

Two Medieval Celtic Enamelled Buckles from Leicestershire

by Susan Youngs

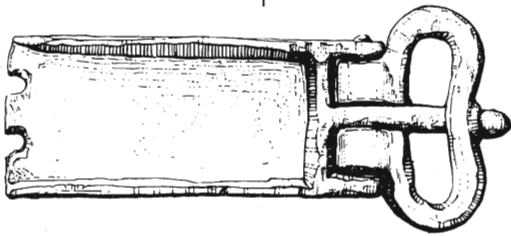
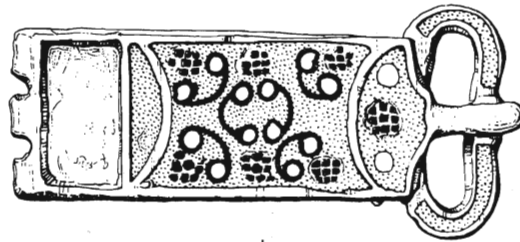
Two unusual enamelled buckles found at the same site in Leicestershire are described and discussed in relation to similar buckles from Ireland, all dating from the early middle ages. The occurrence of these pieces in the county is briefly considered.

The discovery near Melton Mowbray in Leicestershire of two buckles with loops and plates enamelled in Celtic style has brought the number of such buckles, whether whole or parts, up to a present total of thirteen of which only three have been published.¹ These champlévé enamelled buckles are remarkably varied and, with the exceptions of the Leicestershire finds and an 11th century buckle from Cheshire, the rest were found in Ireland. All, bar the Cheshire piece, apparently date from the period of the seventh to the ninth centuries A.D., the hey-day of Irish polychrome enamelling, although there is no firm contextual evidence for dating any one of these pieces.

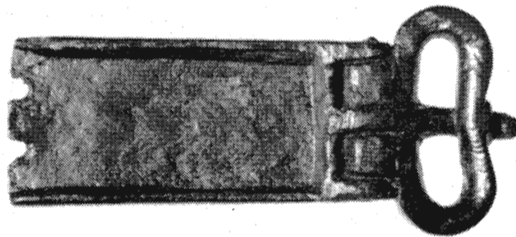
The larger of the two Leicestershire buckles (illus.1) is of copper alloy cast in two parts only; one is the plate with an integral tongue and two projecting lugs, the other is the loop with a complementary pair of horizontal lugs. The two are joined by a slender pin through the four lugs. The length overall is 46mm, the plate is 15mm wide and 6mm deep where it widens to hold the pin. The buckle is recessed on the front and three of the panels are filled with opaque red enamel. The panel behind the tongue is a truncated segment and inlaid with two dots of opaque white glass flanking a piece of millefiori glass. The main field has a pattern of six copper alloy 'C' scrolls symmetrically arranged, each scroll ends in a small ring and resembles a pince-nez, each ring holds a dot of opaque white glass like those next to the tongue, while ten more pieces of millefiori lie in and around the scrolls. All the millefiori is of the same type, opaque white glass appears to form a regular grid against an apparently black glass (probably dark blue or green). The third field of enamel is a segment of plain red. The last recess (internally 7 by 13mm) is empty but has a blackened area on the base and tiny scraps, perhaps of silver foil against one edge. The end of the buckle plate has two incomplete rivet holes. The back of the plate is recessed but is open at the end with the rivet holes. The whole plate has three forward projections, two pierced lugs to engage the loop and the centrally placed tongue with a hooked tip. The loop is kidney-shaped with a gully for the tongue and recessed either side to hold red enamel. The buckle is on loan to Leicestershire Museums, Arts and Records Service, Jewry Wall Museum of Archaeology from a private collection.

