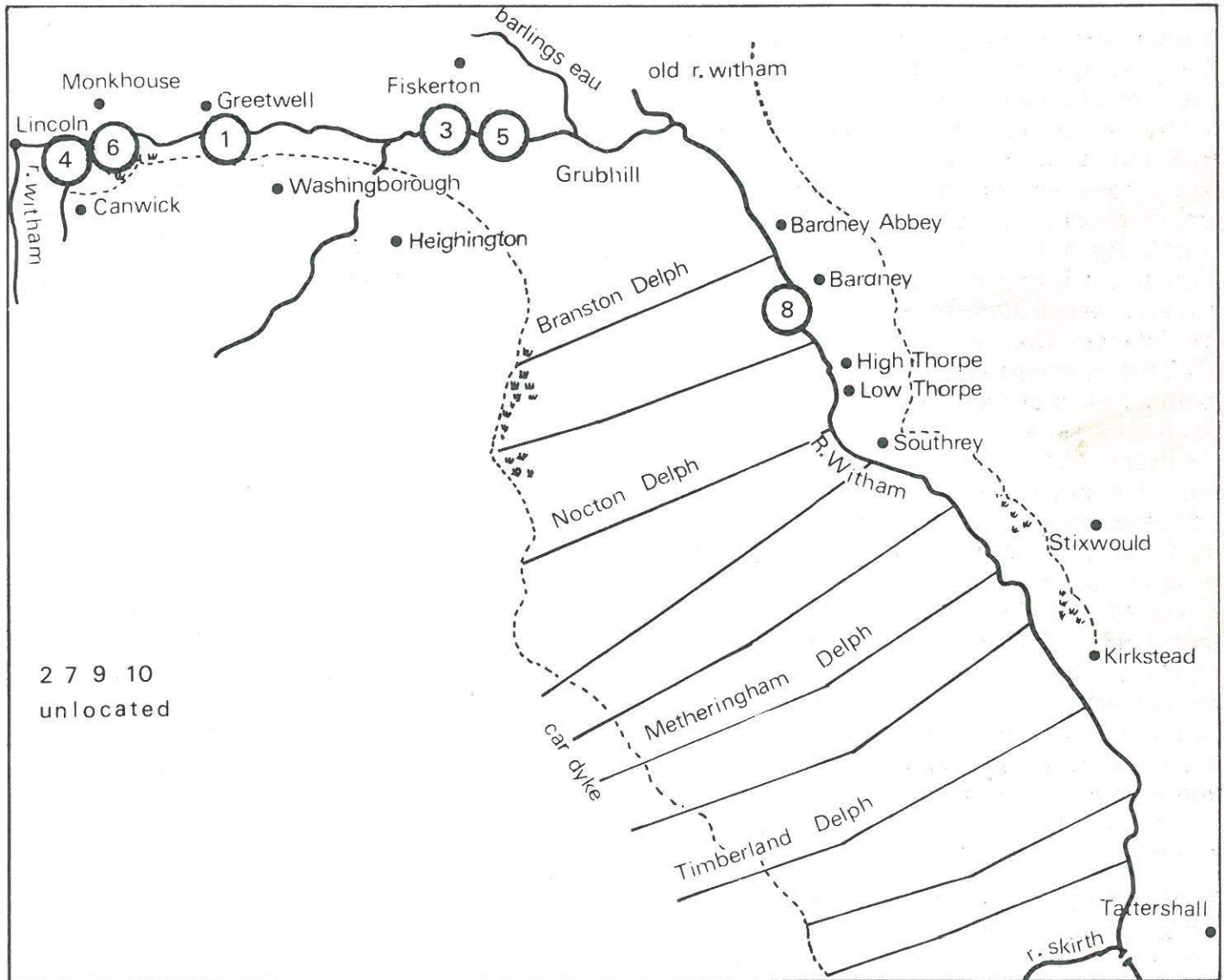


# Information Sheet

Archaeology Series No.13

## ANTIQUITIES FROM THE RIVER WITHAM

### PART 2 ANGLO-SAXON AND VIKING



Map showing findspots of Anglo-Saxon and Viking antiquities. [Map based on Armstrong's Map of 1779].

#### 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 rivers, the River

Witham. Its placid and 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 (112km) at a point only 28 miles (45km) 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 (11km) 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 (24km).

