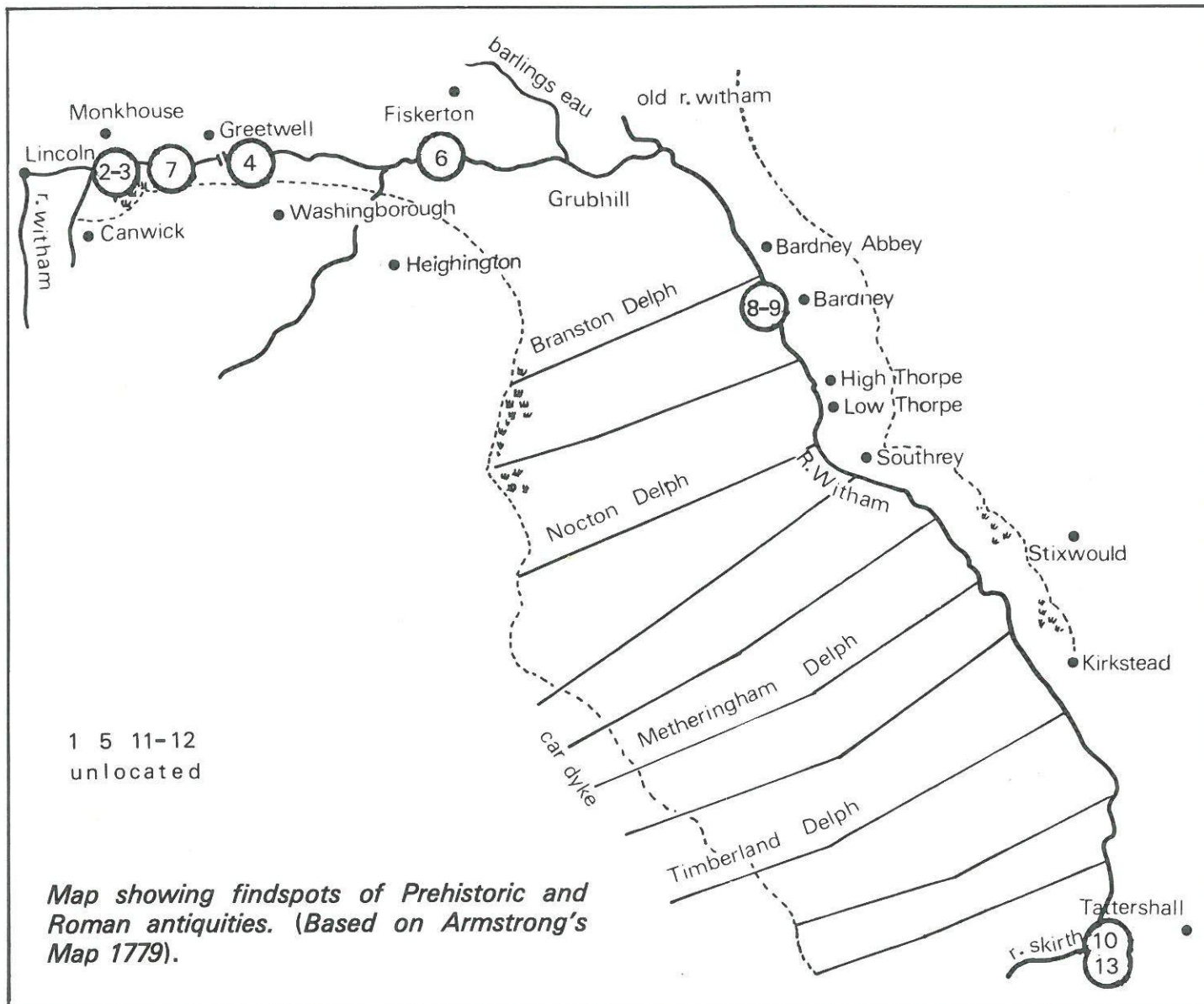


Information Sheet

Archaeology Series No. 12

ANTIQUITIES FROM THE RIVER WITHAM

Part I Prehistoric and Roman



INTRODUCTION

It is strange that some of the most spectacular discoveries of ancient metalwork ever found in this country should have been made in what is one of the least impressive of rivers, the River

