

Romano-British

Zoomorphic Brooches

Do you recall the flurry of interest in song badges that rippled through detectorists' ranks about 20 years ago? Finders had no idea how to classify the first few brought up from the golden sands of various seaside resorts, so we grouped them with Robertson's Golly badges and Butlin's Holiday Camp badges and guessed at their histories. Most difficult to categorise were those that included no lettering in their designs, such as a rather battered example I detected on a London common. It depicted a bird on the wing and

what I initially identified as snow covered mountains. Another I recall, found by a reader detecting on the Yorkshire coast, had a large, yellow enamelled star beneath which an attractive young woman sat on a roped swing.

Thanks to the efforts of a Lancashire detectorist who owned only a basic early Viking, which he used to search Blackpool's beaches after (occasionally during) stormy weather, we were eventually granted enlightenment. He treated us to a mounted display of around two dozen of those enigmatic little enamelled badges – and we could suddenly

see what they were all about. The subject matter on each referred to a popular song from the 1920-30s. The bird on mine was a bluebird on the wing; not flying over snowy mountains, but chalk cliffs. The song: *There'll Be Bluebirds Over The White Cliffs Of Dover*. The Yorkshire reader's find commemorated the song: *Would You Like To Swing On a Star?* Another depicting a Gypsy Moth bi-plane had the word *Amy* written along the aircraft's fuselage. The Blackpool detectorist later tracked down the information that a popular song titled *Amy Wonderful Amy* had been written to commemorate the success of

Figs.1-3. These hare brooches (one could be a rabbit) show some of the surface treatments ancient craftsmen employed to make their wares as colourful and eye-catching as possible. Deep troughs and recesses show on Fig.1., as do the raised fields (*champlevé*) between the coloured enamels. On Fig.2. the ears and feet were given sufficient detail to make them look naturalistic, while the eye, perhaps silvered, must have drawn the eyes of all who saw it when first made. Some readers may recall the hare in *Masquerade* when looking at this brooch. On Fig.3. the craftsman employed silvering to enhance the creature's surface.



Fig.1.



Fig.3.



Fig.2.

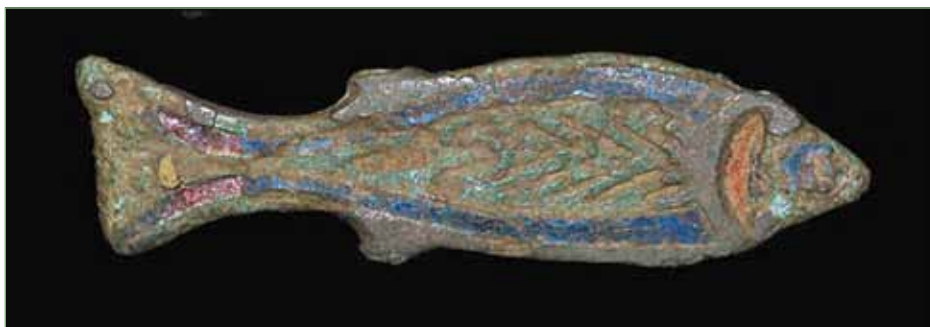
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Figs.4-6. Birds provided brooch makers with opportunities to represent plumage in a variety of hues using three, four, even five different colours. Black ravens (Fig.5.) and white swans (Fig.6.) were often given technicolor treatment.



Figs.7-9. Apart from the dolphins seen in Fig.7., fishes were rare subjects for zoomorphic brooch makers. When fish brooches were made, their scales gave ample opportunities for applying colours.



Amy Johnson, who flew solo from England to Australia in 1930.

So far more than 80 different 1920s-30s enamelled song badges have come to light, with badge collectors confidently expecting more. And that brings me to Romano-British copper-alloy enamelled zoomorphic brooches, which have far more in common with 20th century song badges than you might imagine. The correct term for the enamelling technique employed to make both types is *champlevé*, in which troughs and recesses are cast or pressed into the surface of the metal and then filled with what amounts to powdered glass and powdered metallic oxides. The piece is then fired until the powders melt and transform to coloured enamel. When cooled the surface of the object is polished. Portions of the original metal which were not pressed into troughs and recesses remain visible as frames for the enamel designs. It is these raised areas which give the technique its name: the French word *champlevé* means "raised field".