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 the *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 drain 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 at Bardney, and 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 now 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 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 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 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 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. Washingborough Hanging Bowl

One of the most spectacular finds of the Anglo-Saxon period ever made in this country came to light in April 1816 at Washingborough, about four miles below Lincoln. In cutting one of the catchwater drains associated with improvements to the Witham a number of antiquities were recovered, including a dug-out boat and a jewelled silver hanging bowl. The hanging bowl, about 6 inches (15cm) in diameter, was decorated with a number of blue glass settings, imitating rivet heads, and enamelled plaques. In the centre of the bottom stood a small long-necked animal surrounded by four small animal heads, while equally spaced around the outside were four *escutcheons* in the form of animals biting the edge of the bowl and acting as loops into which rings and chains would have been fitted for suspending the bowl. In all probability the bowl would have been hung from a tripod and used to contain water for ecclesiastical washing of hands. Any other contents would have covered up the elaborate ornaments inside.



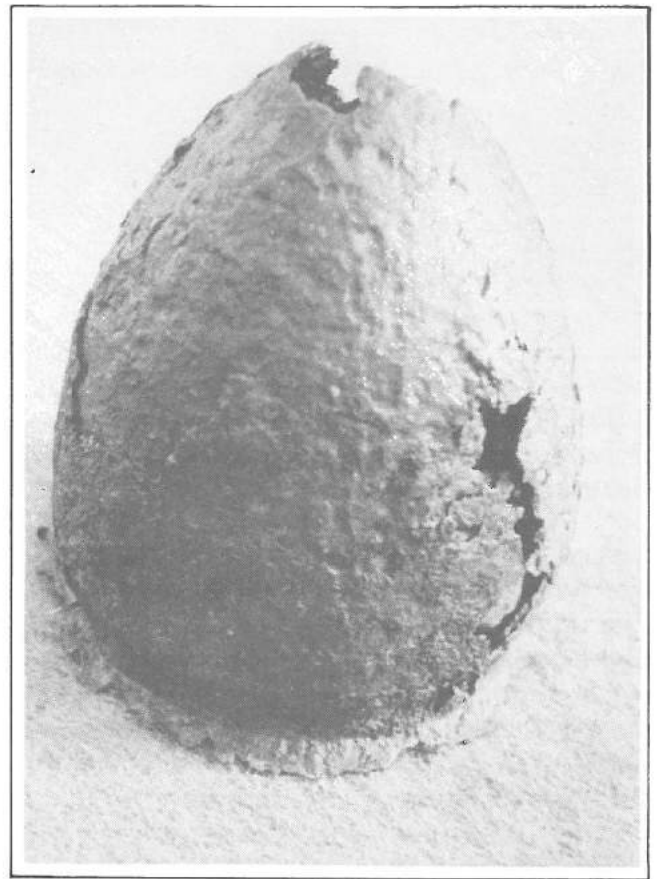
*Washingborough hanging-bowl. Diameter 6 ins. (152mm)*

*Reproduced by courtesy of the Society of Antiquaries of London.*

This bowl, dating from the 8th century, was exhibited at the Lincoln Meeting of the Royal Archaeological Institute in 1848. It was then said to be in the possession of John Heywood Hawkins of Bignor Park, Sussex. Since then it has not been seen.

### 2. Shield Boss

This Anglo-Saxon shield boss, found at an



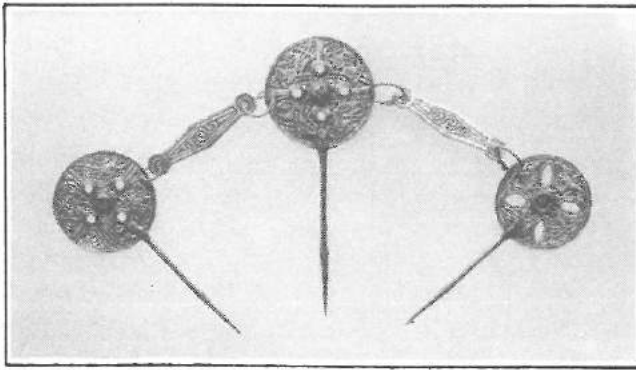
*Shield boss. Height 5.4 ins. (137mm), diameter 5.1 ins. (130mm)*

unrecorded place in the Witham in 1787-8 is of the so-called 'sugar loaf' type, named after the conical loaves in which sugar used to be supplied. This shape is thought to be a fairly late type and may belong to the 7th century A.D. Such a boss, attached to the centre of a circular wooden shield, would have had a dual purpose; firstly to provide a protection for the hand-grip, set immediately behind it, and secondly to disconcert the enemy by being used as a thrusting weapon in its own right. It is in the City and County Museum. Acc. No. 9758.06.