Witham. Its placid canal-like course through Lincolnshire, particularly below Lincoln, belies its ancient importance, for the state in which we now see it is entirely due to the massive drainage works which led to the discoveries. The Witham rises from several springs in the

area of South Witham (Lincs) and Thistleton (Leics) and runs northwards through Grantham, to reach Lincoln at Brayford Pool. From here it runs east then south-east to Boston and empties into the Wash after a journey of 70 miles (122 km), at a point only 28 miles (45 km) from where it rises. From Lincoln to Boston its course has altered considerably over the centuries. The valley cut through the limestone ridge is well-defined at Lincoln, but within 7 miles (11 km) it widens out and soon the Witham becomes a fenland river, embanked on both sides to protect the surrounding countryside from flooding, and pursues a much-straightened and entirely man-made course for the final 15 miles (24 km).

It was in straightening, widening, and scouring the winding and silted-up course of the river nearly two hundred years ago that many of the finds were made. Formerly one of the main transport networks of Lincolnshire the river had become almost un-navigable and was no longer capable of taking the winter flood-water. An Act of Parliament was obtained in 1671 to set it to rights, but nothing came of this and despite many schemes it was not until the Witham Drainage Act was obtained in 1762 that anything was achieved. Lock gates were installed at three points along its course to create a series of deep channels (the fall in the river from Lincoln to Boston was a mere 16 feet (5 metres) and a programme of scouring and embanking was begun. Some finds were made at Tattershall Ferry in 1768 but the majority came from the stretch between Kirkstead and Lincoln in the two years 1787 and 1788. The *bankers* (as the workmen employed in the embanking were called) discovered most of the antiquities on the hard bed of the river, below the silt. They had been preserved by *anaerobic* (airless) conditions and a wide range of materials such as iron, bronze, wood and bone survived in splendid condition.

Further Acts of Parliament in 1808 and 1812 led to the replacement of the existing locks by others in more satisfactory positions and the construction of the catchwater drains to the north and south of the river in order to separate local and long-distance drainage. Finally in 1826 and 1829 Acts were obtained to raise more money for the same purposes as the 1812 Act and further widening and deepening of the river was carried out just below Stamp End lock in Lincoln.

Large numbers of finds were made in 1816 at Washingborough and at the site of Horsley

Deeps Lock near Bardney, and in 1826 below the lock at Lincoln and probably also in the Canwick, Washingborough and Greetwell area.

The discoveries made by the bankers represented all periods from prehistoric to relatively modern. Attempts have been made from time to time to show that the weapons were lost in the aftermath of one of the mediaeval battles around Lincoln, or that the concentration of prehistoric finds represents an early crossing of the Witham in the Washingborough area, but no single explanation of this kind seems to fit all the facts. The truth is that many English rivers such as the Thames have produced quantities of early metal finds; when an item is accidentally dropped into a river it is hard to find again; if it is enveloped in an air-excluding silt it may be preserved in an excellent condition. These two factors rarely occur on dry land, where only broken and discarded material on the whole becomes buried, and that often in very adverse conditions.

Much of the material from the 1787-8 dredging came into the hands of Sir Joseph Banks of Revesby Abbey, President of the Royal Society, and one of the most eminent men of his generation. It did so largely as a result of a notice by Banks in the local press, published on October 17th 1788 which read

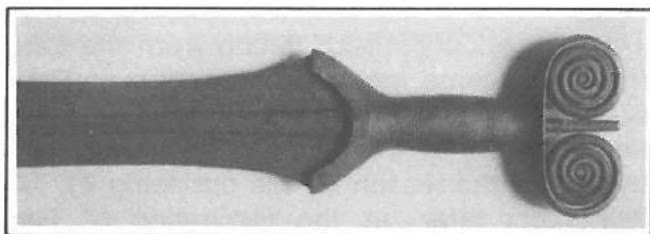
'Any gentleman possessed of ancient weapons, utensils, or other things, found in clearing the river Witham, or elsewhere in Lincolnshire will much oblige Sir Joseph Banks by permitting him to inspect them; and he will be very thankful for any information on the subject he shall receive by the post, directed to him at Revesby Abbey, near Boston.'

