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After Oldcroft: a British silver pin from Welton le Wold, Lincolnshire

by Susan Youngs¹

At a symposium on enamelling held in London in October 2000, each of three papers on Iron Age, Roman and early medieval Celtic work included discussion of one small silver pin from a hoard found near Oldcroft in Gloucestershire. This piece (Fig. 1) is remarkable both for its form, decoration, for the use of red enamel inlay and for its dated context. The hoard of 3000 or more associated bronze coins provides a deposition date ‘by which’ of AD 354-9 (Rhodes 1974; Johns 1974). In a characteristically succinct publication Catherine Johns noted these features and drew attention both to its importance as the earliest dated example of a pin type ancestral to a widespread family of distinctive early medieval pins, the ‘hand pins’, and also to the use of silver with enamel, a unique combination for the first half of the 4th century, but anticipating their widespread use in the immediate post-Roman period. Her observations about this pin and its dating lie at the head of almost any discussion of fine metalwork in post-Roman Britain and contemporary Ireland (Kilbride-Jones 1980a, 212, 253; Youngs 1989, 23, n°1; Laing 1990, 39ff; 1993, 4, cat. 113; Ó Floinn 2001, 5). The subsequent discovery of two examples of an intermediate proto-hand pin form, one published here for the first time, prompts some thoughts on the ancestry of the hand pin some 30 years ‘after Oldcroft’.

The distinguishing features of the Oldcroft pin are a cast ringed head projecting from and roughly parallel to the shank, six beads separated on the front by small fillets form the upper part of the ring, while the lower ring is a flat plate which partly infills the circle and has an incised line running round most of its outer rim; it holds a panel of reserved ornament. Opaque red enamel is inlaid in the lower two beads and around the reserved decoration of the plate. This decoration is in a native, curvilinear Iron Age style, with lobed scrolls springing from a central pelta. The lobes and pelta carry dots of enamel. The front edge of the opening has a row of small notches, but apart from these notches decorative tooling is restricted to the fillets

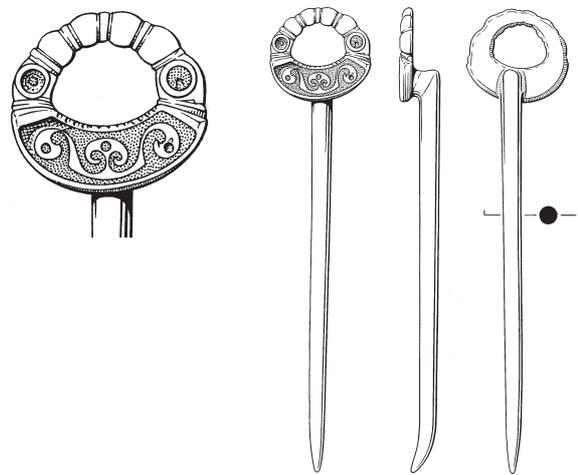


Fig. 1 — Silver and enamel proto-hand pin from Oldcroft, Gloucestershire. Scale 1:1; detail 2:1. Drawn by James Farrant; © The British Museum 2005.

between the beads and the line around the edge of the plate. The back of the head is flat. I reiterate these features because there are a number of changes of form before a pin of Oldcroft-type transmutes into a full hand pin: the marked thickening of the plate area in cross-section and widening of the upper plate to extend beyond the outer edges of the beads or fingers; the extension of the beads to form cylindrical fingers projecting forward beyond the plate; flattening of the upper hoop of beads to a straight row above the plate; on some, the position of the head relative to the shaft moving from tilted back, through parallel, to tipping forward. The plate may still be ornamented in curvilinear style in reserve, or be recessed for mixed glass-based inlays, or, on some smaller pins, be left plain, but it will be proportionally much thicker, thick