### 3. Fiskerton Triple Pins

This exceptional 8th century group consisting of three silver-gilt pins with decorated circular heads, linked together by two decorated strips, was found in the Witham at Fiskerton during the summer of 1826. Various suggestions have been made as to its purpose, but other than the likelihood that it was used as an ornament in the hair or in a tunic there is no real evidence one way or another. A few other linked pins survive complete or as fragments, but none so magnificent as this group.

Each of the three pins has rivetted to it a large disc head; the left-hand and centre heads are similar in design with four circular openings equally spaced around a central setting, the



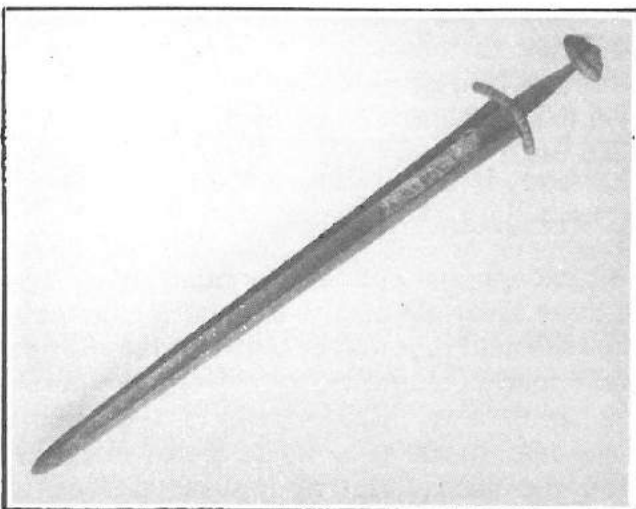
*Fiskerton triple pins. Length of centre pin 4.8ins. (121mm)  
Reproduced by courtesy of the Trustees of the British Museum.*

spaces between being filled with designs of intertwined fanciful animals and scrollwork. The right-hand head is different, and is probably a replacement. Here the central setting is surrounded by four equally-spaced lentoid openings with more fanciful scrolly beasts between them. Linking the pin-heads are two flat bars with rounded ends and widened centres decorated with a 'wave-crest' motif. Twists of plain wire connect links to pins.

These pins came into the possession of Robert Swan, Registrar to the Bishop of Lincoln, who gave them to the Archaeological Institute at its Lincoln meeting in 1848. They were transferred to the British Museum in 1858 and have the reg. no. 58, 11-16, 4.

#### 4. Lincoln Sword

This iron sword has a wide *fuller* along the blade, down-curving *quillons*, and a *pommel*



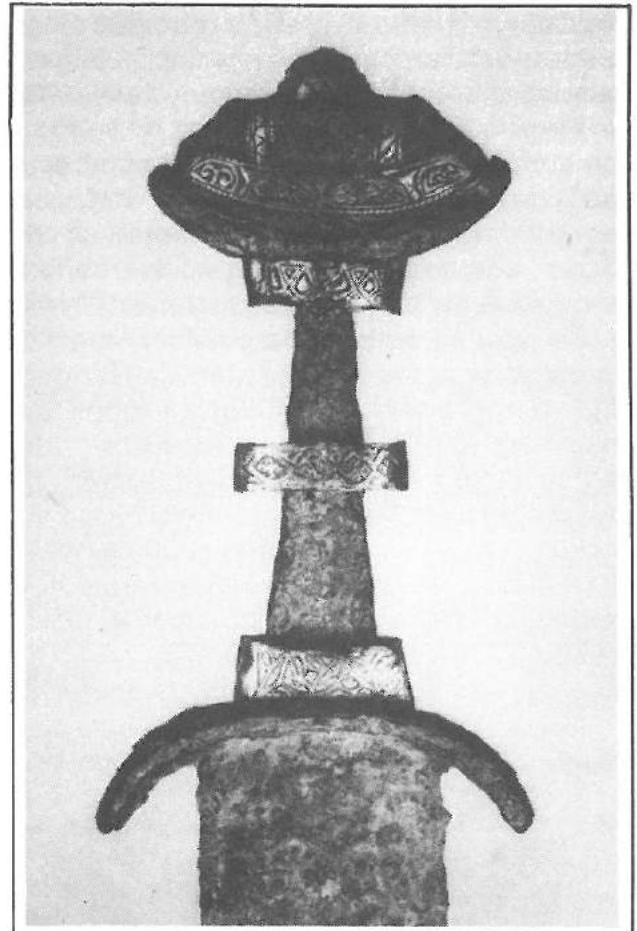
*Lincoln sword. Length 36ins. (914mm)  
Reproduced by courtesy of the Trustees of the British Museum.*

with three lobes. The grip does not survive, but traces of inlaid copper decoration remain on the quillons and pommel, while along the fuller on one side runs an inlaid inscription in

iron on steel + LEVTLRIT and on the other a double scroll pattern. The inscription does not appear to make much sense, but in common with other such inscriptions on swords it may represent the name of the smith.

