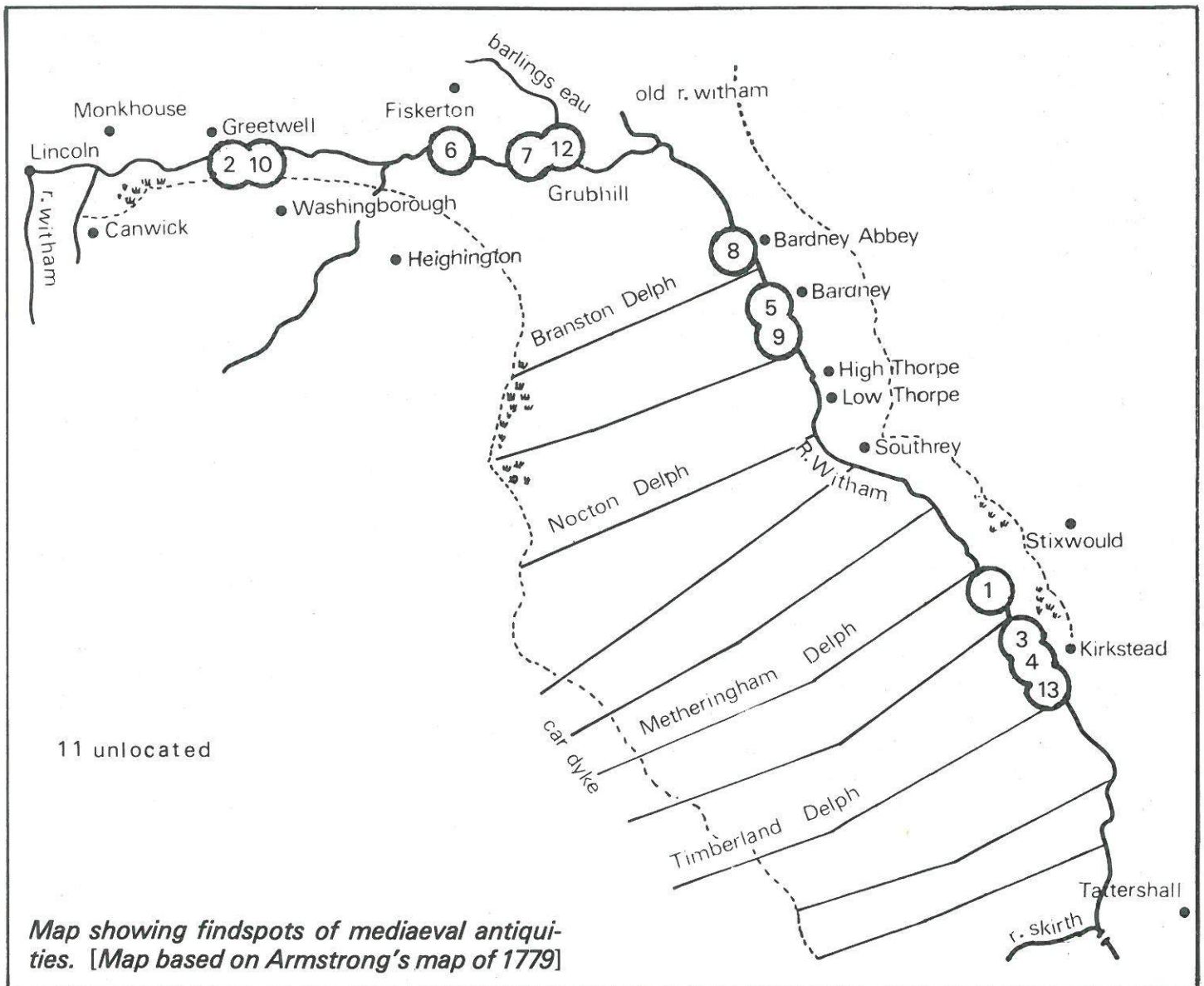


# Information Sheet

Archaeology Series No. 14

## ANTIQUITIES FROM THE RIVER WITHAM

### PART 3 MEDIAEVAL



### 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 the 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 (112 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 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 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 at 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 17th October 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 post, directed to him at Revesby Abbey, near Boston".

