

NOTES ON BRONZE OBJECTS FROM SHOOTERS HILL, KENT
AND ELSEWHERE AND ON THE ANTIQUITY
OF "JEW'S HARPS."

BY F. C. ELLISTON-ERWOOD, F.S.A.

THE bronze object illustrated (Fig. 1, No. 6) came into my possession somewhere about 1925. It was found serving as a fastening for a flimsy sort of gate on some allotments on the crest of Shooters Hill (London, S.E.18, *ci-devant* Kent) about 425 O.D. Its appearance attracted attention and, though I could not call to mind any analogous object, it was obviously a thing of some antiquity, though of what period or for what purpose I was unable even to guess. Its efficiency as a latch or lock was such that the offer of a brand new padlock and staple from Woolworth's was received with gratitude, and I thus became the owner of the relic.

My endeavours to elucidate its history were not so successful. The first finder had disappeared, though his successor was able to say that it had been dug up and applied to the purpose in which it was found, but "when" and "where" were questions without answer, and now, after this passage of time, probably unanswerable. One would naturally suppose that a thing such as this, if used at all, would be used on or near the site of its discovery, but on the other hand it might easily be one of those articles, of which every house is full, put carefully aside in the hope that it would "come in handy some day."

I naturally submitted it, in my honest ignorance, and with, of course, due humility to the pundits of some of our national and other museums and to other high authorities. Buckle, strap end, loop for drawer handle, linch pin, hair ornament, were among the suggestions made, often with an air of authority that left little room for disagreement. But none of these explanations seemed to me to account for all the details of shape and construction in the thing itself, and so, after a brief time, it went into obscurity among my collections.

The summit of Shooters Hill has produced but few antiquities: a dozen or so roughly chipped flints and the butt of a polished tool, a couple of "hut dwellings" with associated pottery of pre- and early Roman date, and there are some debatable mounds, some of which await competent examination, while others have proved to be recent burial places of horses and cattle. There is nothing to suggest a likely find spot; I have watched sections in the gravel cap for many years, but archæologically, the top of the hill has produced very little.

The object is of cast bronze, finished off with a file, of the shape shown in the sketch. In section it is a square diamond, but the

extensions of the pen-annular head, bent at angles to the main body, continue as a pair of fairly sharp tapering points of similar section to the head but of lesser dimensions. These points are bent in the specimen itself, but that is due, I think, to the fact that it had been driven into a hard wood post. The normal condition of these points would be straight.

The feature that gives character to the thing, distinguishing it from all other similar objects, and which all the proffered explanations seem to ignore, is the cutting or filing away of part of the uppermost ridge at its thickest section, to form a groove. (This detail may of course have been produced in the original casting.) The corners of this "chase" have been hammered over to hold some thin object such as a metal strip, which has disappeared, and in this particular case, left no trace. It was this outstanding feature that suggested to me the possibility of it being an early form of Jew's harp.

Ten years later this almost forgotten relic was brought to my notice again by seeing in one of the cases of the Society's collections at Maidstone a similar object (Fig. 1, No. 3), almost identical in size, but with one of its limbs broken and the other rather blunter. There was no label attached, but the then assistant Curator, Mr. Norman Cook, took it from its case and cleaned it, and while I examined it he sought out the known details of its life history.

It came from the Saxon cemetery at Sarre, which was excavated in 1863, an account of the examination of the site and of the chief objects found, being given in *Arch. Cant.*, V, VI and VII. Mr. Cook had been engaged for some time reconstituting the grave groups from information derived from various sources, and was able to state definitely that this example came from grave 18 and was associated with the small bronze votive axe described and illustrated in *Arch. Cant.* VI, pp. 159, 160. It was described in the catalogue, No. 499, "Handle of Bronze Shears or Tongs." My examination showed clearly that there still remained beneath the hammered-over corners a fragment of iron rust, thus strengthening the suggestion made with regard to the earlier example, i.e. that it was a "Jew's Harp."

A Jew's Harp, or as it is sometimes (though probably erroneously) termed, a "Jaw's Harp," is an instrument of music, not quite so often seen in the mouths of small boys and, at times, their elders, as heretofore, but of its antiquity I was not at all certain, though a little research soon showed that this was highly probable. The instrument (a reproduction of a modern one is given in Fig. 2, No. 1) was played by holding the bow in the right hand with the two prongs held firmly against the teeth and while a tune was gently hummed through the prongs, the "reed" or "stang," which is the name given to the thin metal strip affixed to the bow, was vibrated by gently but rapidly striking with the left hand. The varying sounds are produced by the modification of

the note by the changing shape of the mouth cavity, which thus serves as a sound box. The most important thing, however, is that the method of attaching the "stang" to the bow is exactly the same as that indicated in the bronze prototypes, if such they be.