This sword, dating from the 9th - 10th century, was found in the Witham opposite Monks' Abbey, Lincoln in unrecorded circumstances, but almost certainly in 1826, and was given in 1848 to the British Museum by J. Hayward Esq. of Beaumont Manor, Lincoln. It has the Reg. no. 48, 10-21, 1.

#### 5. Fiskerton Sword



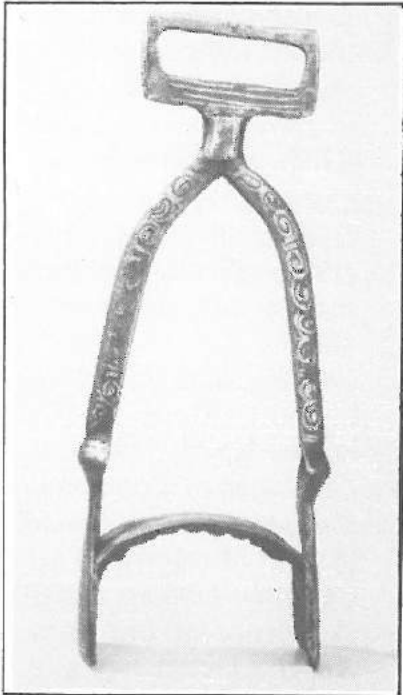
*Fiskerton sword. Length 35.5ins. (902mm)  
Reproduced by courtesy of Sheffield City Museum*

This splendid sword of the 9th century was found in 1954 by an eleven-year-old Sheffield boy while walking along the north bank of the Witham at Fiskerton, just upstream of Five Mile House. It may have been dredged up some time previously. Its broad blade and short curved quillons are undecorated but the three-lobed pommel bears silver bands with ornament in *niello* in both geometric and animal designs. Three silver bands, also decorated with different geometric niello designs encircle what would once have been a wooden or bone handgrip, now lost. Traces of a wooden scabbard survive on the blade. A very

similar sword was found recently in North Yorkshire, in rather similar circumstances and is now in the Yorkshire Museum at York. The Fiskerton sword is now in Sheffield City Museum acc. no. J 1954. 3.

#### 6. Lincoln Stirrup-Iron

This very heavy iron stirrup was found in the Witham near Lincoln in 1826 and dates from the 10-11th century. A rectangular loop at the top held the stirrup-leather which was attached at its upper end to the saddle; below the loop the stirrup divides into two bars, which open out at the bottom into broad plates. Linking these and providing the support for the sole of the foot is an arched plate of flat section strengthened underneath by a twisted iron bar. Ornament in the form of lines, squares and spirals inlaid in copper wire on the prepared surface of the iron-work cover almost the whole of the area that would have been visible in use.



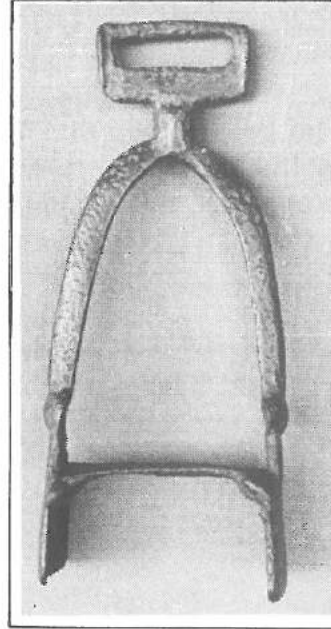
*Lincoln stirrup-iron. Height 12.5ins. (318mm)  
Reproduced by courtesy of the Trustees of the  
British Museum.*

Stirrups were a Chinese invention, which reached Britain in Anglo-Saxon times. By their use a man on horseback gained a much more secure riding position which converted him into a very powerful weapon when armed with a spear or lance. Most of the Viking-period stirrups of this type come from the East Midland area.

The stirrup was one of the 1826 finds which went to the British Museum via J. Hayward Esq. of Beaumont Manor, Lincoln and the Archaeological Institute. It has the Reg. no. 58, 11-16, 6.