The smaller buckle (illus.2) was also made from two principal parts of copper alloy, but here the buckle plate and loop were cast in one piece and the tongue was made separately. Length overall is 43mm, the width of the loop 18mm. There are recesses

1. All these buckles will be published by the writer in 'Recent finds of Insular enameled buckles' in *American Early Medieval Studies*, 3, ed. R. Farrell and C. Karkov (forthcoming)



Red Enamel



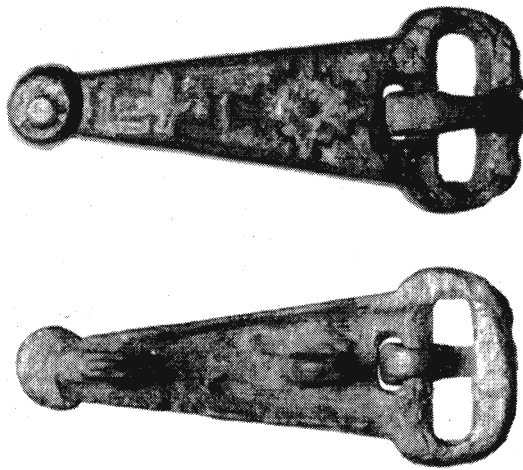
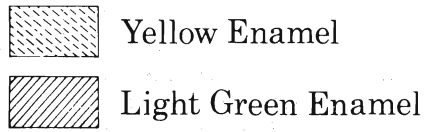
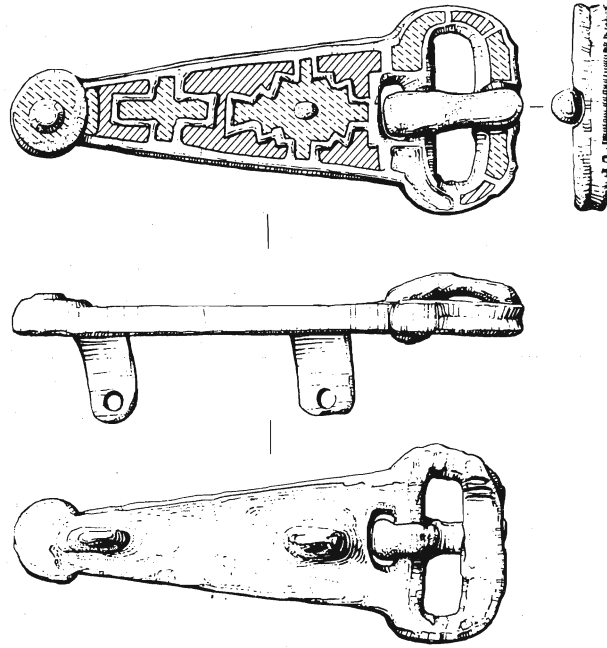
1. An enamelled bronze buckle inlaid with bronze wire and millefiori glass from Melton Mowbray.
Scale: 3:2

for enamel on both loop and plate, the sides of the plate slope out slightly, and the back of the piece is hollowed and has two pierced lugs lying along the main axis of the plate. These lugs are proportionally very deep, *c.* 7mm, giving the buckle a total depth of *c.* 10mm. The plate is sub-triangular and ends in a domed circular projection with opaque light green enamel set in a circle of opaque yellow. The main field has angular cells imitating soldered cloisons, which form a stepped cross with a central metal dot and a simple cross towards the narrow end. Both crosses are filled with yellow enamel, against a background of light green. This green is consistent in colour and does not appear to be decayed red, although it would require scientific investigation to be certain about this important feature.² There is a small area of yellow against the wall of the circular terminal with no wall separating it from the main field of green. The buckle loop has a horizontal groove running part of the way round its vertical face; the upper surface has a gully to accommodate the tongue. There is a symmetrical arrangement of six enamelled fields, three to each side of the tongue. The two flanking the tongue are slightly broadened and shaped to form stylised animal heads in profile and hold yellow enamel. The next pair of cells have green enamel, while the two larger cells mimicking attachment lugs originally held yellow enamel, but one is now empty. A rectangular hole was left to attach the tongue, the end of which is curled round. The metal of the buckle is grey-green and probably a high tin bronze.³ The tongue is brown and is more corroded, roughly triangular in cross section and dips into the loop opening before resting on the bow. A group of three lines is scored across the back of the loop. On loan to Leicestershire Museums, Art Galleries and Records Service, Jewry Wall Museum of Archaeology from a private collection.

