Clarke 1995, type 4). Only one of the three pins from quarry pit 408 is complete; it has a long slender shank and a spherical head. These items are common finds in Late Medieval and Post Medieval contexts and would have been used to secure light clothing or head dress. A small circular domed mount from pit 408 has a small perforation through the top for a separate rivet. Mounts were used individually or in groups to adorn belts, straps and girdles. A fragment of a possible second mount was recovered from pit 468 it is made from thin sheet metal and has a hand applied embossed decoration, there are two holes through it for attachment. The lock bolt, part of the internal mechanism of a lock was recovered from pit 388 and has a pair of teeth on the underside. The iron goad from quarry pit 375 is complete and would have been hafted onto a pole and used to spur or guide livestock.

Phase 4: 15th–mid 16th century (26 objects)

A total of 26 objects were recovered from phase 4 contexts, the majority of which came from quarry pit 373. They comprise 10 nails, 3 horseshoe nails, 4 pins, 7 lace tags and a dome-headed tack. Most of the nails have round flat heads just wider than the shank. The horseshoe nails all have solid square heads for use on Late Medieval horseshoes (see above). The pins are all incomplete shank fragments. The lace tags, a common find in Late Medieval and Post Medieval contexts, were put on the end of laces of leather or textile to protect them and make threading them through eyelets on garments easier. All the lace tags from phase 4 taper along their length and have edges that turn inwards along the seam to secure the lace to the fabric; this is the most common form of tag recovered from the site. The small dome-headed tack from quarry pit 376 is probably an upholstery tack.

Phase 5: Mid 16th–mid 17th century (111 objects)

A much larger number of objects were recovered from phase 5 contexts compared to the earlier phases. The assemblage is however dominated by nails, pins and lace tag. The objects are considered below by functional category.

Dress accessories – The majority of the dress accessories from this phase comprise lace tags (21) and pins (5). The most common type of lace tag recovered are tapered as from phase 4

(see above); examples came from pits 278, 318, 358 and 1200. A single example of a cylindrical tag that has edges that meet at the seam and a rivet through the top of the tag to secure it to the lace was recovered from pit 645.

Most of the pins are small fine pins with wire-wound heads that have been crimped into a sphere. Complete examples ranged in length from 25–32mm. A more robust pin with a spherical, designed to secure weightier material, was recovered from quarry pit 585.

Other dress accessories comprise buckles and a belt mount. The three small buckles from pits 256 and 318 all have D-shaped frames and wrap-around pins; the example from pit 318 has a folded rectangular buckle plate attached. The belt mount from pit 256 has two symmetrical lobes and a central ridge. Two spikes on the back would have secured it to a belt or strap.

Two small (very worn) copper alloy discs recovered from pit fills 137 and 447 are stamped with a central motif of the crucified Christ on the cross, flanked by the letters 'I' and 'C' for Jesus Christ. They may have been the fronts of buttons or small badges attached to clothing. Badges or medallions showing religious scenes or saints are found quite widely in the Catholic world.

Objects associated with books and writing – A catch-plate from a book clasp came from quarry pit 278, and a seal matrix from quarry pit 441. The catch plate has a scalloped outside edge and is decorated with a concentric circle design. It would have been attached to book cover and a hooked plate attached to the opposing cover would have hooked over the catch plate bar. Heavy clasps on books helped to keep them closed and protected the books from spaying open. The seal matrix has a slender shank with a rectangular section and a trefoil knob. The top loop is pierced for suspension. The circular die depicts a crouched hare on all fours with long ears and hunched back. It is almost identical in form to a seal matrix recovered from St Ebbe's (Church Street), Oxford (Goodall 1984, 221, Fig 31, No.2).

Domestic items – The domestic items comprise 5 knives, 2 forks, a vessel rim fragment and a candle snuffer. The knives comprise 3 whittle tang knives, a scale tang knife and a decorative iron knife handle. The whittle tang knives include a complete knife with worked bone handle from pit 540. The knife has a bolster of oval section between the blade and the tang, and a 'through' tang that runs the whole length of the handle protruding from the very end. The simple bone handle expands towards the butt end where it is cut straight. The bolster, a thickening at the junction of the blade and the handle, was an innovation in hafting introduced in the 16th century. It added strength to the knife at the point where the most force was applied, and contributed to a better balance between the knife and the handle, thus improving control. The other two whittle tang knives, both from quarry pit 318, are very damaged with only short sections of the tang and blade surviving either side of the bolster.