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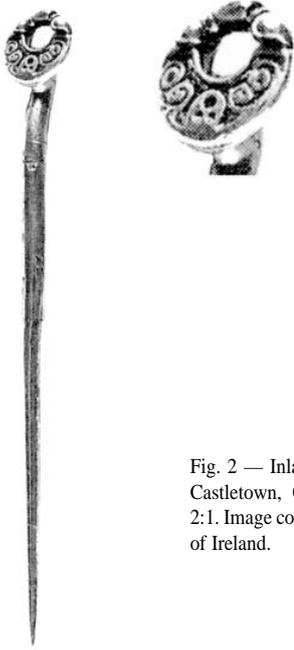


Fig. 2 — Inlaid silver proto-hand pin from Castletown, Co. Meath. Scale 1:1; detail 2:1. Image courtesy of the National Museum of Ireland.

enough to carry a band of decoration on the vertical edge. Proto-hand pins were briefly described by Robert Stevenson and Elizabeth Fowler (Stevenson 1955, 289-91; Fowler 1963, 125-60). In later publications there is some understandable confusion and inconsistency about labelling individual ring headed pins as proto-, or full, hand pins, and a less understandable tendency to focus more on related ornament than form (Kilbride-Jones 1980a, 193-7; Laing 1990, 39-42; 1993, 35-7; Limbert 1996, 264). To distinguish the 'beads' of a proto-hand pin from the tubular 'fingers' of a hand pin, I suggest that a finger's length should be twice that of the thickened plate (the measurement taken at '4 o'clock' on the plate because the end of the shank obscures the lowest point), with some uncontentious exceptions where the plate is extremely thick and projecting fingers are clearly fully developed tubes. It should also be understood in the light of increasingly rich and more varied evidence, that any cast pin with an offset, ringed head is not necessarily a proto-hand pin, a point developed below. Hand pins have themselves been divided into broad categories, and changed in form, materials and ornament over time and place (Duignan 1973; Kilbride-Jones 1980a, 209, 213-16, figs 68, 69, 71).

The pin most close to Oldcroft in form was found in the Irish midlands in 1848, at Castletown, Kilpatrick, Co. Meath, together with a fully-developed silver hand pin (Figs 2, 5). These were recently republished together with other Irish examples by Ragnall Ó Floinn, who pointed out that this constitutes a small hoard (2001, 4-6, fig. 1.2-4). Cast in silver and originally inlaid, this pin has half the number of beads, three more deeply moulded and divided by fillets, instead of the six on Oldcroft, yet it retains the



Fig. 3 — Silver and niello proto-hand pin from Welton le Wold, Norfolk. Scale 1:1; detail 2:1. Drawn by James Farrant; © The British Museum 2005.

idea of a continuous outer ring where the corners of the lower plate do not project outside the line of the upper beads. The plate is not thick but infills a much larger proportion of the ring. A pelta in reserve with decorative dots fills the centre of the plate and this is flanked by two 'C' scrolls. No inlay remains but it is assumed to have been enamel. The head hardly projects and is tilted slightly back from the line of the shank. It is flat and plain on the back. It represents a variation on, or development of the Oldcroft form with a reduction to three beads linked by fillets and should be of similar or slightly later date. It is a third longer (84.8 mm to the 60 mm of Oldcroft) and is almost twice as heavy, weighing 5.89 g to 3 g.

Further morphing from the Oldcroft type is seen on yet another silver example. In 2002 an incomplete pin was found by a metal-detector user in the civil parish of Welton le Wold in Lincolnshire (Figs 3, 5; NGR TF 2787; British Museum MME 2002,7-4,1). There was no associated material. It is a casting and the lower shank is now missing; present length 20.6 mm, weight 2.2 gm. The thickened, decorated head is offset on a short arm and comprises a semicircular plate below an arc of three beads which are rounded at the front, flat on the back. The centre bead is larger and projects slightly further than the flanking pair. The beads are linked, on the front only, by narrower bands cut and incised to give a laddered effect. The plate has on its main front surface a crude version of a symmetrical pattern in low relief, composed of a small central palmette, and two outward volutes with lobed ends springing from sub-triangular fields; this is not very fluently executed and is now difficult to read (Fig. 3). It is in essence the same motif as on the Oldcroft pin. The pitted background inlay has been identified by Dr Susan La Niece, of the then Department of Scientific Research, British Museum, as degraded niello made from silver sulphide. The palmette, lobed spirals and the triangles each carry a circular recess, also inlaid. The flat back to the arc of beads has pairs of incised lines running in radially from the end of each beaded collar. A ladder pattern was incised around the vertical edge of the front plate. The broken shank is circular in cross-section and swells slightly towards the break, features common to the shanks all these pins. In the thickening and decoration of