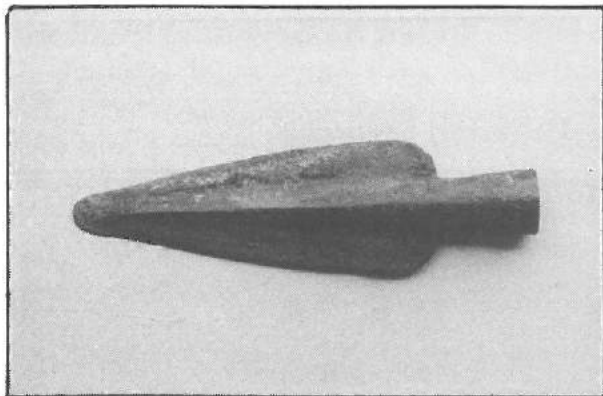
He made manuscript notes on the collection, which he never published, and in 1796 handed over a number of swords etc. (including the trumpet from Tattershall Ferry) to Dr. George Pearson for analysis of the metal, one of the earliest instances of scientific analysis of antiquities. We must admire the 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. Stixwould Armour and Spearhead



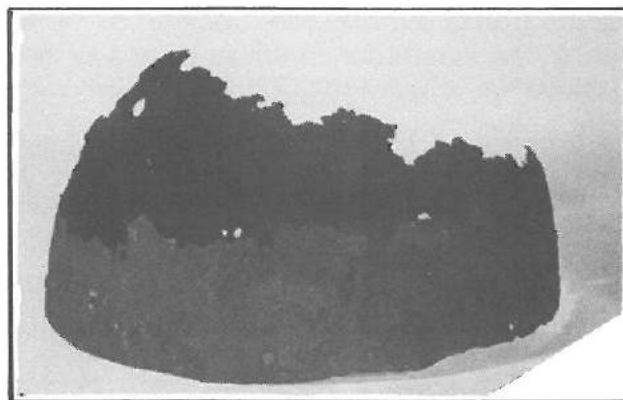
*Stixwould spear. Length 8.1 ins (207mm)*

In 1848, while cuttings were being made on the bank of the Witham near Stixwould, a mass of corroded chain mail, a human skull, an iron sword and an iron spearhead were found together at a depth of nearly 5 feet (1.5m). In the mail, the remains probably of a *hauberk*, was a small stud of bright metal, thought at the time to be of gold. The cutting was almost certainly connected with Stixwould Railway Station, as the railway line was nearing completion in the area at this date.

At the time of the Archaeological Institute meeting in Lincoln in 1848, when the finds were exhibited, they were in the possession of Mr. Philip N. Brockeden but all seem to have been lost, with the exception of the spearhead. Some items from this gentleman's collection were obtained by Capt. Arthur Trollope of Lincoln, and the spearhead was bought at auction in 1918 among other local finds from Trollope's collection, and is now in the City and County Museum, acc.no.88.50. Its short and broad-bladed form suggest a relatively early date in the development of mediaeval armour, as the mail hauberk would help to confirm, and it probably belongs to the 13th or early 14th century.

### 2. Washingborough Helmet

Finds of mediaeval armour are rare, and of helmets in particular even rarer. One of these was found in the Witham at Washingborough

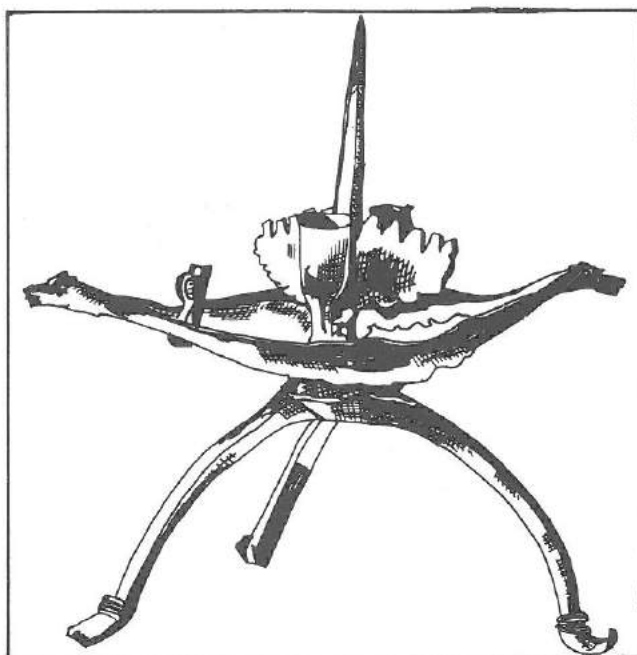


*Washingborough helmet.  
8.7ins (220mm) x 7.7ins (195mm) overall.*

in 1788 and consists of two fragments. One forms part of the dome and the other the lower edge of a conical helmet of a very simple type. Rivets running around the lower edge probably held a reinforcing band — the dome is too fragmentary for any clear evidence of further bands over the top to survive, but so thin is the metal that some sort of reinforcement would almost certainly be necessary. Simple helmets of this form were used in the 11th century and appear for instance on the Bayeux Tapestry, but survived well into the 13th and even 14th centuries. A more precise date within this range is not possible due to the fragmentary nature of the remains.