The larger buckle is of particular interest because it is a unique skeuomorph of a well known type of 7th century Anglo-Saxon buckle with long rectangular plate and incorporating a tongue with a tongue plate. In this case the tongue plate is a non functional dummy. The empty rectangular field at the end appears to have held a panel of foil, a feature of some Anglo-Saxon rectangular buckle plates.⁴ Unlike the enamelled buckle, the proposed models have separately articulated tongues. They are also attached to back plates by three or more rivets through a flange like that on the enamelled example, but which is invariably recessed, that is, lower than the surface of the main plate. The flange here is not recessed. The Leicestershire buckle is a misunderstood version of a foreign, probably Anglo-Saxon, model and one that is not usually decorated with enamel. One Anglo-Saxon buckle, from grave 232 at Sarre, Kent, with a similar rectangular plate, was described as part enamelled but it appears otherwise to be a perfectly conventional Anglo-Saxon buckle of seventh century date with articulated tongue plate.⁵ Unless this buckle can be located and re-examined, the original identification of enamel remains dubious.

Contrarywise, the extensive use of opaque red enamel inlaid with millefiori and the collared dots place the Melton Mowbray buckle in the distinctive tradition of medieval Celtic enamelling. The eccentric construction supports this cultural attribution. None of the buckles found in Ireland, enamelled or otherwise, matches the rectangular form or wire-inlaid enamelling of this one, although some of them are also unique forms.

2. M.J. Hughes 'Enamels: materials, deterioration and analysis' in *From Pinheads to Hanging Bowls*, ed. L. Bacon and B. Knight, pp.10-12. UK Institute for Conservation Occasional Paper 7. London: 1987
3. W.A. Oddy, 'Bronze alloys in Dark Age Europe' in R.L.S. Bruce-Mitford, *The Sutton Hoo Ship Burial*, vol III, ed. A. Care Evans, pp.954-63. London: British Museum Publications, 1983
4. G. Speake, *Anglo-Saxon Animal Art and its Germanic Background*, pl. 9,a-d. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1980
5. J. Brent, 'Account of the Society's researches into the Anglo-Saxon cemetery at Sarre. Part III,' *Archaeologia Cantiana* 7 (1868), pp.307-21; I owe this reference to Cathy Haith



2. A bronze buckle with contrasting enamels from Melton Mowbray. Scale (Scale 3:2).

A British origin remains a possibility but only if one is prepared to argue that enamelled hanging bowl mounts were manufactured in Britain. The most likely area of manufacture is, however, Ireland or Scottish Dalriada (centred roughly on the area of modern Argyll).⁶ The basic pince-nez form of wire inlay is a traditional element in gold and silver filigree work from classical times and indeed silver wire inlay of this form is found on some of the seventh century inlaid Merovingian buckles. Beaded gold filigree 'C' scrolls were used to decorate glass studs on the finest Irish metalwork of the eighth century, such as the Ardagh chalice and Derrynaflan paten.⁷ On the Moylough belt-shrine two glass studs have inset 'C' scrolls of beaded silver thought to have originally held dots of contrasting enamel inlay, a feature of the larger Melton Mowbray buckle.⁸ Small amounts of silver wire inlay are found in eighth to ninth century Insular enamelling; on a disc reused on a Viking weight from Kilmainham, Co. Dublin, a mount from Gjonnes, Norway, and a complex enamel disc from Aberdour, Fife, with possible Pictish affinities.⁹ Millefiori was first used on the late La Tène style Irish penannular brooches from the later sixth and first half of the seventh century, on contemporary Celtic hanging bowl mounts and on dress pins of a type found in Pictish Scotland and Ireland. It then remained in fashion for some centuries.

