

Traffic Light Twisted Cable Beads

Proudly made in Britain? Sue Heaser



The scenario has been around for aeons: After the Romans left Britain in around 420AD, the remaining native population slumped into the Dark Ages. Then the Anglo-Saxons moved in and brought with them their culture, their skills, and their language.

This has led to the impression that any beads that appear in British graves from the early Medieval period were imported or were made by Anglo-Saxon immigrants.

The nationalistic side of my nature has been having a field day with my latest research and it seems that this impression is quite wrong and at least half, and quite likely more, of the beads found in early Anglo-Saxon women's graves are unique types that are only found in Britain.

Enter the British beadmaker of the fifth century AD! I have spent some time pondering on the likely profile of such a person. Immigrant or native-born? Man or woman? Settled or wandering? Solitary or group/family? We can only speculate.

The main type of indigenous beads, found in considerable numbers in England, has a single, distinctive pattern made using twisted trails of yellow and green glass as shown in Figs 1 to 5. The beads were made in a variety of shapes and styles: round beads, cylinder beads and cube beads. Most have red for the base colour, but some cube beads are black (Fig 4). The twisted cable is often carelessly applied

but the beads have a recognisable style to suggest the same hand or workshop.

Birte Brugmann, in her book *Glass Beads from Anglo-Saxon Graves* (2004) identified these and called them 'Traffic Light Beads' or 'TL' for short because of their striking colours. She pointed out they were not found on the continent and therefore probably made in Britain. I have been following the trail of these beads and by studying the techniques, have subdivided them further. The all-important factor that pinpoints these beads as being from Britain.

A distribution map of the beads shows a fairly wide distribution with the largest number concentrated around the Cambridge and West Suffolk area. Was there a workshop there? Or were the beads made by an itinerant beadmaker who travelled around East Anglia, south into Kent and north to Yorkshire, making beads as he/she went? And yes, none have been found on the continent – not one – I have searched far and wide in publications, museums and museum websites. So these beads were not traded outside Britain.

How the twisted cable beads are made

In Britain, this technique first appears in Iron Age beads and later in occasional beads from Irish crannogs and in Scotland.

Most of those beads have blue and white cables used in a variety of ways, but none are like the beads in question.

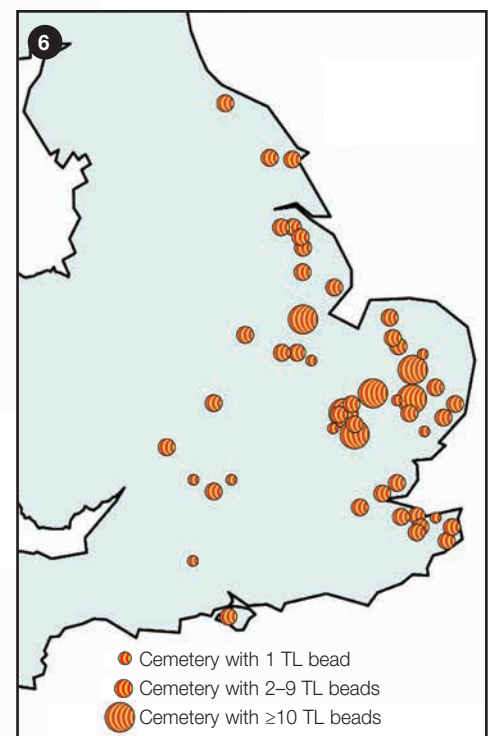
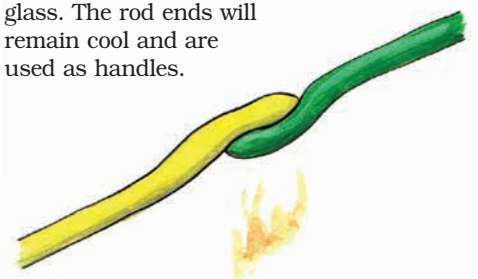
The following steps show how twisted cable stringers (long thin sticks of glass) are made and then used to decorate these distinctive English beads in their traffic light colours.

Making the twisted cable stringer:

The illustrations show using glass rods which have been used by beadmakers for centuries and have been found in excavations of glass bead workshops from ancient Egypt to Viking Scandinavia. Glass tesserae may also have been used by Anglo-Saxon beadmakers.

