

# Anglo-Saxon treasured heirlooms

Ancient beads from afar treasured by the Anglo-Saxons

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The Anglo-Saxon women of the 5th and 6th centuries loved glass beads. When they died, they were buried in their clothes with their personal belongings arranged around them and their beads poignantly displayed on their breasts (Fig 1). Hundreds of Anglo-Saxon cemeteries have been excavated all over Britain during the past 150 years and the thousands of grave goods which were found are now stored in museums around the country.

I have been researching the beads found in Anglo-Saxon graves for several years and it has been a fascinating experience. Very few of the beads are on display and most are consigned to dusty boxes which have not been opened for decades. Many beads are colourful glass, some with beautiful polychrome patterns but there are also beads of amber, amethyst, coral, jet, cowrie shell and sometimes gold and silver.

Occasionally a bead catches my eye because it is unusual – a kind that I have never seen before – and this happened at West Stow museum, one rainy day, when I was photographing the beads in their collection. It was in a display case with other bead necklaces from local Anglo-Saxon sites. I was at once struck by the unusual shape and style – a long black oval with loose, joyful trails of turquoise blue like sloppy piped icing (Fig 2). The bottom of the bead had broken off but all the decoration was intact. I thought how Arabian it looked – the decoration made me think of Arabic script. I asked about it, but the museum had no information apart from the number written neatly on the bead itself: RISBY 1972.898. So I began to investigate further.

## The bead hunt

The Risby clue led me to the origin of the bead, found in an old archaeological report in the Cambridge University library. The bead had been excavated from a Bronze Age round barrow in a field at Risby, near Bury St Edmunds in 1959. It had been found with an Anglo-Saxon pot which was deemed to be about 5th century, a secondary burial in the barrow. Nothing else had been found.

Were there any others in Britain? And was it locally made, or had it been imported?

The next bead of this type that I located had been excavated from a grave at the 5th/6th century Anglo-Saxon cemetery at



Fig 1 Reconstruction of an Anglo-Saxon woman wearing her beads, brooches and wrist clasps, as she was buried in about 500AD. Grave 10, Snape, Suffolk.

Petersfinger near Salisbury. This bead is so like the Risby bead, it could have been made by the same beadmaker and is in a necklace of typical Anglo-Saxon beads. This time the decoration was red trails (Fig 3) and the bead goes beautifully with the necklace colour scheme of red, yellow, black and green (Fig 4, opposite). The beads are threaded almost symmetrically and were in a woman's grave arranged between two bronze disc brooches. There was also an iron knife, a bronze finger ring, a bronze pin, and a bronze bangle.



Fig 3 Detail of the Petersfinger bead.

Eventually I tracked down two more. They are from Bath Gate Roman Cemetery in Cirencester, in graves dated by coins to the 4th and early 5th centuries. Both are broken at one end and one is decorated with yellow opaque glass, the other with white (Fig 5). Yet again, the decoration has been applied in flourishes of crossing waves. The base colour of all four beads is identical – not really black but a very dark translucent yellow-green.



Fig 2 The Risby bead

Fig 5 The Cirencester beads. The yellow glass has decayed more than the white.



Fig 4 The necklace from Grave 29, Petersfinger Anglo-Saxon cemetery, Wiltshire. The black and red bead is on the right.

The Cirencester beads had been buried in Roman graves... the plot thickened. Therefore, they were not Anglo-Saxon in origin but had been made in Roman times or earlier. They had no doubt been treasured and perhaps passed down the generations so that they eventually ended up in the care of Anglo-Saxon women after the Romans had left Britain. If only the beads could tell their stories!

**How the beads were made**

I tried making replicas of the beads using my hot glass beadmaking skills. It was not easy to get the flourishes right. Such freely

made beads as these can show the maker's hand much better than carefully made beads. The results seem to be a product of the same heat sources, the same glass and perhaps even the same hand. The hole from the mandrel in each bead is the same size - was it the same mandrel?

Fig 6 shows how the beads would have been made.

(a) First a base bead is made in dark glass on a mandrel. The coloured glass decoration is then applied using a small gather of glass on a pontil rather than a stringer. This gives the swelling line at the top and bottom of each wave as the

hot coloured glass is dabbed down onto the bead surface, then pulled away into a fine thread and dabbed again at the next change in direction.

(b) A second round of waves then crosses the first and the fine end bands are applied.

**Where were they made?**

These beads are so atypical for Roman beads that I suspected that they might have been made a long way from Britain and imported. Roman beads are more carefully made and refined.