Ancient craftsmen lacked powerful

machinery that could press copper alloys into the form of a brooch, so instead they relied on casting to produce the bronze parts of their wares. And whereas song badge makers had kilns, the ancient workers used bellows to blow air into charcoal fires to melt their enamels.

Examination of 1st, 2nd and 3rd century zoomorphic brooches under microscopes indicates that very few can be traced to moulds used more than once. This revelation must be treated cautiously because it is possible that during the final finishing process minor flaws that might have linked two or more brooches to the same mould were eradicated by polishing. However, a more likely interpretation of the evidence points to individual moulds being made on instruction from customers who must have gone to the metal worker to place what amounted to bespoke orders. If that did indeed happen then each customer could have specified not only the shape of his/her brooch, and the animal depicted, but also the colour of the enamel used to decorate it.

Some researchers and collectors still resolutely support the view that zoomorphic brooches had strong links to religion; that the creatures portrayed by the brooches were either personifications of deities, or closely associated with a particular god, or perhaps with the rituals of worshipping a favoured spirit. But another interpretation has gained ground among those who have compared animal names to human names. Did you know, for example, that Aper, Leo, Columba, Capella, Gallus, Passer, Pavo and Ursus were popular names among the artisanal classes of the Roman Empire during the 1st-3rd centuries, which happen to be the years of greatest popularity for zoomorphic brooches? In case you have forgotten your O-level Latin, those names in English are: boar, lion, dove, she-goat, cock, sparrow, peacock and bear. They include some of the creatures most often seen on zoomorphic brooches.

Here's another talking point. Song badges were produced as promotional advertising give-aways intended to be



Figs.10 & 11. Although these frog brooches are not from the same mould, it is interesting that their makers divided the bodies into two cells to receive enamel.

Figs.12 & 13. Another amphibious creature, the mythical hippocampus, provided plenty of opportunities for the liberal use of colours. Fig.12., a superb example of this type of zoomorphic brooch, sold for more than £1,000 in a London auction in 2010.



Fig.13.



Fig.12.

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Figs. 14-16. Exotic creatures such as panthers and the lioness shown in Fig. 16., must also have been figments of the brooch maker's imagination – unless the unfortunate animals were sent to Britannia to die in provincial arenas.



Figs. 17-20. The horse, revered in both Roman and Celtic religions, proved a popular subject for zoomorphic brooch makers.

pinned to a blouse or a lapel for the few weeks during which the popular song caught the attention of its fickle public. Then – apart from songs such as *Blue Birds Over The White Cliffs Of Dover*, which achieved long-term patriotic popularity – the sheet music and its badge were discarded. Paralleling this in antiquity, some zoomorphic brooch makers, though by no means all, seem to have skimmed on materials when making these wares.

On a number of finds pins seem rather flimsy, as though both vendor and buyer expected the brooch to be worn for only a short time. I wonder, is it possible that zoomorphic brooches were purchased and worn on special

occasions such as gatherings for feasts, markets or religious festivals?

Worthy of mention, though it does not draw any comparisons between ancient and modern brooches and badges, is a study undertaken by archaeologists at Newcastle-on-Tyne University into enamelled brooch finds (not all zoomorphic, of course) recorded on the PAS database up to the end of 2009. Some 2,728 enamelled brooches were listed and differences in the use of coloured enamels came to attention. Red, yellow and blue seemed associated with 1st century finds, while red, yellow, blue, green, orange, black and white were all widely used in the 2nd century. By the 3rd and 4th centuries the range had decreased to mainly

blue and white enamels which frequently appeared together on the same brooch, sometimes along with one other colour.