He made manuscript notes on the collection, which he never published, and in 1796 handed over a number of the swords etc. (including the trumpet from Tattershall Ferry) to Dr. George Pearson for analysis of the metal, one of the earliest instances of scientific analysis of antiquities. We must admire the spirit of scientific curiosity, but can only regret that it led to the total destruction of the items in question. Banks handed over his collection to the Dean and Chapter of Lincoln Cathedral, probably in the 1790s, and certainly before 1810, when Adam Stark described it as being in the east end of the library over the North Cloister. Subsequent finds from the river were not so fortunate and while a number fell into

private hands and eventually went to the British Museum, many were lost. In 1906, on the formation of the City and County Museum, the Dean and Chapter's Collection was transferred to it to form the nucleus of the present archaeological collection.

THE FINDS

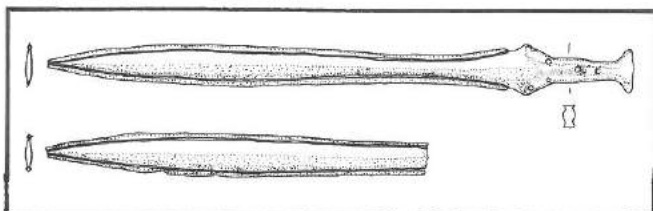
1. Antennae-Hilted Sword



Antennae-hilted sword.
Length 28 ins. (711 mm)

This exceptional bronze sword with an intricately-moulded blade and a cast hilt decorated with two spiral 'antennae' twisted in opposite directions dates from the Late Bronze Age, probably the 8th century BC, and may have originally been made on the continent. It was found in 1826 just below Lincoln, and is now in the private museum of the Duke of Northumberland at Alnwick Castle, no. 235, along with other antiquities formerly in the possession of E.J. Willson, the Lincoln architect and antiquary.

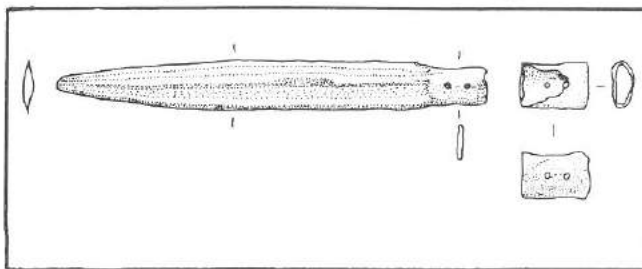
2-3. Lincoln Swords



Lincoln swords.
Length (complete example) 22 ins. (569 mm)

These two Late Bronze Age leaf-shaped swords of the 8th-7th-century BC were found in dredging the Witham near Monks Leys (the eastern extremity of Lincoln) in 1906. Swords of this date are frequently found in pairs or even threes, as though a warrior might possess more than one such weapon. When found both swords were complete, though one was broken: the upper part of the broken one slipped back into the river and could not be found again. Now in the City and County Museum, acc. nos. 113-4.08.

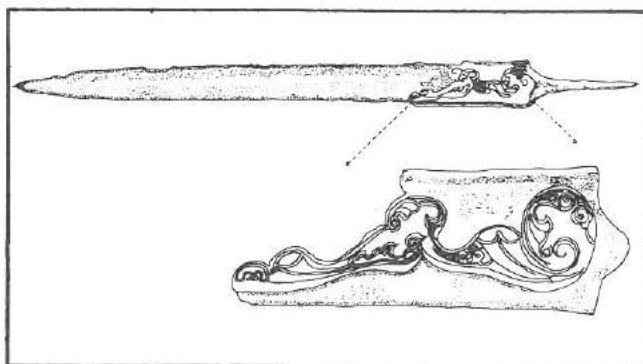
4. Washingborough Sword/Dagger



Washingborough sword/dagger.
Length 12.2 ins. (310 mm)