The scale tang knife (folded in half) was recovered from quarry pit 483. It is in very poor condition but there are two rivet holes visible in the tang for attaching the scales. The corroded remains of a decorative knife handle dating to the late 16th century came from quarry pit 1200 it would have abutted the bolster and has a decorative discoidal end with a small protruding pommel (Moore 1999, 110, second knife down on the lower plate). Two forks were recovered from phase 5 contexts. The example from pit 1011 is complete with long straight prongs, a moulded shaft with a slender bolster and a worked bone handle with an octagonal section that expands to a rounded butt. The second fork from layer 1004 has

shorter prongs and a larger more robust bolster, the tang survives but the handle is missing. Forks only came into common use in the latter half of the 17th century.

The vessel rim fragment recovered from pit 531 has a thickened upper edge and a circular perforation near the edge possibly so that the vessel could be suspended. A sheet metal thimble with straight-sides, machine applied indentations and a plain rim came from pit 1200.

An almost complete candle snuffer/wick cutter of 'scissor form' came from pit 319. Designed for trimming the wicks of burning tallow candles to prevent guttering the snuffer has a box and plate mounted on the blades so that the wick could be cut and captured in the box. The sharp point at the front was useful for spearing scraps of burnt wick that fell into the hot tallow. Snuffers are recorded in the privy purse expenses of Henry VIII (1509–47) but they do not appear in common use until later in the 17th century (Eveleigh 2003, 16)

Lock furniture – A large iron key was recovered from pit 629. It has a kidney-shaped bow with double internal points and a plain stem with a moulded knop on the end that protrudes beyond the bit.

Horsegear – Six objects associated with horse gear were recovered from phase 5 contexts; a set of spurs, a buckle, a fragment from a horseshoe and 3 horseshoe nails. The spurs from pit 256 are rowel spurs with a very short bifurcated neck for the rowel (now missing) and slender straight arms. There is a complete spur buckle attached to the figure of eight terminal of the surviving arm to secure the leathers that fastened the spur to the wearers ankle. This type of spur dates to the 16th–17th century, and marks a return to a more functional form from the rather exaggerated, elongated spurs that had become fashionable in the 15th century.

The iron buckle from pit 256 is trapezoidal in shape and was designed to join harness straps of differing widths. The tip from a horseshoe arm was recovered from pit 318. This appears to have a calkin at the end, a thickening of the tip generally found on Medieval horseshoes.

The 3 horseshoe nails recovered from quarry pits 433 and 441 have solid rectangular heads with wide rectangular shanks. They and were designed for use with horseshoes with rectangular nail holes (without countersinking) and would have stood proud of the shoe (Clarke 1995 type 4). Outside London this late Medieval form lasted through the 16th–17th centuries (Egan 2005, 179)

Fixtures and fittings – A fragment from a hinge-strap came from quarry pit 318. It has a decorative scalloped terminal and is perforated for attachment to a door, window or cupboard.

Craft and industry – Two waste pieces from bone working were recovered from quarry pits 278 and 587. The first is a simple wedge-shaped piece cut from a large mammal long bone, the second piece is roughly rectangular, slightly curved in section, cut from a large mammal tibia. The upper face has had circles removed from it, each with a small deeper circle at the centre. The circular cut-outs vary in size (D: 4–9mm); in one case two circles touch, but one has not been completely drilled out. This piece is probably waste from bead working.

Ammunition – A single lead shot with a diameter of 12mm was recovered from layer 1003.

Structural items –The majority of the structural items recovered from Phase 5 contexts are nails (54), ubiquitous finds on most excavations. A number of different types were identified. The most common types are those with circular, flat, flanged heads or smaller circular heads just a little wider than the shank (see above). Less common are the slightly more robust nails with square or diamond heads and rectangular section shanks. The only other structural items from this phase were a short length of window lead from pit 135 with the characteristic H-shaped profile and a rectangular staple or timber dog used to secure large timbers together from pit 318.

1. *Book clasp catch plate, copper alloy, complete. Scalloped outside edge and concentric circle decoration, ctx 279, L:34mm*
2. *Seal matrix, copper alloy, slender shank with rectangular section and a trefoil knob. The top loop is pierced for suspension. The circular die bears the image of a hare, ctx 446, L:22mm*
3. *Knife, iron and bone, complete. Whittle tang knife with worked bone handle. Oval shaped bolster, 'through' tang, simple bone handle, ctx 542, L:196mm.*
4. *Fork, iron and bone, complete. Two straight prongs, moulded shaft with slender bolster. Bone handle with octagonal expanding a rounded butt, ctx 1014, L:202mm*
5. *Candle snuffer, iron, complete. 'scissor form', box and plate mounted on the blades and sharp point at front, ctx 319, L:166mm*

Phase 6: Mid 17th–18th century (183 objects)

The number of objects recovered from phase 6 contexts is again large but this is mainly due to an increased number of nails, pins and lace tags. All the objects from this phase were recovered from pits 225, 678 and 1026.