The sub-triangular buckle from Leicestershire, both in form and decoration, is a miniature version of a buckle found on the shore of Lough Gara, County Sligo (illus. 3).¹⁰ The new buckle is much smaller, length 43mm as compared with 76mm and much simpler in construction. The Lough Gara buckle has a separate loop and tongue with tongue plate fully articulated, two circular studs inlaid with amber, as well as a larger terminal stud inlaid with reticella glass with a recessed grid pattern.¹¹ It has a further enamelled panel projecting beyond the large stud. The two buckles have in common their overall design, a slight curvature and the use of cruciform cells; both employ yellow and green enamel, the larger one uses red also. Genuine green enamel is uncommon at this period and much green has proved to be discoloured red. The green enamel on the Lough Gara buckle is confined to two central square cells and recent cleaning has confirmed the colour, which is deeper than that on the Melton Mowbray buckle. Use of this unusual colour strengthens the impression that these two buckles were made in the same workshop. The profile animal heads with oval eyes on the loop of the Lough Gara find confirm the zoomorphic nature of the simple

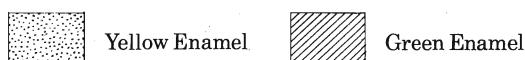
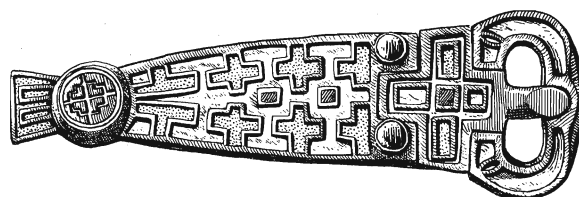
6. See F. Henry 'Irish enamels of the Dark Ages and their relation to the cloisonné techniques' in *Dark Age Britain*, ed. D.B.Harden, pp.71-88. London: Methuen, 1956; for the history of Scottish Dalriada, J. Bannerman *Studies in the History of Dalriada*. Edinburgh: Scottish Academic Press, 1974; E. Campbell and A.Lane 'Celtic and Germanic interaction in Dalriada; a seventh-century metalworking site at Dunadd' in *The Age of Migrating Ideas: Early Medieval Art in Northern Britain and Ireland*, ed. J. Higgitt and R.M. Spearman, pp. 52-63, Edinburgh: National Museums of Scotland 1993.
7. N. Whitfield, 'Motifs and techniques of Celtic filigree. Are they original?' in *Ireland and Insular Art A.D. 500-1200*, ed. M. Ryan, pp.75-84, in particular pp.75-6. Dublin: Royal Irish Academy, 1987
8. M.J. O'Kelly, 'The belt-shrine from Moylough, Sligo,' *Journal of the Royal Society of Antiquaries of Ireland* 95, (1965),pp.149-88; for the inlay see p.177, pl. 26
9. For Gjonnes see G. Haseloff, *Email im frühen Mittelalter*, pp.164,186. Marburger Studien zur Vor- und Frühgeschichte 1. Marburg: Hitzeroth, 1990. The Aberdour disc is published on pp.232-5 of C. Bourke and J. Close-Brooks, 'Five Insular enamel ornaments,' *Proceedings of the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland*, 119 (1989), pp.227-37
10. National Museum of Ireland 1958:20; M. Ryan in 'The Work of Angels' *Masterpieces of Celtic Metalwork, 6th - 9th Centuries A.D.*, ed. S.M. Youngs, p.58 London: British Museum Publications, 1989
11. This revised description is based on information kindly supplied by Paul Mullarkey of the National Museum of Ireland after his recent cleaning of the buckle

decoration on the Melton Mowbray piece, although on the latter the heads face the tip of the tongue and not its base. The buckles were attached to a strap by large pierced lugs, although it does not seem correct to describe the tiny buckle from Leicestershire as a belt fitting (see also discussion below).