Let us pause for a moment to reflect on the enormous benefits archaeology derives from the efforts of detectorists and collectors – nowhere more so than in providing material and information invaluable for the study of brooches. Detected finds are manna to desk-bound archaeologists and museum curators. And in the field of brooches they owe an enormous debt to privately-funded collector, Richard Hattatt, whose books describing and illustrating his own vast collection are on the shelves of just about every museum or archaeological institution.



Figs.21 & 22. Peacocks symbolised immortality, and to Romans they belonged to Juno, Queen of Heaven; though that did not deter well-off Romans when it came to making a feast of a roast peacock. The bird featured on many zoomorphic brooches.



Figs.23 & 24. Boar brooches, another popular subject treated in many different ways, as shown by these two examples.

To feed my own insatiable curiosity I want to see more of these enamelled finds, ancient and modern, coming out of un-stratified ground. I urge clubs and individuals to try the following areas:

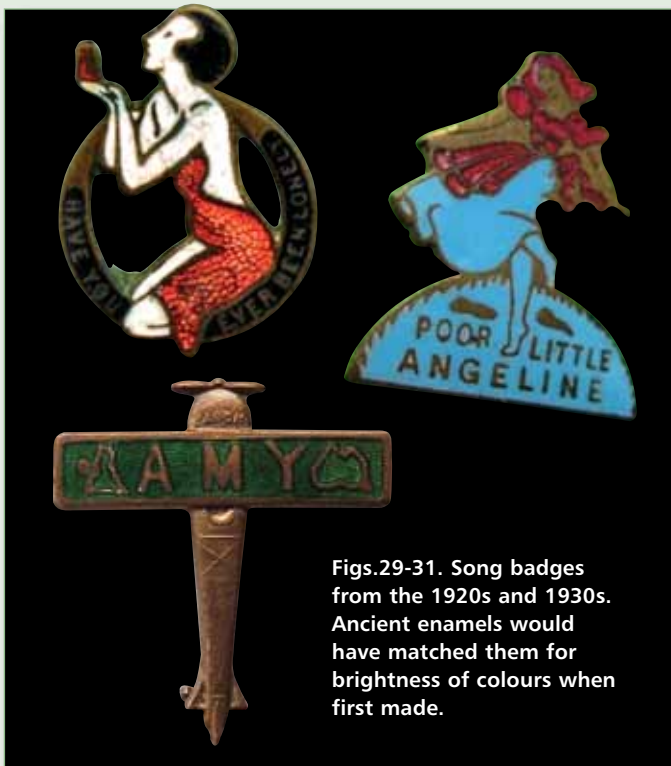
- In all cities and towns where near-derelict parks and recreation grounds cry out for investigation. The artefacts of working-class 20th century life lie inches beneath the roots of grass originally sown to provide recreational pleasure for working people. Having obtained permission, when and where necessary, you can

recover them without causing any damage to the amenity grass.

- In fields flanking minor 1st, 2nd and 3rd century habitation sites. Less affluent Romano-Britons, who purchased most of the zoomorphic brooches, lived there and probably lost their personal possessions on surrounding land. The present-day farmer will surely be aware that detectorists have helped many farmers to harvest exceedingly rich crops from soil that no archaeologist is ever likely to investigate. And even if your finds

amount to only a few zoomorphic brooches, the farmer will be more than welcome to half of them. Please let me hear of any you save from destruction.

Note: This article is illustrated with zoomorphic brooches from the stocks and/or the catalogue pages of TimeLine Auctions who generously gave permission for use of the photos. If you have any zoomorphic brooches you wish to sell, you could contact Brett Hammond of TimeLine Auctions on their website at www.timelineauctions.com TH



Figs.29-31. Song badges from the 1920s and 1930s. Ancient enamels would have matched them for brightness of colours when first made.

Figs.25-28. Owls, hounds, flies with an astonishing variety of coloured wings and deer all provided subjects for ancient zoomorphic brooch makers.