This strange concoction, found in the Witham at Washingborough in 1936, seems to consist of a broken leaf-shaped sword blade of Late Bronze Age date (8th-7th century BC) reworked and converted into a socketed knife by means of grinding and hammering the upper part into a tang, drilling it, and providing it with a wooden or bone handle (missing) for which the surviving oval-sectioned tube no doubt served as a ferrule. Socketed knives are a feature of the last part of the Bronze Age and may have acted as carpenters' tools rather than as weapons. This example is now in the City and County Museum, acc. no. 2.36.

5. Sword & Scabbard

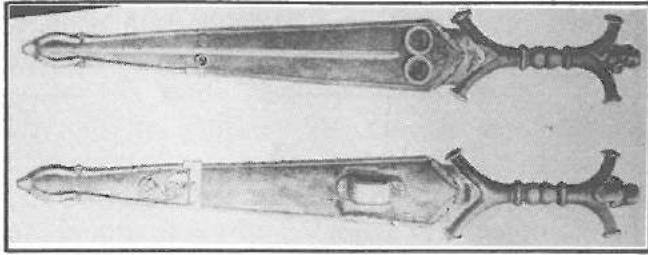


Iron Age sword and scabbard
Length 25 ins. (635 mm)

This iron sword lacking its handle but preserving a part of its decorated bronze scabbard mount was found in 1826 just below Lincoln. The mount was no doubt originally attached to a leather scabbard and in 1852 the *chape* or metal protector at the tip end of the scabbard still survived, but was later lost. Decoration of the scabbard mount consists of a series of irregular scrolls with a pattern of fine lines forming a curvilinear design within them.

The sword, dating from the Late Iron Age (2nd century BC), is now in the Alnwick Castle Museum, no. 276.

6. Anthropoid Dagger



Anthropoid dagger. Length 15 ins. (381 mm)

This dagger (now lost) is one of a group of swords and daggers found both in Britain and the continent, in which the hilt is given a human or semi-human form: the guard and pommel are curved projections which are usually adapted as arms and legs, the hand-grip forming the body, and with a head projecting from the upper end. This example, probably found near Fiskerton in 1787, is unusual in that instead of a head the handle terminates in a small grotesque figure, not unlike the famous Lincoln Imp in Lincoln Cathedral. As the dagger has not been seen since 1863 it is not possible to check the accuracy of the early drawings, nor yet to discover whether or not the 'imp' figure was an original feature, a misunderstanding of a corroded shape, or a recutting carried out after its discovery. The scabbard, of bronze, may originally have been decorated with coral or bone studs. Dagger and scabbard were last recorded in the possession of 'Henry Thorold Esq.'

7. The Witham Shield



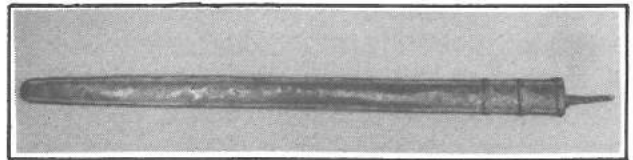
*Witham Shield.
44.2 ins (1123 mm) x 15.2 ins. (385 mm)*

One of the most famous prehistoric finds ever made in this country the Witham shield was dredged from the Witham just below Lincoln in August 1826. It consists of two thin sheets of bronze joined down the middle by a bronze spine opening out into three bosses at top, bottom and centre. The central boss is decorated with coral studs while the two terminal

bosses bear an incised curvilinear design. Around the centre of the shield a slight difference in the surface finish of the bronze sheets and a row of tiny rivets mark the place where an emblem in the form of a very stylized boar was once attached. It must originally have formed a splendid sight but before the shield was lost or thrown into the river the boar figure was removed. The shield would have had a stout backing of leather or wood, but this has not survived.