The helmet is now in the City and County Museum, acc.no.9734.06.

### 3. Kirkstead Candlesticks



*Kirkstead candlestick. Dimensions not recorded*

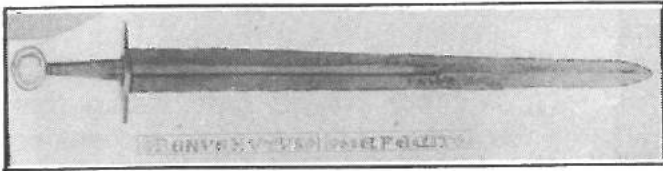
Some time before November 1801, and very probably in 1787 or 1788 six iron candlesticks were found in dredging the Witham near Kirkstead Abbey and were exhibited by Sir

Joseph Banks before the Society of Antiquaries. An illustration survives of one of the set, but all now seem to have disappeared.

The illustrated candlestick seems to have stood on three legs terminating in claw feet. A boat-shaped body shaped into an animal's head at either end supported a central *pricket* flanked by two sockets and two comb-shaped projections. The purpose of the remaining projection near one end cannot be ascertained, but the two sockets no doubt each held a candle, while a third was impaled on the *pricket*, and it is possible that the notched pieces supported rush lights. At all events it would provide a reasonable concentration of light.

A date in the 15th century might be suggested on the basis of the animal heads, and the findspot makes it highly probable that the six candlesticks were in use at Kirkstead Abbey, possibly in the church, refectory, or dormitory.

#### 4. Kirkstead Sword

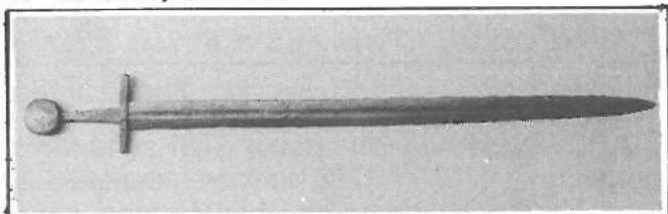


*Kirkstead sword. Dimensions not recorded.*

One of the finest of the many mediaeval swords from the Witham was brought up in the prongs of an eel spear at Kirkstead Wath (the site of the present Kirkstead Bridge) in 1788. The blade, with a *fuller* running for about two-thirds of its length, carried an inscription + BENVENTVS + / + ME FECIT + ('Benvenutus made me'). A wheel *pommel* and straight *quillons* completed the handle end of the sword, the hilt of which, probably of wood, did not survive.

This sword, dating from c.1300-25, was metallurgically examined by Dr. Pearson in 1796 and proved to be of steel, while the pommel had been tinned. Unfortunately analysis led to the total destruction of the sword.

#### 5. Bardney Sword

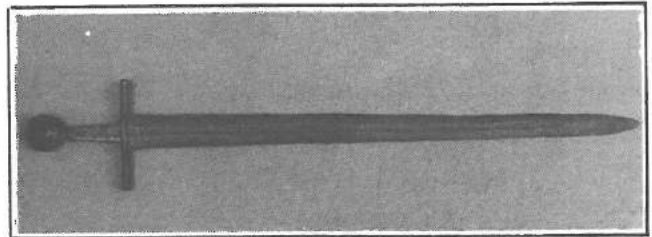


*Bardney sword. Length 35.8 ins (910 mm)*

This sword was found in the Witham near Bardney Abbey in 1787. It was broken when found and was crudely rewelded by a blacksmith who as a result rendered illegible an inscription inset into the blade part of which reads [ ] || — IHICIHICIH[. In this sword the fuller runs almost the whole length of the blade while the quillons are short and straight and the pommel large and in the form of a flat disc. Such swords seem to date from the last half of the 12th century.

It is now in the City and County Museum, acc. no.9708.06.

#### 6. Fiskerton Sword

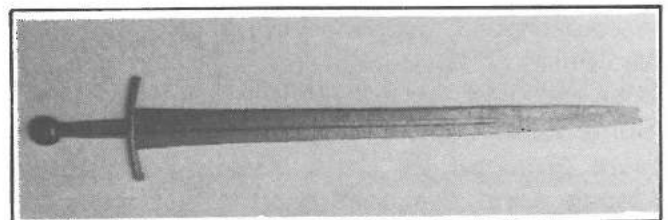


*Fiskerton sword. Length 37.1 ins (943mm)*

Found in the Witham near Fiskerton in 1788 this sword has a fuller running down the greater part of the blade, straight quillons of circular section and a wheel pommel. Its most unusual characteristic is the mysterious, and probably magical, inscription in neat capitals along both sides of the blade, reading SNEXORENEXORENEXORENEXOREIS with a cross at each end.