Dress accessories – The majority of the dress accessories from this phase are lace tags (17) and pins (47). The lace tags are almost all the same type as seen in phase 5 with in-turned edges (see above). A single example of a cylindrical tag with a single rivet through the top was recovered from pit 1026 and an example with two rivet holes was recovered from pit 225. The only decorated tag (pit 225) has edges that overlap along the seam and is decorated all over with a fine criss-cross pattern.

Most of the pins are small fine pins with wire-wound heads that have been crimped into a sphere; complete examples range in length from 20–7mm. A more robust pin from pit 225 could have been used with heavier fabric, but a small group of very fine pins with extremely small heads and could only have been used to secure the lightest of fabrics.

Other dress accessories comprise three fasteners, a belt mount and a buckle. The three iron hooks from hook and eye fasteners (pit 225) are long and robust examples (34–42mm), probably used to secure heavy clothing such as doublet and breeches (Read 2008, 153). The belt mount, almost identical to the one recovered from phase 5, came from pit 1026. It has a central area of linear ornamentation rather than a ridge. The simple square buckle frame with central bar from pit 225 is probably a shoe buckle.

Domestic items – A fragment from a knife with a bolster was recovered from pit 225. It is in poor condition and has lost its tang and most of the blade.

Lock furniture – The key from pit 225 has a kidney-shaped bow with double internal points and a moulded stem. The damaged lock plate (pit 678) has a key hole and corner fixing hole the surviving mechanism comprises a sliding bolt and tumbler.

Horsegear – Two sets of spurs were recovered from pits 225 and 1026. Both are rowel spurs with very short bifurcated necks and straight arms, and in both cases the rowels are missing. The set from pit 225 has figure-of-eight shaped terminals and the spur from 1026 has rectangular terminals with horizontal slots. There is a riveted plate through the upper slot of one terminal to attach the leathers. This set also has two moulded collars round the neck.

The buckle pin recovered from pit 678 is large, so most likely to be from harness rather than a dress accessory because of its size (L: 88mm).

The 2 horseshoe nails were recovered 225 and 678. The former is a clenched nail with a rectangular head and the latter is a fiddle key nail.

Tools –The tools comprise a fish hook and a punch. The slender unbarbed fish hook came from quarry pit 225 and the punch came from pit 1026. The latter has a circular section and a flat end; the head is slightly burred from impact. Punches were used to make holes in hot iron, but also in woodworking to sink nail heads.

Fixtures and fittings – A small hinge pivot, probably for a window or cupboard door came from quarry pit 225 and a large pinned hinge came from the same pit. Three small dome-headed upholstery tacks came from pits 225 and 1026. Eight small L-shaped hooks came from pit 225. They have tapering shanks and hooks and vary in length from 30–47mm they could be tenter-hooks used on tenters (a post and rail construction) to stretch cloth out to dry after fulling. Alternatively, and perhaps more likely considering the setting, they could have been used to support wall hangings and tapestries (Goodall 1990, 234–5).

Structural – Nearly all the structural objects recovered from phase 6 are nails (86), and in this phase there is a more even spread of nail types. Nails with circular flat flanged heads still the most common, but nails with square and diamond shaped head appear in greater numbers. The only other structural objects are a short length of lead window came with wide-spaced toothed milling dating to 18th–19th century and a U-shaped iron staple from pit 225.

Phase 7: 19th century

The majority of objects recovered from phase 7 contexts come from ditch cut 1000 they comprise 6 nails, a fragment from a knife blade and a length of window came. The nails are all the same form they have circular, flat, flanged heads and shanks with a square section. The blade fragment has a slender triangular section but is undiagnostic. The length of window came has a cross-piece at the centre, the H-shaped profile shows evidence of milling with straight tooth marks about 5mm apart. This type of window lead dates to the 18th and 19th century (Geddes 1985, 154–6, type G). The only other find from this phase was a lead weight recovered from layer 265 it has a square base and an octagonal top and weighs 1283g (2lbs 13½ ounces).

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