This exceptional shield, dating from the Late Iron Age, came into the possession of Rev. H.W. Sibthorpe, Vicar of Washingborough and also one of the Witham Commissioners (no doubt the reason for his obtaining it). A few years later, at the instigation of Earl Brownlow, it was given to the Armoury at Goodrich Court, Herefordshire, and eventually went to the British Museum in 1872. (Reg. no. 72.12-13.1). An exact electrotype copy is now in the City and County Museum.

8-9. Bardney Swords



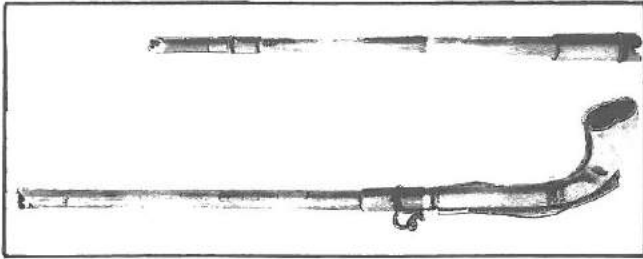
*Bardney sword and scabbard.
Length 34.6 ins. (880 mm)*

Among the 1787 finds from the Witham close to the site of Bardney Abbey were two Late Iron Age (late 1st century BC/early 1st century AD) iron swords in bronze scabbards. The two swords, apparently in identical scabbards and in a similar state of preservation, were almost certainly lost on the same occasion and presumably were the property of one man. One of the two was sacrificed in 1796 to metallurgical analysis resulting in its total destruction. From this it was discovered that the blade was corroded away within the scabbard leaving the projecting shoulder and tang as the only metallic parts. The scabbard of thin sheet bronze (an alloy in this case of 90% copper to 10% tin) was covered in what was described as 'a bright blue varnish', which may have been *vivianite*, a product of corrosion in wet conditions. The surviving scabbard is made in two pieces, bound at the edges by narrow strips, and strengthened at the upper end by three cast bands. Between and below these are three areas decorated in a similar curvilinear pattern with symmetrically

placed dots, perhaps imitating rivets. On the back is a loop for suspension.

The surviving sword and scabbard are in the City and County Museum, acc. no. 9711.06.

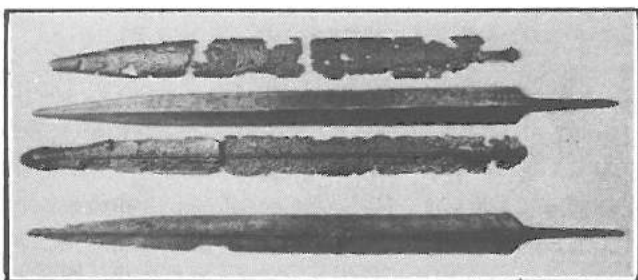
10. Tattershall Ferry Carnyx



Tattershall carynx.
Length 53 ins. (1346 mm) overall

Among the earliest finds from the Witham, in about 1768, were the two pieces of an Iron Age war-trumpet or *carynx* from Tattershall Ferry (site of the present Tattershall Bridge). The two pieces were formed from several lengths of tube made from bronze sheet soldered at the junction and fitted with a series of overlapping joints, the two fragments being made up from five such lengths. The end-piece, forming the 'bell' of the instrument was decorated with a finial, perhaps imitating an animal's tail, and a long crest. Around the tube just before it curved was a pattern in the form of stylized chain. The whole instrument would have been held vertically, with a mouthpiece on the side of the lower end and in all probability the upper end was enclosed by an animal's head (probably that of a boar) fashioned from sheet metal. Along with other antiquities, this extremely rare instrument was sacrificed to metallurgical analysis in 1796 and is thus no longer in existence.