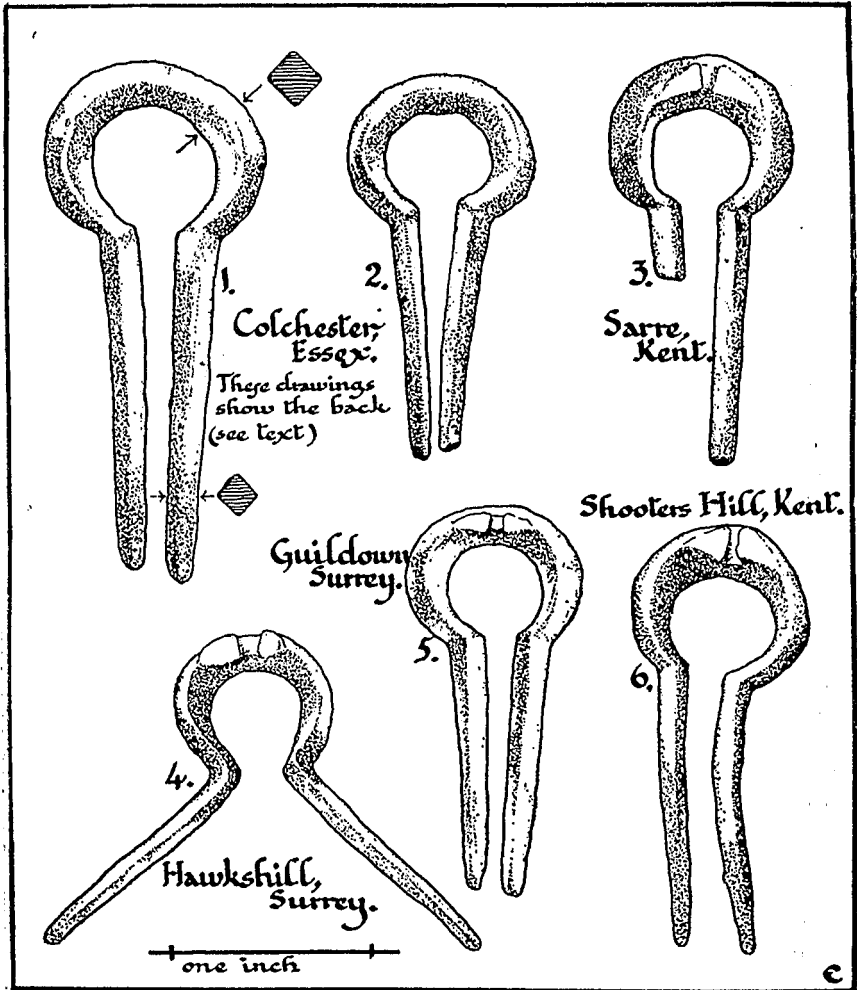


FIG. 1. BRONZE OBJECTS FROM KENT, ESSEX AND SURREY.

According to Groves' *Dictionary of Music* the Jew's Harp is found all over Europe, Asia and Oceania. In France it is known as the "gimbarde" but earlier forms, going back perhaps to the fifteenth century, are "rebuté" or "ributhe." In Germany it is the "Maultrommel" (mouth drum) or "Brummeisen" (buzzing iron) and also

"Judenharpe" which is clearly the same as the English name, and akin to the Dutch "Jeudy Tromp." The Italians have a characteristic name for it: "Scaccia pensieri" (drive away thought!) while it appears in China as the Mouth Harp (K'ou chin) and India as the Chang (harp) or Murchang. A mediæval Latin name is "crembalem" or "cymbalum orale." This is evidence of a very widespread use but not much evidence of antiquity. I can find no classic allusion or any mediæval reference earlier than the fifteenth century, nor can I find any picture of it being played, in for instance, the quaint marginal drawings that adorn so many illuminated MSS.¹ An illustration (which I have not

