

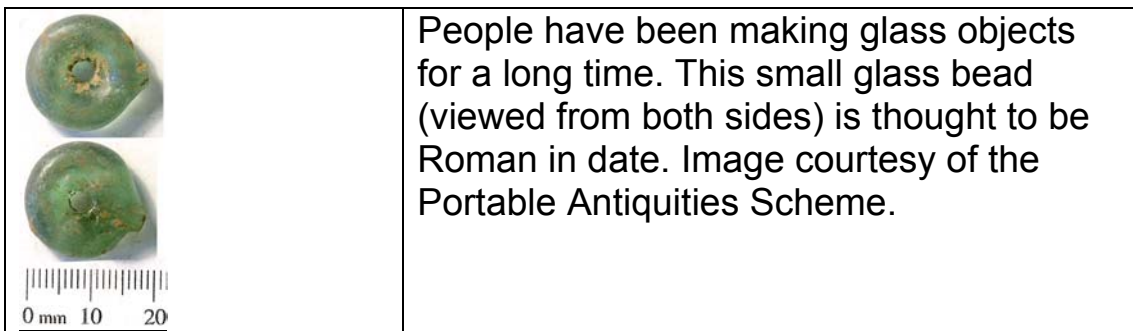
IDENTIFYING YOUR FINDS: A beginner's guide to what to look for

FIRST STEPS IN IDENTIFYING AND DATING GLASS FINDS

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Introduction

Glass was first used in the ancient world for making ornaments and glass vessels. In Britain its use became widespread under the Roman occupation. It was however always a luxury item and the use of glass declined again with the Roman abandonment of Britain in the early years of the 5th century AD. Glass remained expensive during the Middle Ages and it was only with the mechanization of the manufacturing process that glass became the household item which it is today.



Manufacture

The principal ingredient of glass is sand, which, when heated to molten state, can be formed into a variety of shapes. The Romans were familiar with glass blowing by the time they conquered Britain. They also knew that the blowing into a mould would increase the range of shapes which could be easily manufactured.

Techniques for producing larger sheets of glass emerged during the 11th century. This was done in one of two ways. The molten glass could be first blown into a sphere. This was then elongated into a cylinder and split lengthways and folded out to form a single sheet of glass. Alternatively, the molten glass can be spun to form a large flat disc, from which appropriate sized pieces can be cut.

The 19th century saw mechanization of the glass making process enabling both window and vessel glass to be produced cheaply for the first time.

Window glass

In practice it is impossible to identify the method by which small fragments of hand-made sheet glass have been made. Both methods produce an uneven finish. This unevenness has also given rise to the myth that glass is almost a liquid which flows down over the course of time. This is not so. Panes of glass were set into their frames with their thickest side at the bottom to increase stability.

A major change occurs in 1696 when William III introduced a window tax as a form of taxation on luxury goods. This had several effects including the blocking up of windows in some larger houses. Window glass from this period tends to be thin (less than 1.6mm), while window glass produced after the tax was abolished in 1851 tends to be thicker (up to 2.0mm). The thickness of glass retrieved by fieldwork can be established by using a vernier calliper.

Vessel glass

Glass bowls and containers have been used in Britain since the Roman times, but like window glass, such items would have been luxury goods in antiquity. Again it was industrialization which made glass a common household item.

Fragments of glass bottles are often found during fieldwork. A distinctive feature to look for is a line running up the side of the bottle. This is made by the join in the two halves of the mould in which the bottle was made. Bottles made in the 19th century were often finished by hand, the lip being added after the rest of the vessel was made. If the seam does not run all the way to the lip of the bottle, this is a clear indication that the bottle has been hand finished.

Another feature to look for is a pontil mark, a rough area on the base of the bottle. This is the mark of a pontil rod, a tool that was attached to the base of the bottle by a blob of molten glass to provide a means of holding the vessel while it was being worked on. When the work is finished the rod is snapped off leaving a scar or pontil mark. Better quality glassware may have this rubbed out leaving a small slightly hollow smooth patch.

External Links

The Museum of London Glass Collection

{<http://www.museumoflondon.org.uk/ceramics/pages/glass.asp>}

This extensive online catalogue gives illustrations and detailed descriptions of glassware of all periods.

Trade directories Online

Moulded bottles of the have the name of the business embossed on them. This can often be traced through using a Trade Directory – the Victorian equivalent of the Yellow Pages. This site is hosted by the University of Leicester.

For help identifying other finds [click here](#)

{<http://www.archaeology.wyjs.org.uk/Identifying/beginnerguid.htm>
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