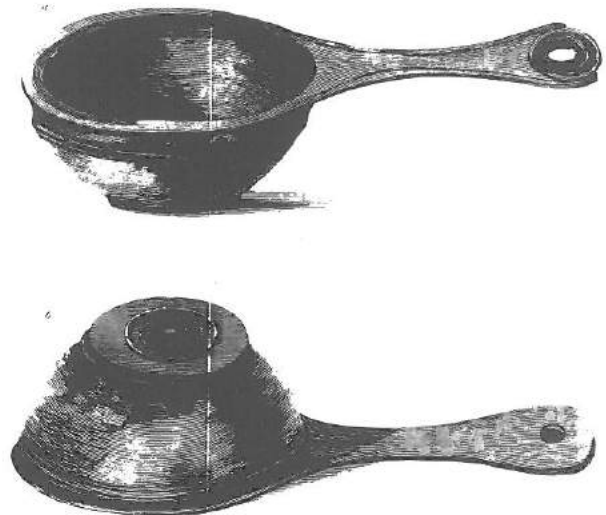
11-12. Two Iron Age Swords and a Scabbard



Iron Age swords and scabbard.
Length of swords 28 ins. (710 mm) and 27.2 ins. (693 mm)

Among the Iron Age finds from the Witham whose history is somewhat vague are two swords of a very simple form with raised midribs and plain tangs, all traces of the hilt having gone. One of the two has remains of an iron scabbard, flat on the back with a loop for attachment, and centrally ribbed on the front, with an iron chape at the end. Both swords may be 1787-8 finds but in view of the absence of any description of them at that date and in view of the report that a number of swords were found in 1826 'just below the lock' in Lincoln it is possible that these are 1826 finds. Both are in the City and County Museum acc. nos. 344.14 (sword) and 2-3.56 (sword and scabbard).

13. Tattershall Ferry Skillet



Tattershall skillet. Dimensions not recorded.

Like the *carynx* this Roman skillet or saucepan (one of the very few Roman finds from the Witham) was dredged up in about 1768 at Tattershall Ferry, and was said to have been used by some boatmen to bale out their boat until about 1800! When found it still had soot adhering to its base, and the makers name C ARAT was stamped on the handle. A maker CARATUS is recorded from elsewhere in the Roman Empire; this piece of military kitchen equipment was undoubtedly made on the continent, though whether in France or in southern Italy is uncertain, and probably dates from the late 1st or early 2nd century A.D. Like the *carynx* and the second Iron Age sword from Bardney this skillet was destroyed in the interests of analysis in 1796. Adam Stark, who describes various antiquities in the Cathedral Cloisters in 1810, specifically mentions 'saucepans' being there among

other finds from the Witham. As he mentions a number of other items known to have been destroyed in 1796 he was either using old notes or someone else's account; at all events his information cannot be accepted without question.

These thirteen items are a selection of the most interesting and important of the pre-historic and Roman finds from the Witham. There are a number of other pieces from the Witham in the City and County Museum which do not appear here. Anglo-Saxon, Viking period, and Mediaeval finds will appear in Parts 2 and 3 (Information Sheets No. 13 and 14).

Glossary of terms

Catchwater	Dyke draining area of wet ground
Carnyx	Celtic war-trumpet
Chape	Metal fitting on scabbard protecting sword point
Hilt	Handle of sword or dagger
Scabbard	Sheath protecting sword or dagger blade
Skillet	Roman military saucepan
Tang	Handle end of sword or dagger blade, over which hilt fits

SOURCES

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- Anon. *Lincolnshire Notes and Queries* III (1893) and IV (1894) (Sir Joseph Banks' manuscript notes of c 1800).
- Anon. *A Descriptive Catalogue of Antiquities, Chiefly British, At Alnwick Castle* (1880).
- J. May *Prehistoric Lincolnshire* (1976)
 Sir F. Hill *Georgian Lincoln* (1966)
 W.H. Wheeler *A History of the Fens of South Lincolnshire* 2nd edn. (n.d.)
- Lincoln, Rutland, and Stamford Mercury.*
- Lincolnshire Museums; City & County Museum records.
- Lincolnshire Library Service; Lincoln Central Library Local History collections (esp. Banks' Collection of topographical sketches).

WRITTEN BY

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 City & County Museum
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 May 1979.