It is now in the City and County Museum, acc. no.9709.06.

#### 7. 'Barlings' Sword

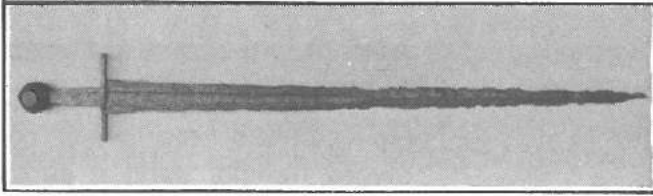


*'Barlings' sword. Length 38 ins (965mm)*

This sword, complete save for the very end of the blade, has a wheel pommel and down-curved quillons and a fuller running about three-quarters of the length. It came to the City and County Museum in 1906 from the Cathedral along with the other swords, and is probably the one described by Sir Joseph Banks as coming from the Witham in 1788 'near Barlings'. As no part of Barlings parish actually borders the Witham a find-spot in Fiskerton or Stainfield parish is most likely.

The sword has the acc. no. 9706.06.

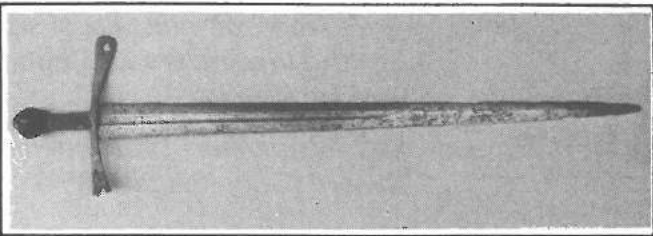
### 8. Bardney Abbey Sword



*Bardney Abbey sword.*  
Length 40.8ins (1036mm)

The longest of the mediaeval swords from the Witham was found near Bardney Abbey in 1788. It has straight quillons, a very broad fuller, and a wheel pommel of bronze; unlike most of the other swords the unscribed blade of this example is very broad, tapering gradually to a narrow point. This taken together with the lightness of the pommel would suggest that the sword was more effective for stabbing than cutting. It is in the City and County Museum, acc. no. 9707.06.

### 9. Bardney Sword



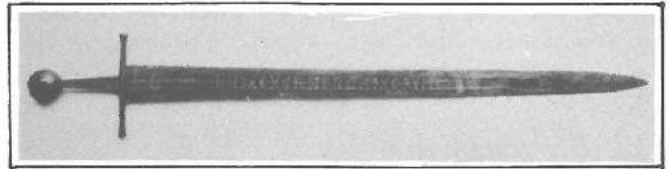
*Bardney sword.* Length 39.4ins (1000mm)

Found near Bardney in 1787 this mid 14th century sword presents certain problems. The quillons, pierced with quatrefoils at either end (one broken away) are excessively wide for the very short hilt which survives, and the wheel pommel has every appearance of being forced on to a broken end — very probably the hilt had been snapped off and the present arrangement represents a clumsy repair. Inlaid along the fuller in brass wire are on one side three Maltese crosses and on the other two Maltese crosses flanking three capital 'N's with two lozenges between.

Although illustrated in the Banks' Folios this sword remained in private hands until 1956 when it was given to the City and County Museum (acc. no. 1.56.) by Mrs. G.R.C. Harding.

### 10. Washingborough Sword

In July 1826 another sword of 14th century type very similar to those dredged up in 1787-8 was found somewhere in the vicinity of

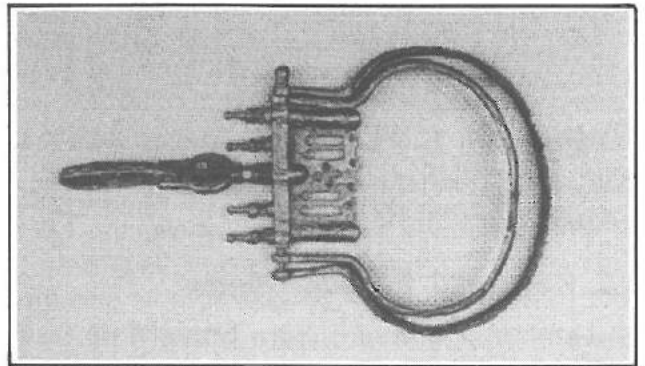


*Washingborough sword.*  
Length 38ins (965mm)

Washingborough. It has straight quillons, a wheel pommel, and a double-fullered blade with an inlaid inscription in brass wire reading on one side + NDXOXCHWDNCHDXORVI + and on the other a series of symbols; two crosses in circles flanking three crescents divided by two quatrefoils. The inscription is clearly gibberish.