Step 1

A glass rod of yellow and another of green are overlapped a few centimetres and the overlap area heated to soften the glass. The rod ends will remain cool and are used as handles.

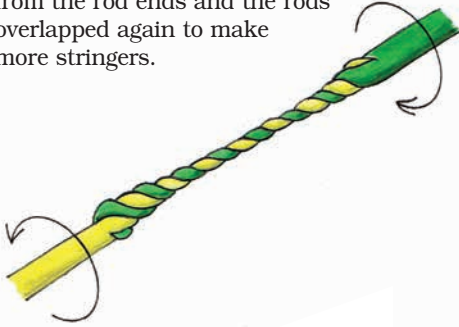


Figs 1-5 Traffic Light Twisted Cable Beads from Anglo-Saxon cemeteries – Fig 1: Spong Hill, Fig 2: Eriswell, Fig 3: Morningthorpe, Fig 4: West Garth Gardens, Fig 5: Morningthorpe

Fig 6: Distribution map of TL Twisted Cable Beads

Step 2

The glass is removed from the flame and the two rods are twisted in opposite directions while pulled gently apart. The twisted glass stiffens as it cools and is pulled straight just before solidifying to make a thin twisted stringer about 20cms long and 2-3mm thick. The stringer is cut from the rod ends and the rods overlapped again to make more stringers.

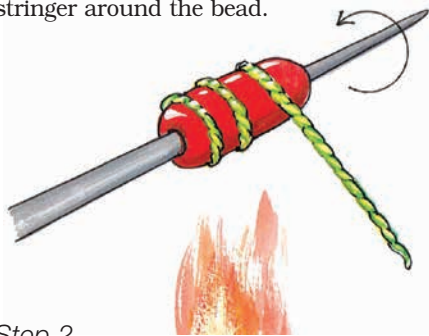


Making the twisted cable beads

This shows the steps for making a cylinder bead, one of the commonest forms.

Step 1

A basic red cylinder bead is made and allowed to cool slightly. The twisted cable stringer is heated a little to soften it and then the end is touched onto the bead to stick. The mandrel is rotated to wind the stringer around the bead.



Step 2

Further heating makes the cable sink flush with the surface. The bead can then be marvered to correct the cylinder shape. Some cylinder beads are tonged or marvered to give them a square cross-section.

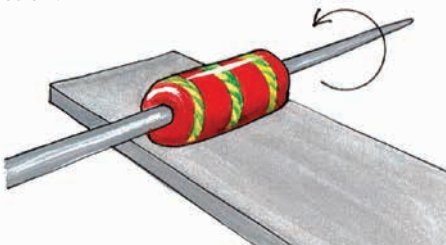


Fig 7: Anglo-Saxon bead necklace found at West Garth Gardens near Bury St Edmunds, Suffolk



Fig 8: Replica Anglo-Saxon bead necklace based on a string found at West Garth Gardens and made by the author.

Variations

There are many variations using the colour scheme but not all have twisted cables. Other types include combed beads with lovely feather effects and simple trail and dot beads, all in the 'Traffic Light' colours. Beads with these colours occasionally appear on the continent in small numbers but none have twisted cable designs. They are decorated with simple trails and dots. The bright red, yellow and green colour scheme was apparently the height of fashion in late 5th and 6th century lowland Britain but not across the North Sea.

This shows how the beads would have looked before deterioration in the soil. TL twisted cable beads are threaded in an almost symmetrical order with other glass beads, amber beads, and a quartz bead. The amber beads in this string are simulated amber and made of glass and the 'quartz' bead is cast resin from a handmade mould that replicates the original. Lapidary on quartz is a difficult skill and real amber is costly, so I used these simulations to create the full effect of the ancient necklace.



Bibliography

Brugmann, B. 2004 Glass Beads from Anglo-Saxon Graves (Oxford)

Acknowledgements

All photos and illustrations are by the author. Thanks to the following for permission to photograph beads in their collections: Suffolk Archaeology (Cotswold Archaeology): Eriswell; Norwich Castle Museum: Morningthorpe, Spong Hill; West Stow Museum: West Garth Gardens.

Further information about Sue Heaser and her current research on Anglo-Saxon beads can be found on her website: www.sueheaser.com