

Hands On Learning

with Reading Museum Service

ROMAN CRAFTS & INDUSTRIES

AH 30/A

Cross Pane Hammer

A cross pane (or pein) hammer has a flat hammering face at one end and a chisel edge at the other. They were probably for use by a blacksmith rather than a carpenter. The vast majority of Roman hammers found in Britain are of this kind.



Lynch Pin

This iron lynch pin would have been made by the blacksmith for the local cart builder. It would have been used to pass through the end of an axle to keep the wheel from falling off. The loop would have allowed the pin to be tied to the axle, to prevent it being lost should it work loose.



Lamp

Lamps like this were used by both the Romans and the Greeks and by many other ancient peoples. They were filled with olive oil, though animal fat could be used if there was nothing else. A wick protruded from the spout. This example is of a kind known as a Picture Lamp. Lamps of this type were made using an upper and a lower mould. The mould for the upper surface often had a picture on it perhaps an animal, or gladiators fighting, or a god. A thin layer of clay was pressed into both halves, which could then be joined. Once dried sufficiently, the lamp was removed and it could then be smoothed and finished off. If you look carefully at this example you can see where the decorated upper section has been joined to the lower, plain bowl. Before firing they were often dipped in a slip (a thin slurry of clay) that gave both inner and outer surface a glaze and stopped the lamp from absorbing the oil.



This lamp is rather worn and the image on its upper surface has become blurred - it appears to show someone attacking a large rabbit! Perhaps it shows a gladiator attacking crouched animal, or even another defeated gladiator. What do you think?

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Rim of a Dish

This is an example of coarseware pottery. Cheap to produce and robust such pottery was designed to withstand the knocks and the heat of kitchen-life and if it broke it didn't matter too much as it could be easily replaced. The rim probably came from a broad, but fairly shallow dish - the kind which, today, we use for making pies in. The Roman's may have used such dishes for preparing what they called a patina - basically any dish that was rather flat, such as a modern omelet.



Carved Stone

A fragment of carved, but unpolished stone. The decoration probably showed floral decoration. Chisel marks can still be seen along the edge of the motifs.



Blade

The two metal fragments in the plastic box fit together. The handle end is twisted round at right angles to the small blade. This was probably a knife for dining with, though the blade is very small. It is also possible that it may have been a razor. A third possibility is that it may have been used as a spatula - the small blade used by a variety of craftsmen, from the sculptor to the potter, for shaping clay, wax or plaster. What do you think?



Glass Fragment

The only glass to reach Britain before the Romans came in the form of beads and, rarely, bangles. Glass vessels began to be used regularly soon after the conquest and glassware of the finest quality was used in Britain throughout the Roman period. Very few complete vessels, though, have been found. Just as today, the Romans recycled broken glass to make new bottles and bowls. This plain fragment seems to come from a bottle-like vessel with fluted sides.



Metal Needle

The end of this needle has corroded away, but clearly it once had an eye and must have been used for stitching.



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Nail

This is a small square shanked nail. A blacksmith would have made each nail individually. Wrought iron would be hammered into square edged rods. After re-heating the rod in a forge, the blacksmith would cut off a nail length and hammer all four sides of the softened end to form a point. Then he would insert the hot nail into a hole in a nail-header or anvil and with a glancing blow of the hammer would form the head. This shape of nail had the benefit of four sharp edges on the shank which cut deep into timber and the tapered shank provided friction down its full length. Such nails were made in a variety of sizes. When the legionary fortress of Inchtuthil in Scotland was abandoned over three-quarters of a million such nails, weighing nearly seven tons, were deliberately buried in order to prevent them being re-used to make weapons. They ranged in size from 2 inches (5cm) up to 16 inches (40cm).



