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PIPECLAY BEADS FROM NORTON ST PHILIP, ENGLAND

Marek Lewcun

In 17th-century England, the village of Norton St Philip was well known as a center for the manufacture of clay tobacco pipes. In recent years, however, discoveries have shown that pipes were not the only things they made, as among a variety of interesting objects are some quite remarkable beads.

INTRODUCTION

Norton St Philip is a medium-sized village on the eastern edge of the county of Somerset, southwest England, and lies 15 miles (24 km) southeast of the port city of Bristol and 7 miles (11 km) south of the Roman city of Bath. At the time of the Domesday survey, commissioned by William the Conqueror in the year 1086, it supported 20 people with three plows, a mill, and 20 acres of meadow. In 1255, it was granted the right to hold a cloth fair, which gave the settlement the status of a town, and throughout the medieval period it was one of the most important fairs in England which attracted trade from far and wide. The fair declined in later years, and Norton St Philip was gradually reduced back to village status (Brett 2002).

At the center of the village is the magnificent timber-framed George Inn, created as a hostelry in the 14th century by the monks of the nearby Carthusian monastery (Brett 2007). In 1397, it was granted the earliest licence in the whole of England to sell alcohol. In June 1685, the march of the Monmouth Rebellion arrived in the village, which hosted the penultimate battle on English soil when James Duke of Monmouth fought royal forces in a bloody confrontation. Today the village has a population of 858, and the principal trades are agriculture (mixed arable and dairy) and tourism to the George Inn, the Fleur-de-Lis public house opposite it, and the High Street with its historic houses.

PIPECLAY BEADS

Sometime during the period 1620-1630, the Hunt family began making clay tobacco pipes. The clay used is pale grey prior to firing to a white color and was obtained from pits

dug in the parish of Chitterne, in the neighboring county of Wiltshire. By 1650, the production of pipes, some of which found their way to North America, became the next largest local employer after agriculture and cloth, with products bearing the makers' names being sold up to 50 miles (80 km) away (Lewcun 2005).

The Norton St Philip pipe makers occasionally made other items such as wig curlers, decorated gaming pieces, and marbles. They also produced beads. To date, six beads have been found among kiln debris which was tipped in local fields along with many thousands of pipes which were broken or misfired in the workshop. From the pipes associated with them, the beads can be accurately dated to the period 1670-1700, and some, at least, were made by Jeffrey Hunt, who died in May 1690.

Of the six beads (Figure 1), five are decorated. Of these, four are spherical, the fifth is in the form of a truncated cone, while the sixth, undecorated, is oval. The decoration consists primarily of stars, wheels, crosses, compound indentations, and rouletted lines. The diameter of the spherical beads ranges from 17.5 mm to 19.1 mm. The holes of the beads generally range from 2.2 mm to 3.5 mm (6/64-9/64 in.), typical of the borehole in pipes of the late 17th century in Somerset.

Bead 1 (Figure 2), found in the southern part of the village, is spherical with a diameter of 18.2 mm and a hole that is 2.9 mm wide. The decoration consists of a number of rouletted short lines, between which are several impressed design elements composed of two small indentations connected by a shallow groove.

Found in the western part of the village, Bead 2 (Figure 3) is sub-spherical and 17.5-19.1 mm in diameter with a hole that is 2.2-2.4 mm wide. It exhibits the same decoration as Bead 1, but with the addition of crosses formed by four short indentations in each case.

Bead 3 (Figure 4), from the northern part of the village, is incomplete but would have had similar dimensions to Beads 1 and 2. The hole is 2.2 mm in diameter. The decoration is



Figure 1. The six 17th-century pipeclay beads found among kiln debris at Norton St Philip, England. The oval bead is 26.3mm long (all photos by author).



Figure 2. Spherical pipeclay bead (no. 1) decorated with rouletted lines and indented elements (diameter: 18.2 mm).



Figure 3. Sub-spherical bead (no. 2) decorated like no. 1 with the addition of cross-like elements (diameter: max. 19.1 mm).



Figure 4. Fragmentary spherical bead (no. 3) decorated with rouletted lines (diameter: ca. 19.0 mm).

plainer, consisting solely of rouletted lines, two stretching from hole to hole and a single one around the middle. Bead 4 (Figure 5) is also spherical and has a diameter of 17.5 mm and a hole 2.8 mm wide. The decoration differs from the first three beads, there being an absence of any rouletted lines. Instead, it is covered with crude stars or asterisks impressed in the soft clay using a piece of pipestem into which notches had been cut.



Figure 5. Spherical bead (no. 4) decorated with crude stars or asterisks (diameter: 17.5 mm).

Beads 5 and 6 are the only ones of their style found so far. Bead 5 (Figure 6), from the southern part of the village, is in the form of a truncated cone 13.5 mm in length. The diameter ranges from 12.2 mm at one end to 15.3 mm at



Figure 6. Truncated-cone bead (no. 5) adorned with spoked-wheel designs (max. diameter: 15.3 mm).

the other, while the hole is 3.0-3.5 mm in diameter. The decoration is similar to that on Bead 4 except that the notched pipestem has been pressed deeper into the clay giving the appearance of a spoked wheel.

Bead 6 (Figure 7), from the west side of the village, is undecorated and consists of an elongated oval 26.3 mm long and 14.4 mm in diameter, while the hole is 3.1 mm across.



Figure 7. Undecorated oval bead (no. 6) (diameter: 14.4 mm).

CONCLUSION

The author has been collecting clay tobacco pipes and researching their makers for 45 years and, as an archaeologist for over 30 years, has seen many excavated objects of various kinds, but the beads described here are among the most unique. They were all found during a 12-year program of scanning the soil of plowed fields surrounding Norton St Philip. Whether these beads were made just for the village

market or for wider distribution is not clear, but none have been recorded anywhere else in either Somerset or any of the adjoining counties. Neither have the gaming pieces found in Norton St Philip, decorated with other elaborate motifs, been recorded beyond the parish boundary. This suggests that whereas general household items such as pipeclay wig curlers might have been made for distribution to nearby market towns, the gaming pieces and beads were made only for the people in the village, perhaps produced during quiet times in the workshop or when a worker had a short period of time to spare at the end of the day and a lump of clay which needed to be used up.

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