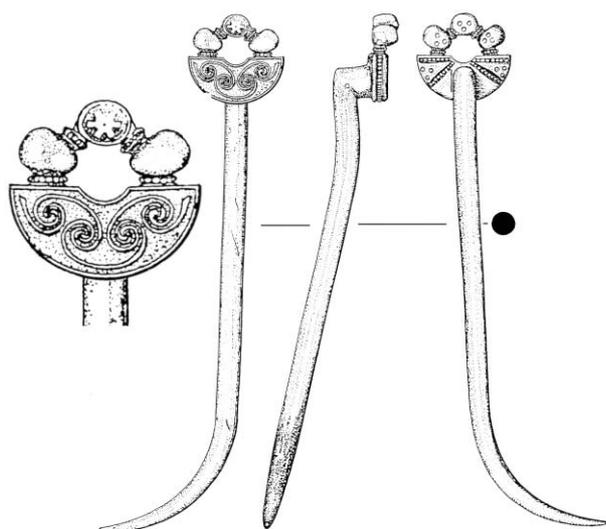


Fig. 4 — Silver and enamel proto-hand pin from Tripontium near Rugby, Leicestershire. Scale 1:1; detail 2:1. Drawn by Henry Wattam. Reproduced courtesy of Jack Lucas F.S.A.

the plate's rim and enlargement and reduction of the beads this pin looks forward to the full hand type. The head is slightly smaller than on the Oldcroft example.

The form marks a step towards the emergence of the hand pin, but the use of niello is in keeping with Romano-British hot-inlaying tradition of the 3rd and 4th centuries. It is a very rare survival indeed in post-Roman native metalwork, although it is usually assumed that empty fields carried enamel. The great hanging bowl from Mound 1 at Sutton Hoo, in which the internal fish pedestal is inlaid with niello, is the only pre-8th century occurrence known to me (Oddy *et al.* 1983, 305). However, niello features in the repertoire of early Anglo-Saxon style metalwork and this could be the influence on the smith who made the bowl, the same smith certainly borrowed the idea of inlaying garnets over foils for this bowl from Germanic tradition. For the moment niello on metalwork not in the Saxon tradition remains essentially a material of the Roman period.

Another well-published, post-Oldcroft find, was excavated at the Roman *mansio* settlement of *Tripontium* on Watling Street, by Cave's Inn, near Rugby in Leicestershire (Figs 4, 5; E. Fowler in Lucas 1981, 47-8; *Current Archaeology* 145, 1995, 4-10; Lucas 1997, 28). This came from the debris of the hypocaust of the high-quality dining-room in a well-appointed 4th-century building 'which was still standing in the 5th'. The excavator, Jack Lucas, has commented that, although the pin was not securely stratified, 'an adjacent stratified feature produced two coins of Arcadius 385-408 AD', *in litt.* The cast pin head has an arc of three globular beads separated by collars of beads from each other and from the lower crescentic plate. The plate is slightly wider than the arc, and