#### 7. Stirrup-Iron

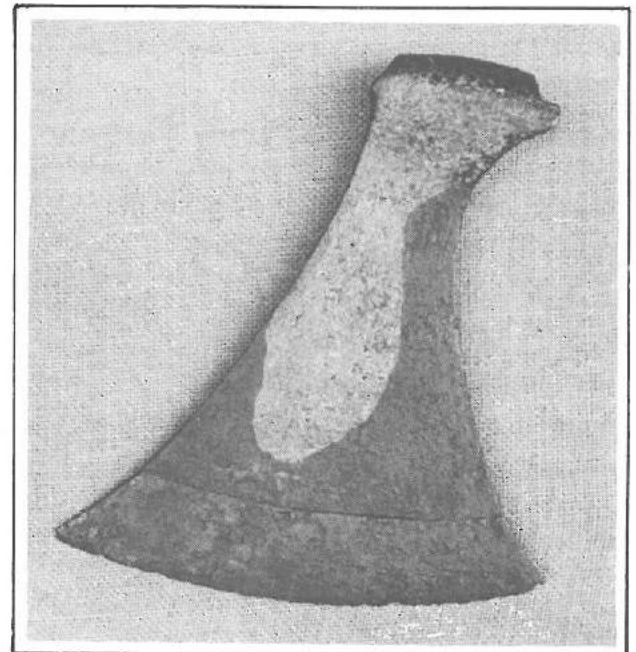
A stirrup iron very similar to the above was found at some unrecorded point in the Witham dredging between Kirkstead and Lincoln in 1787-8. Although from its overall appearance it could be mistaken for the 1826 find the foot-plate is somewhat different, being flat and without an underlying support. Welds at either end of the plate, however, suggest that the stirrup was damaged when found, and was rather badly repaired.



*Viking stirrup. Height 12ins. (305mm)*

It came into the possession of the Dean and Chapter of Lincoln Cathedral, being transferred to the City and County Museum in 1906. It has the acc. no. 9663.06.

#### 8-9 Viking Axes



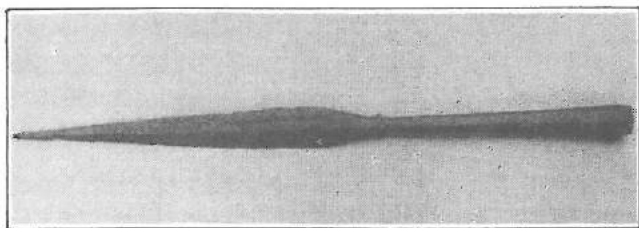
*Bardney Axe. 8.5ins. (215mm) × 7.5ins.  
(190mm) overall*

The Viking-period axes of the early 11th century were found in the Witham during the 1787-8 dredging.

Both axes were of similar form with a very thin steel blade thickened just behind the long cutting edge, and oval eye with projections above and below the socket probably designed as much for ornament as for use in attachment.

The former, found at Bardney in 1787 is in the City and County Museum (ex Dean and Chapter collection) and has the acc. no. 9661.06 but the latter — the exact find spot of which is unknown — was submitted to metallurgical analysis by Dr. Pearson in 1796 and was destroyed in the process. It was found to be of steel throughout, not merely in the cutting edge.

## 10. Viking Spear



*Viking spear. Length 18ins. (458mm)*

Among the Witham finds which remained in private hands until this century is a fine spear-head probably of 11th century date. It has a long blade of diamond section, and on either side of the midrib is a row of triangular notches, designed originally to hold a metal inlay. The long socket is hexagonal in section and at its junction with the blade bears two peg-like projections, perhaps imitation rivets, while a true rivet remains in place at the lower end of the socket.

It came to the City and County Museum from the collection of Mrs. Dineley Tonge (who donated an Iron Age sword from the Witham at the same time). It has the acc. no. 345.15. Although said to be from the 1787-8 dredging of the Witham it is much more probable that it is an 1826 find, and so likely to be from the Washingborough/Lincoln area.

These ten items are a selection of the most interesting and important Anglo-Saxon and Viking period finds from the Witham. Finds of earlier and later date appear in parts 1 and 3 (Information Sheets 12 and 14.)

### Glossary of terms

Escutcheons Decorative fittings on sides of hanging-bowl to which were attached rings for

suspension.  
 Eye Hole in an axe-head, to take the shaft.  
 Fuller Groove or channel along centre of sword blade.  
 Niello Black paste of silver sulphide let into engraved lines in silver to emphasise contrast.  
 Pommel Heavy metal end-piece to sword handle, serving as a counterweight to blade.  
 Quillons Bar of metal between blade and handgrip of sword, to protect hand.

### Acknowledgement

I am most grateful to Miss P. Beswick, Keeper of Antiquities, Sheffield City Museum, for information on the Fiskerton Sword.

### Sources

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Written by Andrew White  
 City & County Museum  
 Lincoln. May 1979