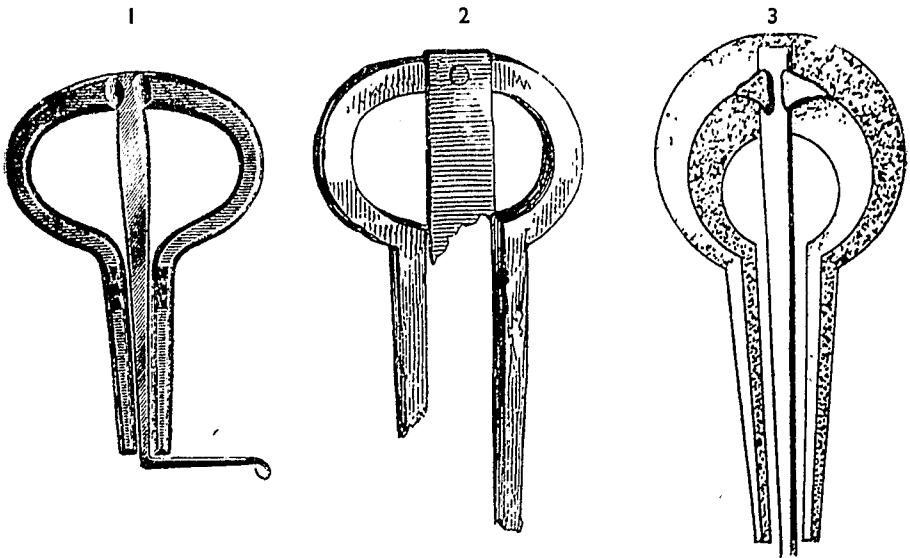


FIG. 2. 1. MODERN "JEW'S HARP."

2. JEW'S HARP FOUND AT SIBERTSWOLD, KENT, from Faussett's *Inventorium Sepulchrale*, p. 119.

3. SUGGESTED RESTORATION OF EARLY TYPE OF JEW'S HARP.

seen) is in a work (title not given) printed by Sebastian Virdun in 1511 and also, I am informed, in Durer's *Triumph of Maximilian*. A Hungarian brass gun at the Tower of London, dated 1535, has a representation cast in relief.

¹ Since writing this I have discovered what I think may be a representation of a man playing a "Jew's Harp." It is pictured in an illuminated initial in an Italian Pontifical, sold at Sotheby's May 19th, 1936—lot 37—and illustrated in their catalogue, plate xxv, no. 1. The details are naturally small but the position of the hands across the mouth is very suggestive, and the eye of faith may perhaps detect the "bow" of the harp. The date of this MS. is c. 1440-50 and it is of Roman provenance.

Meanwhile two references in literature came to me. The first was from Mr. Norman Cook who sent me to Bryan Faussett's *Inventorium Sepulchrale* (p. 19 and the sketch, reproduced here, Fig. 2, No. 2). The text says that it was an iron instrument but so rotten that it would not bear handling, and entirely crumbled to pieces while it was being taken away. The drawing was made by a draughtsman from Mr. Faussett's rough sketch. It will be noted that the bow and prongs are similar to the specimens being considered, though the square section is not placed diamond wise but resting on one face, and that a portion of the reed actually remains though it was affixed to the frame by a rivet. Here one can join in Mr. Faussett's lament that the object was not of brass, for then this detail would have been preserved for us beyond question. Mr. Faussett, however, must have the distinction of suggesting that his find was a "Common Jew's Harp or Jew's Tromp."

The other reference came to me when reading my favourite bedside book *Hydriotaphia* by the old physician of Norwich, Sir Thomas Browne. In Chapter II, last paragraph but one, he says :

"However certain it is, that urns conceived of no Roman original are often digged up both in Norway and Denmark, handsomely described and graphically represented by the learned physician Wormius.¹

"And in some parts of Denmark in no ordinary number, as stands delivered by authors exactly describing those countries.² And they contained not only bones, but many other substances in them as knives, pieces of iron, brass, and wood and one of Norway a brass gilded jewsharp" (my italics).

Embarked now on a definite quest, by correspondence and visits to divers museums other examples came to my notice, and a summary of all these, with details and circumstances associated with their discovery follows.

1. Shooters Hill, in my own collection : details above. (Fig. 1, 6.)
2. Sarre, in Maidstone Museum : described above. (Fig. 1, 3.)
3. Sibertswold, lost : described above, from *Inventorium Sepulchrale*. (Fig. 2, 2.)
4. Colchester, in Museum, No. 702.04 (see Fig. 1, 1). Find spot unknown.
5. Colchester, in Museum, No. 3789.20 (see Fig. 1, 2). Found in Balkerne Lane. The illustrations show the *back* of the instrument. They were drawn from photographs taken and supplied

¹ Olai Wormii Monumenta et Antiquitat Dan.