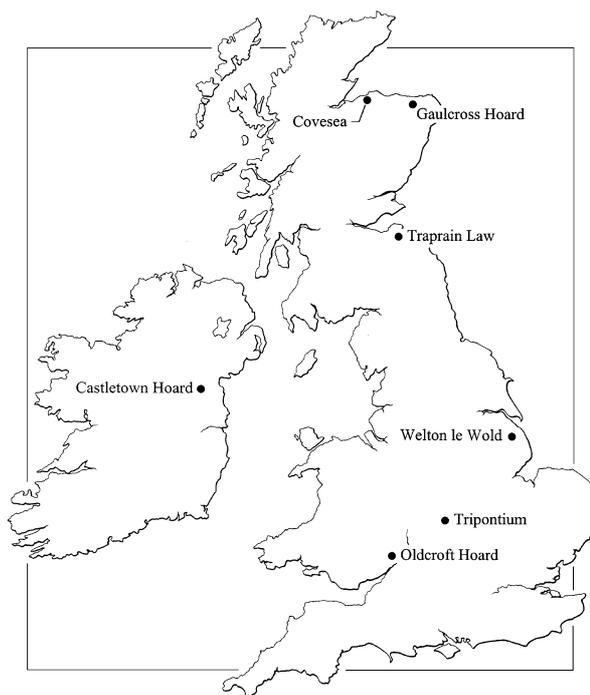


Fig. 5 — Location of the principal sites and finds discussed in the text. Map by James Farrant; © The British Museum 2005.

deep enough to carry a panel of linked rings around the vertical edge. The front has a narrow border and recessed field with an open pattern of three interlocking spirals in reserve which run out into expanded terminals. Considerable amounts of inlay remain; while this has not been analysed and is covered by a modern protective coat, it appears to be enamel, with the pale yellowish tone typical of decayed red (*contra* the 'dark grey' described by H. Wattam in Lucas 1981, 48). The back of the head carries rows of overlapping punched circles, while triplets of punched rings decorate the interstices and rounded backs of the beads. The elbow where the shank supports the head is similarly marked with a ringed stamp on each side. All these stamped rings are of the same diameter. The shank is sturdy and tapers to the tip, the lower part being bent to one side. It can be seen in the profile view that the 'beads' now extend slightly forward beyond the plane of the front plate and the central one projects further and carries a six-armed star. This motif is made by recessing little triangular segments and not by a pattern of arcs, to give a complex cogged look, a trait found on a few of the developed hand pins in Scotland including the silver and enamelled pin from the Gaulcross, Moray, hoard. Length overall approximately 80 mm, plate width 12.2 mm.

The fine ring-punching, here performed with virtuosity, is found on late-Roman jewellery made in the province: a number of gold pieces from the Thetford jeweller's hoard of c. AD 380-400 are thought to be die-

linked by the use of the same ring punch (Johns & Potter 1983, 66-7). Such ornament had a persistent if subsidiary role on post-Roman fine metalwork in Britain and Ireland; patterns made from stamped circles were made on the back of hand pin heads, on offset disc-headed pins, and also on both the earliest and later zoomorphic penannular brooches. This is the only one of these proto-hand pins to be so embellished, but neither this stamped decoration, nor the decorated edge to the plate make this a full hand pin from the 4th century (as Limbert 1996, 264), or justify a date as late as the 6th- or even 7th-century dates given to the Gaulcross and Norrie's Law hand pins. There is still so much uncertainty about the manufacturing and deposition dates of the comparanda, in particular the silver hand pins, many of which come from hoards, that dates should be modified by the early 5th-century context of the Tripontium pin. The use of one particular decorative motif or motifs, remembering also the cogged star, is not a good guide to date, a point illustrated by the ornament on the Oldcroft pin, of which Catherine Johns has observed that its design of a pelta with side volutes was of considerable antiquity, to be found on Roman Iron Age terrets (1974, 297), or as early as 4th-century BC continental Iron Age art (1989, 23). The pattern of simple spirals running out into loose ends is not common, but it is seen on a silver disc headed pin from Ireland and re-occurs on a pair of later zoomorphic penannular brooches from near Athlone, County Westmeath (Youngs 1989, n°11; Kilbride-Jones 1980b, nos 66, 67). This does not mean anything more than that they are tapping into the same tradition of ornament, and that the Leicestershire find is the earliest datable example at the dawn of the post-Roman world.