The sword was given to the Archaeological Institute after its Lincoln Meeting in 1848 by Robert Swan, Registrar to the Bishop of Lincoln. It was later transferred to the British Museum and has the reg. no. 58, 11-16, 5.

### 11. Purse-Frame



*Purse frame.*  
7.4ins (188mm) x 4.3ins (110mm) overall

Among the collection of antiquities from the Witham formerly housed in the Cathedral Cloisters and since 1906 in the City and County Museum is a complete iron purse-frame of late 15th century date; fragments of several others were also found. Unfortunately the exact find-spot of this purse is not recorded.

It has a loop for suspension from a belt at the top, linked to a vertical bar expanded into the form of a spoked wheel. Below this, and pivoting on the vertical bar is a cross bar, decorated on top with a row of miniature finials and below with a cutwork panel in the form of a series of windows. From the ends of this bar are suspended two curved frames, one inside the other, with perforated edges for stitching to the purse.

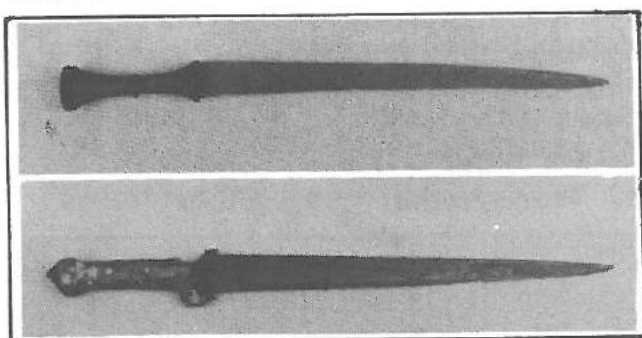
The actual purse would have been a much larger affair of decorated cloth suspended



from the frame and drawn out at the lower corners into elaborate knots. The frame has the acc. no. 9733.06.

## 12. Barlings Eau Knife

Many knives and daggers were among the antiquities dredged from the Witham and its tributaries. From the mouth of one of these, the Barlings or Langworth Eau (pronounced 'ee') which drains the clay vale to the north, came in 1788 a single edged knife with a blade of triangular section and a metal hilt. The hilt narrows towards the middle and has a single moulded cordon at this point. The knife was probably a civilian implement, not a weapon. It is now in the City and County Museum, acc. no. 9723.06.



*Barlings Eau Knife. Length 16.9ins (430mm)*  
*Kirkstead Wath dagger.*  
*Length 18.1ins (460mm)*

## 13. Kirkstead 'Ballock' Dagger

Several weapons etc. were brought up by an eel spear at Kirkstead Wath (now the site of Kirkstead Bridge) in 1788. Among them was a 'ballock' dagger, so-called from the two projections on either side of the hilt, one of which is now missing. Unusually the conditions which preserved the blade also preserved the wood of the hilt and so the dagger retains much of its original appearance. It is now in the City and County Museum, acc. no. 9718.06.

These few items are of course only a selection of the more interesting and important Mediæval finds from the Witham. Finds of Pre-historic and Roman date and of the Anglo-Saxon and Viking periods appear in Parts 1 and 2 (Information Sheets 12 and 13).

## Glossary of terms

Fuller	Groove or channel along centre of sword blade
Hauberk	Armour in the form of a coat of mail
Pommel	Heavy metal end-piece of sword handle, serving as a counterweight to blade
Pricket	Spike on which a candle could be impaled
Quillons	Bar of metal between blade and handgrip of sword or dagger, to protect hand

## Sources

- London Museum *Mediæval Catalogue* (1940)
- G. Pearson 'Observations on some ancient metallic Arms and Utensils . . . .  
*Philosophical Transactions* LXXXVI (1976) pp.395-451
- W.H. Wheeler *A History of the Fens of South Lincolnshire* 2nd edn. (n.d.)
- A.B. Hoffmeyer *Middelalderens Tveæggede Svaerd* (Copenhagen 1954)
- Anon *Lincolnshire Notes and Queries* III (1893) and IV (1894). (Sir Joseph Banks' manuscript notes of c.1800)  
*Lincoln, Rutland and Stamford Mercury*

Lincolnshire Museums: City and County Museum Records.

Lincolnshire Library Service: Lincoln Central Library Local History Collections (esp. Banks' Collection of Topographical sketches).

Written by Andrew White  
City and County Museum  
Lincoln. June 1979