To my delight, I came across a paper,

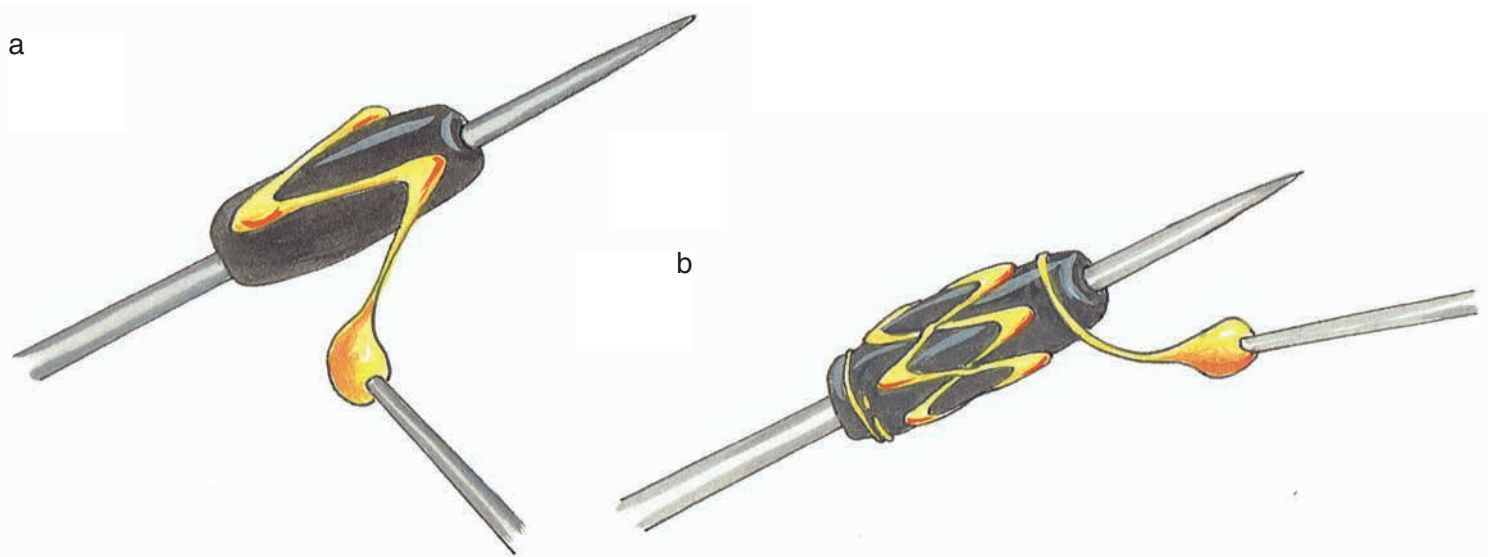


Fig 6 How the beads were made.





Fig 7 The four beads from three museums. They make a lovely set.

published a few years ago in the Polish archaeological journal, *Archeologia Polski*, and written by a professor of archaeology, Dr Maria Dekowna. It described unusual 'thread decorated' beads from Damascus Museum which were probably made in the 2nd and 3rd centuries in Syria. Illustrations and photographs showed some beads almost identical to the British ones I had discovered. My Arabian hunch had been right.

I contacted Dr Dekowna and she was delighted to hear about these unusual beads being found in Britain. A few have been found in Eastern Europe and Poland but until now, none had been reported as far west as the British Isles. The findings add valuable information to the study of the movements of people in antiquity.

#### How did they get to Britain?

This was naturally the next question. More research – more poring over weighty tomes about the Romans in Britain.

These beads are rare with only these four identified in Britain so far (Fig 7), so it seems unlikely that they were part of trade routes. We can never be sure, but there is the intriguing possibility that they were brought by individuals as personal belongings. There was a large influx of Roman troops into Britain from the 1st to the 3rd centuries AD and the Roman Legions included crack archery troops from Hama in Syria. They came to Britain in the



Fig 8 Map showing the find location of the British beads.

2nd century and were posted to Hadrian's Wall but could well have spent time at the large military garrison near Corinium, the Roman town of Cirencester – very close to where three of the beads were found. They brought their families with them and no doubt their wives brought their jewellery. So possibly not trade, just a few Roman ladies who loved their beads and brought them to Britain.

I am still looking for more beads of this kind and would be grateful for any sightings by Society members.

#### Acknowledgments

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