² Adolphus Cyprinus in Annal Sleswick urnis adeo abundabat collis, etc.

by the Museum and do not show the characteristic slot for affixing the stang, but this does exist on both specimens. The larger specimen is the biggest example I have yet seen. The Curator informs me that these came from a site where rubbish has been dumped ever since Roman times.

6. Colchester, in Museum, No. 5282.26. This example, described in the Museum Report 1927, cannot now be found, but it was evidently of the same type. It is worth noting that all of these objects are termed Jew's Harps in the report or catalogue, but are dated either mediæval, seventeenth century or unknown.
7. Guildown Saxon cemetery, in the Surrey Arch. Soc. Museum, Guildford. This (Fig. 1, 5) was found in 1929 while excavating a Saxon cemetery. Mr. A. W. G. Lowther, to whom I am indebted for the information, says that it was found in the top soil and in no way associated with the burials and he imagines it to be of no great antiquity, though Mr. Humphry Nevill, writing on the same matter, says of this and of the following (No. 8), "Both our examples are apparently Saxon."
8. Hawk Hill, near Leatherhead, Saxon Cemetery, in the Surrey Arch. Soc. Museum, Guildford (Fig. 1, 4). This was excavated in 1906, but the report of the excavation (*Surrey A.C.*, Vol. XX) gives no details. The bent limbs are probably accidental, and this is of rather slighter construction than the rest. Of these two specimens, that from Guildown shows file marks and has traces of rust still remaining in the groove, as has that from Hawk Hill, though this latter shows no signs of filing.
9. Norway. The very definite statement in *Hydriotaphia* quoted above.

The following suggestions and references were rejected :

- (a) A linch pin illustrated in Bruton's *Roman Manchester*, p. 44.
- (b) Staples for handles, illustrated in the second *Richborough* (S.A. Lond.) *Report*, 1928, Plate XXI, Fig. 45.
- (c) Similar objects shown in Curle's *Roman Frontier Post* (Newstead), Plate LXVII, Nos. 6, 10, 11, 12, 13.

It remains to assign some date for these objects which can now be correctly described as Jew's Harps. Of the nine examples above, five are definitely associated with post-Roman sites, chiefly cemeteries. These are Guildown, Hawk Hill, Sarre, Sibertswold and the Norwegian specimen. One, the Shooters Hill specimen, is unfortunately without any information at all, while the three Colchester examples come from an area where a Roman date is most likely, though of course by no means

certain. The evidence for Guildown is somewhat conflicting, but the fact that it was found in association with Saxon objects must be taken into consideration. One other fact must be borne in mind. There was definite evidence of Roman objects intrusive in Saxon graves at Sarre, and the little toy axe found with the burial group of a woman and child, together with the Jew's Harp, was definitely a Roman object.

From this it would appear that they must be considered older than is generally supposed and that a post-Roman date in the Pagan Saxon period is most probable.

It remains then to relate that a little time since I met a youth in the street playing a modern Jew's Harp (there was, according to the press, a boom in these instruments in 1925, one firm alone producing 100,000 per week !). I persuaded him to try and play my specimen as if the missing stang were there, and going through the motions. This he did quite well, till, catching the side of his hand on the rather sharp points, he stopped quickly and handed me back my harp with the words, "Blimy, guv'nor, them points ain't 'arf sharp."¹ This may seem to cast a shadow of doubt as to whether, after all, these things are Jew's Harps, but, with the other possible exception of that from Hawk Hill, the points seem to be generally blunted.

There must be other examples in existence. A correspondent says he has seen five, but cannot now say where ; and I have a report of one from Icklingham in Suffolk where was also a Saxon cemetery. There are said to be London harps, too, but I have seen none of these. I should be very grateful for further information, details of the find spot and drawings or photographs.

I am afraid that in the pursuit of all this information I have been more than a nuisance to many worthy and busy people, and to give a list of their names would make the tail of my paper more imposing than the body, but to one and all of my numerous correspondents and helpers I tender my grateful and appreciative thanks.

¹ It appears to me desirable, in view of the coming uplift in education, to record these fragments of phraseology with some exactitude, before the influence of Eton on the Council School (or vice versa) brings about a dead level of correct but dull uniformity, and archaeological publications seem to be the proper media for archaisms as these will shortly be.