Decoration raises the subject of variations instead of similarities between these four proto-hand pins, so defined by form. While the smith who made the Welton le Wold find still used niello, the craftsman who made the Tripontium pin prepared the field for enamel with rough little hooks around the inner edge, just below the upper surface, a trait possibly related to the decorative notched edges on niello inlay on some fine Roman silver plate. But what is significantly different about the Leicestershire pin is an aspect of its cast form, that the beads are shaped and rounded on the back. This must reflect a different model, one with a half ring of fully rounded, linked beads. This is not seen on the other three pins described in rather tedious detail above, nor in the later more developed 'hand pin' forms; all of these have flat backs to the row of fingers. There are fully rounded beads on the 4th-century 'rosette' pins made from a full ring of beads, found for example at the late-Roman period manufacturing site of Traprain Law, East Midlothian (Fig. 5). This site was prolific both in ring-headed pins and two-part moulds for their manufacture, and also has both pins and moulds with flat-backed and fully rounded beads (Burley 1955-56, nos 110-120, 549-4; Kilbride-Jones 1980a, fig. 59, nos 6, 8, 9 and fig. 60, nos 2, 3, 9). These pins are of bronze, with one tiny silver pin which on examination appears to be a true proto-hand pin with three fat beads, flat at the back (Close-Brooks 1983, fig. 98, n°47).

Before assuming any direct links between the pins found in two such separate places in Leicestershire and Midlothian (Fig. 5), the widespread occurrence of related pin types with off-set ringed heads but variant features in 4th-century Britain and in Ireland should be remembered, although space prevents a full analysis here. Early focus on the many and varied finds from Scotland, as exemplified by the variety of pins, including rosette pins, excavated in the Sculptor's Cave, Covesea in Morayshire (Fig. 5; Benton 1931; Stevenson 1955; Foster 1990), has now shifted to the growing evidence that south-west Britain, in particular the area of the lower Severn and Bristol Channel, was potentially the source of new enamelled forms both in Britain and in Ireland (Laing 1993; Ó Floinn 2001, 4-7). All this material, whether dress pins or brooches, is complex in detail, thinly but very widely spread in Britain. It also includes new manufacturing evidence for hand pins from Scotland. The variable number of beads or fingers has been remarked by previous commentators. But while the move from six to three elements, as from Oldcroft to Tripontium, appears a natural division, there are no more proto-hand pins with six beads but several examples with five (as on an otherwise undecorated silver pin from Ireland in Mahr 1932, pl. 1, n° 6). These also easily reduce to three by the elimination of the outer pair, while a localised group of later hand pins in Scotland carries four fingers. Does this change of detail signify anything more than a change in fashion? It requires further detailed analyses of form, distribution of finds, and the nature of the hoards in which many of these pins have survived, before we can be certain that the Bristol Channel area has a dominant role both in the development of the early medieval enamelled pieces, as well as playing a major part in their introduction to the Irish midlands.

Returning to the development of hand pins, it is usual to introduce into discussion of proto-hand pins a silver crescentic plate with reserved pelta flanked by volutes excavated at Atworth Roman villa in Wiltshire (Shortt 1939; Shaw Mellor & Goodchild 1948, 75-6; Laing 1990, 39). While the motif is that found on the Oldcroft pin, and indeed it could have come from such a pin, on the basis of other comparanda it is equally, or more, likely to have come from the plate of a ring headed pin with a plain, unbeaded upper hoop. The same motif is used on the lower plate of a ring headed bronze pin found at Little Cornard in Suffolk (Martin *et al.*, 1998, fig. 50, D; British Museum PE 2001.12-2.1), which has a faintly ribbed upper half-ring. There are also related reserved scrolls on another bronze and enamelled pin with a plain upper half-ring, from Onnum/Halton Chesters on Hadrian's Wall (Kilbride-Jones 1980a, fig. 68,1; present location unknown). This is an ancient and established ornament on other types of metalwork as we have seen. While no early composite is known in the proto-hand pin group, a composite 'Ibex-headed' ringed pin was excavated at Cirencester, where the ribbed upper ring is an applied piece of silver (Brown 1976, 19, fig. 3.1). On Ibex-headed