Spindle Whorl

People in Roman Britain would not generally have bought ready-made items of clothing from a shop. Most clothing would be made by women in the home, unless you were rich enough to own slaves who could do the work for you. Wool was the commonest material used. Thread was made by using a distaff and a spindle. A clump of fleece was attached to the wooden distaff - a sort of stick - which was supported in the left hand. The end of the thread was tied to the spindle, a rod which ended in a whorl, which helped the spindle to rotate as the spinner span the thread through the fingers of their right hand. After the thread was spun, it was woven into cloth using a large vertical loom. Many spindle whorls like this have been found - the spindle itself tends to decay, being made of wood, but this one is made of shale (a kind of rock) which has helped preserve it. It would have been carved and shaped on a small lathe.



Stylus

The stylus was used upon the tabula - a tablet of wood covered with wax. The pointed end was used scratch the letters onto the wax. The blunt end was used to rub out mistakes.



Phaelera

Phaelerae were small discs awarded as military decorations, usually worn by the centurion of the honoured unit attached to a leather chest harness. This example is a modern copy.



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Chain

These fragments are from a figure-of-eight chain. That is, a chain in which the rings are compressed at the centre until the two sides either meet or almost meet. The figure-of-eight chain is the one most frequently found from the Roman period, probably because it had greater strength than the plain loop. A chain like this could have been used for a variety of purposes, including hanging a cauldron over a fire or even as part of a shackle for slaves or criminals - any job where rope would be unsuitable.



L-shaped Lift-Key

Many such keys were found at Calleva Atrebatum (Silchester), suggesting locks were quite commonplace. Like nails, each key would have to be manufactured individually by a blacksmith. This example has a fairly fine teeth and a heavy handle, from which a lip of metal has been bent round to form a hole so that it could be hung on a cord.



Bone Pin

Thousands of such pins have been found from Roman sites across Britain. Women often wore their hair in complicated styles that took a long time to do. These pins were probably used to keep plaits and loops of hair in place. This example has lost its head, which were often carved into spheres and other geometrical shapes, sometimes even into tiny human heads.



Samian Sherds

Samian pottery was made in Gaul (France) and Germany. It is not glazed; the glossy red colour is caused by the iron oxide in the clay. It was exported to Britain from the mid-first to the mid-third century. Samian pots were finer - and more expensive - than many of the thicker and darker pots that were available in Roman Britain. They were used for a variety of purposes, including holding perfumes and skin-creams and serving cooked food in the dining room. Some Samian pots were decorated with moulded patterns, others were left plain. One of the fragments here is a rim from an undecorated bowl. The other is from the base of a vessel. One side shows marks made by the potters wheel, while the other has the makers stamp. Unfortunately it is not possible to make out the complete name. The fact that the base shows signs of the potter's wheel suggests the body of the pot would have been plain, as decorated pots were made in moulds. Potter's stamps had a variety of purposes, including distinguishing the work of different workshops when work from different makers was fired together.



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Coins

Without coinage it would be hard to live in towns. How would you obtain food if you did not have your own land? Coins began to appear in Britain slightly before the Romans arrived here although these pre-Roman coins do not seem to have been widely used to buy things.

Roman coins often show the head of the emperor on one side and a symbolic figure on the other. The head of the emperor reminded everyone who was in charge. Quite a few coins were also issued which showed the emperor's wife.



The coins in this box have not been securely identified.

The coin on the top left (red arrow) is probably a sestertius of the Emperor Marcus Aurelius, possibly produced between AD 170-171. The figure on the reverse is possibly Fides, the goddess of trust, who was also worshipped under the name Fides Publica Populi Romani (trust towards the Roman state).

The coin on the top right (yellow arrow) is probably a coin of the Emperor Licinius I, who ruled AD 308-324, until he was murdered by Constantine. The reverse possibly shows the god Jupiter, with an eagle at his feet and a statue of Victory held in his right hand.

The three tiny coins in the centre are minims or minimissimi. They date from the fourth century. Many emperors were tempted to reduce the amount of gold or silver in their coins. Also, forgers often made cheap copies of official coinage. By the fourth century the system for producing official coins was breaking down and the result was the minting of tiny coins like these, which had a very low value. After the Roman authorities left Britain the system for producing coins disappeared. Without central authority - and without a coinage system - it became difficult to live in towns. Calleva Atrebatum was abandoned altogether.