Liam de Paor in a 1961 paper on Irish buckles and strap mounts agreed with earlier writers that the belt buckle was originally a non-Irish item of dress and briefly reviewed the evidence for its introduction, with particular reference to the Lough Gara find.¹² No general study has been published since this but a major survey of early Irish buckles was undertaken for a post-graduate degree which remains unpublished.¹³ Enamelled buckles form a small part of this survey and are conspicuous for their variety and refusal to fit readily into tidy categories. This type of buckle with a triangular plate also apparently has its origin in Continental and Germanic models of the late sixth and seventh centuries. The majority of these have inlaid, faceted or engraved decoration but Françoise Henry in her 1956 survey illustrated some enamelled Frankish and Burgundian examples, and recent work has identified important Aquitainian groups.¹⁴ It is significant however, that where these inlays have been tested they have turned out to be lead oxide and, in one case, degraded niello.¹⁵ The red of a well known buckle from Amiens was identified by the British Museum Research Laboratory as lead oxide and not cuprite, although it is not possible to prove whether this inlay was originally a compound of lead or a high lead glass.¹⁶ This limited evidence introduces the important possibility that the enamelling on buckles in the Celtic world represent an independent, local, parallel development based on a native tradition of enamelling. Some of the varied forms could come direct from late Roman buckles, while others could depend on 6th or 7th century Merovingian or Anglo-Saxon exemplars. Imported examples of both model types found at Melton Mowbray are absent from mainland Irish sites, but this is not surprising, nor is the physical presence of more than a very few necessary.¹⁷ An excavation at Randalstown, County Meath, produced an unstratified, thick kidney-shaped buckle loop with bar of normal Germanic type, but this is exceptional.¹⁸ One of the enamelled buckles, another unparalleled form from Ervey, County Meath, may reflect such a model, but it has a different means of assembly.¹⁹

Dating of the two Leicestershire buckles cannot be precise, it depends on the comparison of their design features with other objects which are themselves only broadly datable on art-historical grounds. The triangular buckle may therefore date to the eighth century when polychrome enamelling and imitation cloisonné cell work is quite common

12. L. de Paor, 'Irish belt-buckles and strap mounts', *Bericht über den V. Internationalen Kongress für Vor- und Frühgeschichte Hamburg 1955*, ed. G. Bersu, pp.649-53 Berlin: Mann, 1961
13. O. O Sullivan, 'Buckles of the First Millenium A.D. from Native Irish Sites', 2 vols. University College Dublin: unpublished M. Phil. thesis, 1984
14. Henry 1956, as n. 6, pp.73-5; S. Lerenter 'Nouvelle approche typologique des plaques-boucles mérovingiennes en bronze de type aquitain,' in *Gallo-Romains, Wisigoths et Francs en Aquitaine, Septimanie et Espagne*, ed. P. Périn, pp.225-57, groups F ,G,H. Actes des VIIe Journées internationales d'Archéologie mérovingiennes, Toulouse 1985. Paris:L'Association française d'Archéologie Mérovingienne, 1991
15. E. Salin, *La Civilisation Mérovingienne III Les Techniques*, p.232. Paris: 1957; Davydd Kidd personal communication
16. Comments by Mavis Bimson and Ian Freestone of the British Museum Department of Scientific Research, and see also Haseloff 1990, as n. 9, p.75
17. This approach was helpfully suggested by my colleague Dafydd Kidd
18. National Museum of Ireland E149:671; O Sullivan 1984, as n. 13, pp.92, 183
19. O Sullivan 1984, as n. 13, p.135, pls 25,26



An enamelled bronze buckle with amber and glass studs from Lough Gara, County Sligo. Scale 1:1.

on more complex objects such as the Moylough belt shrine and the Ardagh chalice.²⁰ The extensive field of red with 'floating' millefiori ornament on the rectangular buckle plate, however, ties it more closely to the decoration in the last La Tène style as seen on zoomorphic penannular brooches from Ireland, the large hanging bowl from Sutton Hoo and to a buckle from Derry Churches, County Down, suggesting that this buckle may be earlier and date from the mid or late seventh century.²¹

Both buckles were recovered by metal detectorists from fields south of Melton Mowbray, Leicestershire, in an area that has produced finds from the Bronze Age to the post-medieval period. The fields in question lie south of the crossroads of an east-west road of almost certain Roman date and a north-south road of some antiquity, certainly medieval but probably earlier (W.G. Hoskins regarded it as prehistoric). A Roman occupation site and an early Anglo-Saxon cemetery (including seventh century material) lie some 400m to the south-west of the crossroads. The larger of the buckles comes from the south-east quadrant, while an early eighth century coin, a 'porcupine' sceat (Series E; Metcalf Class L, the 'plumed bird' type), comes from the south-west quadrant some 300m away. Other finds which are generally located in this group of fields include the second enamel buckle, a strap end with animal head terminal and a gilt-bronze disc brooch, both of 9th to 10th century date. The Melton Mowbray Archaeological Fieldwork Group has fieldwalked the area but no further material from this period was recovered. In Leicestershire finds of the 8th to 10th century are still uncommon and this group stands out.²² It is tempting to consider this to be a possible 'productive site' such as a market or meeting place, but the present coin evidence is insufficient to support this.²³