pins the upper part of the ring is finely ribbed, the lower slightly moulded with raised bosses but otherwise mostly plain (Kilbride-Jones 1980a, 195-6, fig. 61). But these pins are not the immediate ancestors of the hand pin following Reginald Smith's magisterial study (Smith 1913), rather they are representative of a wide variety of mid- to late Roman-period pins with off-set ringed heads. Atworth villa produced a plain bronze pin of this type in the 1970-75 excavations. Such pins, while lurking in the family tree by virtue of simple cast, offset ringed form, or ornamented plate, or all-round beading, or ribbing, or a variety of plastic ornament as on the early Ibex pins, lack one or other of the two basic ingredients: a flat lower plate with upper beads. They did not become the pattern for the early medieval hand pin. Like the zoomorphic penannular brooch, 'the' one preferred form of early medieval ring-headed pin was to emerge, through some as yet unexplained process of selection, from a variety of potential prototypes. These two features of beads over plain half-plates are found combined on bronze pins from Sculptor's Cave, Covesea, and at Traprain Law where there are also moulds (respectively, Benton 1931, 195, fig. 16, 5; Burley 1955-56, nos 118-9, 552, 554), matched by an unprovenanced silver pin from Ireland (Mahr 1932, pl. 1, n° 6).

To return to further consideration of the problems of dating, whether of manufacture or deposition. The coin hoard associated with the Oldcroft pin was deposited by AD 359; the place itself lies in the rich valley of the lower Severn, seven kilometres from the temple complex at Lydney where base-metal ring-headed pins have been found (Johns 1974, fig. 7). While the ornament is old, it could also be later, it is the form of the pin head and use of enamel on silver which indicate a date in the 4th century, if it is not contemporary with deposition. The *Tripontium* find alone comes from an excavated semi-domestic context, albeit associated with demolition, and this is the other peg to which dates can be related. *Tripontium* lies on the edge of the great Forest of Arden in Leicestershire, one of six stations on Watling Street most of which were fortified for mobile cavalry units in the 4th century, among them *Bannaventa*, *Letocetum* (Wall), *Pennocrucium* (Penkridge) on the way to Wroxeter, all place-names or sites of interest in the post-Roman period. 'In the rubble above this [the richly appointed dining room or *triclinium*] we discovered the silver proto-hand pin...This was a truly magnificent building which was still standing in the 5th century AD' (Lucas 1997, 28). It was therefore lost no earlier than the first decade of the 5th century, possibly later, depending on the date of the collapse of the roof. There is some evidence of wear on the head. A manufacturing date within the period 380 to 410 seems reasonable on present evidence, and I am in complete agreement with Elizabeth Fowler's argument that form and context take the 'later' ornamental features with them and not the other way round (Fowler 1981, 48). The Castletown pin was found with a developed silver hand pin and should be seen as part of a small hoard of later date, but as Ó Floinn cogently argues, not separated

by as much as a century or more, which therefore also draws the developed silver and enamelled series back into the 5th century, back from the conventional dating in the later 6th or early 7th centuries (2001, 5). The earliest Castletown pin should be seen as an import or loot from Britain (the area of manufacture of the later pin is less clear but probably the same). The new find from Lincolnshire, although the nature of its immediate context is unknown, comes from a parish with Romano-British settlement found by aerial photography and pottery scatter, with activity in the late Roman period being attested by a coin of Gratian (AD 367-383). No 5th-century material is recorded. Here the Roman-period use of niello inlay, suggests that a date in the second half of the 4th century is more likely.

Why should these small pieces be of interest? The apparently widespread adoption and development of dress fasteners in a highly distinctive, unique local provincial style by a class or group affluent enough to wear silver during the second half of the 4th century has implications for late Roman Britain. That this type of jewellery alone continued to find favour in the 5th century and beyond in both Britain and in Ireland casts light on the nature of the post-Imperial societies which followed. Slowly, pin by pin, we advance after Oldcroft.

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