

The Witham Shield – an icon returns to Lincoln

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In 2010 the British Museum embarked upon a groundbreaking project called 'A History of the World in 100 Objects'. The core of the project was a Radio 4 series narrated by the museum's Director Neil MacGregor taking 100 key objects from the worldwide collections in an attempt to discuss the entire scope of human experience. Allied to this was a local BBC-led project to find objects in regional museums and in private ownership which told the stories of Britain's cities, towns and villages through time.

The success of the project led to the British Museum being awarded the prestigious Art Fund Prize and an accompanying award of £100,000. The museum decided to use this award to continue to work with museums across Britain by instigating a series of Spotlight Loans, taking important objects from the national collections to venues across the country. This programme now sees one of the most iconic objects from British Prehistory returning temporarily to Lincolnshire – the Witham Shield.

The Witham Shield was discovered during dredging of the River Witham in 1826. The exact findspot is unknown, but the shield was passed to the Rector of Washingborough, Humphrey Waldo Sibthorp. Washingborough has always therefore been cited as the traditional findspot, though David Stocker has more recently postulated that a location closer to Lincoln's Stamp End may be more accurate. Sibthorp was persuaded by Lord Brownlow to allow the shield to pass to Samuel Meyrick, a collector of arms and armour in London, and when he died it was purchased by Sir Augustus Wollaston Franks. In 1782 Franks donated the shield to the British Museum, where he was the Keeper of British and Medieval Antiquities.

The shield was crafted in the 3rd Century BC, most likely in Britain though its exact origins are unknown. Rather than being a complete shield it is actually just the bronze facing of a shield, having lost its original wooden backing. It was probably made for ceremony or display rather than combat, though given the highly ritualised nature of Iron Age warfare, the two may be closely connected and the Witham Shield may have been intended for battlefield displays of wealth and status.

The shield is decorated with intricate patterns focussed along a central spine with a boss and two roundels. The central boss is inset with corals imported from the Mediterranean. Most intriguingly, the shield was once adorned with the striking image of a spindly-legged boar, now only visible through rivet holes and areas of discolouration.

The shield was deposited into the waters of the River Witham, presumably as a votive offering in a similar manner to the spectacular assemblage of finds discovered in association with the timber causeway at Fiskerton.

The shield will be on display at The Collection in Lincoln until 9th June 2013. A free series of lectures about the shield and the archaeology of the Witham Valley will complement the display.