20. O'Kelly 1965, as n. 8; R.M. Organ, 'Examination of the Ardagh Chalice - a case history' in *Application of Science in Examination of Works of Art*, ed. W.J. Young, pp.238-71. Boston: Museum of Fine Art, 1973
21. 'The Work of Angels' *Masterpieces of Celtic Metalwork, 6th-9th centuries A.D.*, ed. S.M.Youngs, nos 17-19, 203. London: British Museum Publications, 1989; for the Sutton Hoo bowl Bruce-Mitford 1983, as no. 3, pp.202-43
22. Information kindly given by Peter Liddle, Leicestershire Archaeological Survey Officer; for the distribution of early medieval material in the county see P. Liddle, 'Anglo-Saxon Leicestershire' in *The Anglo-Saxons in Leicestershire* ed. J.E. Bourn (forthcoming)
23. Productive sites are defined and discussed in *Anglo-Saxon Productive Sites*, ed. M.A.S. Blackburn and D.M. Metcalf. B.A.R. (Brit. Ser.) (forthcoming)

Most Celtic enamelling recovered in England occurs on the decorative mounts of hanging bowls found in furnished Anglo-Saxon graves of the late sixth and seventh centuries, but there is no direct evidence that the Melton Mowbray buckles were deposited in this way.²⁴ There is a second important group of Irish or Insular material known to have reached England through the trading activities of the Vikings from the ninth century onwards, usually recognisable by the re-use or adaptation of decorative pieces of metalwork; bosses become brooches, offcuts decorate lead weights.²⁵ A gilt-bronze harness mount recently found at Newtown Linford, Leicestershire, of eighth to ninth century date, is more typical of this type of imported material although it shows no sign of secondary adaptation.²⁶ Excavation at the early monastery at Breedon-on-the-Hill recovered an eighth century Irish enamelled fitting.²⁷ This does not explain the presence and loss of two such unusual Celtic enamels at Melton Mowbray. A possibly analogous site at Coddtenham in Suffolk, similarly explored by metal-detectorists, has produced a Celtic enamelled stud of Irish type as well as a unique zoomorphic mount.²⁸ There appear to be other means of dispersal in addition to the two mentioned above, such as trade under the umbrella of the monastic network with its Irish connections, to account for the possible appearance of Celtic decorative metalwork in eastern Mercia, that is pre-Viking Leicestershire, and elsewhere in the former Anglo-Saxon kingdoms.

Acknowledgements

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Personal details

Mrs S. M. Youngs, F.S.A. Curator in the Department of Medieval and Later Antiquities, British Museum, London WC1B 3DG; at present preparing a catalogue of the early medieval Celtic material in the Department.

24. J. Brennan, *Hanging Bowls and their Contexts*. B.A.R. (Brit. Ser.) 220. Oxford: 1991
25. 'The Work of Angels', as n. 21, nos. 135,136; E. Wamers, *Insularer Metallschmuck in wikingerzeitlichen Gräbern Nordeuropas*, pp.13, 40. Neumunster: Karl Wachholtz, 1985
26. Private collection; information courtesy of Leicestershire County Museums Service
27. A. Dormier, 'The Anglo-Saxon monastery at Breedon-on-the-Hill, Leicestershire' in *Mercian Studies*, ed. A. Dornier, pp. 115-68 Leicester: University Press 1977; 'Work of Angels', as n. 21, no. 50
28. Stud unpublished, zoomorphic mount and site in *Proceedings of the Suffolk Institute of Archaeology and History* 36 (1989), pp.60, 72