

# AN EARLY POST-MEDIEVAL REINFORCED PURSE LINING AND OTHER FINDS FROM FINSBURY AVENUE SQUARE, LONDON EC2

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## SUMMARY

*Excavations at Finsbury Avenue Square revealed a number of significant finds of 16th- and 17th-century date, including a reinforced purse lining, part of a head-dress frame, a bowling ball, two leather shoes and a shoe horn.*

## INTRODUCTION

This report supplements previously published data on selected accessioned finds from an excavation in the Moorfields area of the City of London (Richardson 2016; site code FNB02). It includes illustrations of key 16th- and 17th-century finds and a report on a particularly significant item, several pieces of textile and attached wire mesh thought to have come from a reinforced purse or pouch lining, found in an early 17th-century pit (Fig 2, <21>). This type of wire mesh lining is thought to have served as a protection against cut-purse thieves (Egan & Forsyth, 1997, 233; Richardson 2016, 288–9). The other illustrated finds are a head-dress frame (<99>), a head-dress pin (<98>) and a small bowling ball (<124>) recovered from a 16th-century fill of a drainage ditch (Fig 1), a shoe horn (<1>), two decorated shoes (<9>, <10>) from the fill of a pit, dated 1630–60 and a later 17th-century shoe (Fig 3). The relevant details of the site sequence

cited in the catalogue are: period 2, the establishment of a suburban garden (15th to 16th century); period 3, continued usage of the suburban garden (1600–30); period 4, orchard and the construction of the first buildings on site (1630–66) and period 5, post-Great Fire buildings (1666–1700) (Howell 2016, 263–73).

## FINDS CATALOGUE

Copper-alloy head-dress pin (Fig 1) <98>, [1218]; period 2, S (structure) 1 Complete; L (length) shank 39mm, D (diameter) head 4.4mm. Spherical head; shank slightly bent at tip (Richardson 2016, 288). Similar to an example from Norwich, dated 1600–1700 (Margeson 1993, 10–11, 30); also 16th-century examples from London (Egan & Forsyth 1997, 222–4, fig 15.7). Associated ceramics date to 1480–1550.

Copper-alloy head-dress frame (Fig 1) <99>, [1218]; period 2, S1 Near-complete. Est. H (height) approx. 167mm; D wire 1mm. Three lengths of copper wire, bent and twisted to form curved 'French hood' or gable-type head-dress frame (Richardson 2016, 288). Similar frames are illustrated in Egan and Forsyth (1997, 228, fig 15.11). Associated ceramics date to 1480–1550.

Wooden bowling bowl (Fig 1) <124>, [1221]; period 2, S1



Fig 1. Copper-alloy pin <98>, head-dress frame <99> and wooden bowling ball <124>, from fill of ditch S1 (Period 2)

Complete. H 36mm, D 68mm (top and bottom), weight 185g. Flat upper and lower surfaces, convex sides. Concentric incised double rings on both flat surfaces; triangle of three small round holes inside central ring on ?lower surface. Made of *lignum vitae*, a West Indian hardwood (Richardson 2016, 287). Associated ceramics date to 1480–1550.

Copper-alloy and textile lining (Fig 2) <21>, [1135]; period 3, OA (open area) 1  
Incomplete. Over 100 twisted wire rings or loops, each has a diameter of approximately 10mm. Fragments of textile backed and strengthened

with a layer of linked copper-alloy wire rings sewn to the textile with flax or fine hemp thread; additional (separate) fragments of leather with impression of fine silk twill on surface. See below for further details. Associated ceramics date to 1580–1650.

Horn shoe horn (Fig 3)

<1>, [219]; period 4, OA1

Near-complete, L 170mm, W (width) 49mm (max); D hole 5mm. Shoe horn with suspension hole at top end (Richardson 2016, 287). Associated ceramics date to 1630–60.

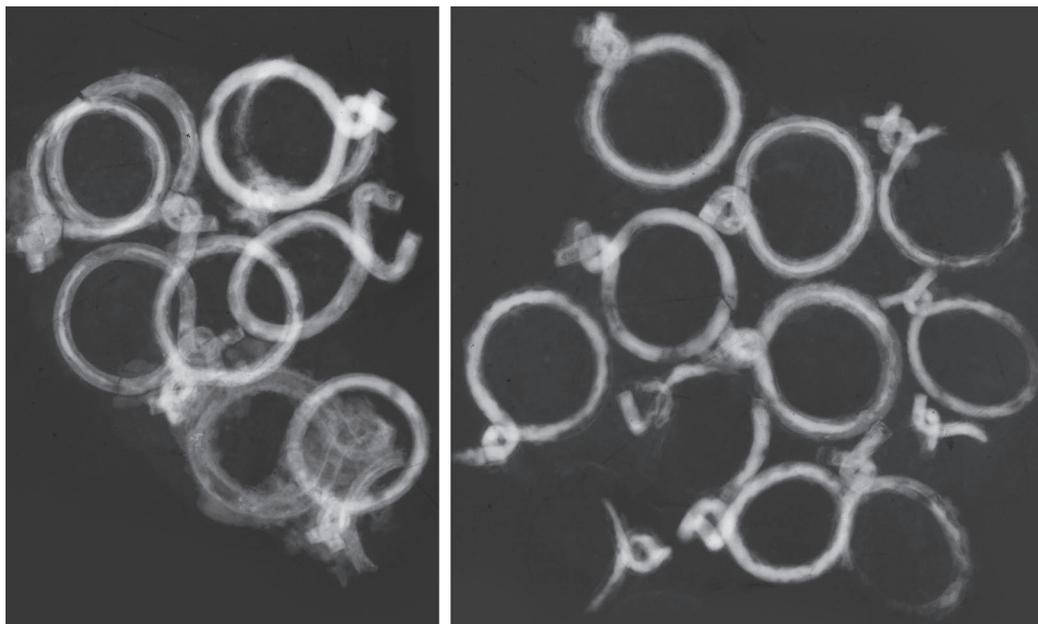


Fig 2. Copper-alloy rings stitched to textile backing <21> from pit [1146] (period 3). The x-rays (from other pieces from the same item) show the form and spacing of the rings

Leather shoe (Fig 3)  
 <9>, [219]; period 4, OA1  
 Complete; L (insole) 131mm, max W 42mm.  
 Child's latchet-fastening shoe, square toe, left foot (Richardson 2016, 286). Flat sole, insole, one-piece quarter, semi-circular heel stiffener, vamp. High vamp decorated with incised (?)

compass-drawn flower inside double border; one-piece quarters decorated with incised vertical lines; one latchet survives with lace hole at end. Red marks on vamp, quarter, and lasting margin may be dye, but there is not enough crystalline material for pigment identification. Associated ceramics date to 1630–60.

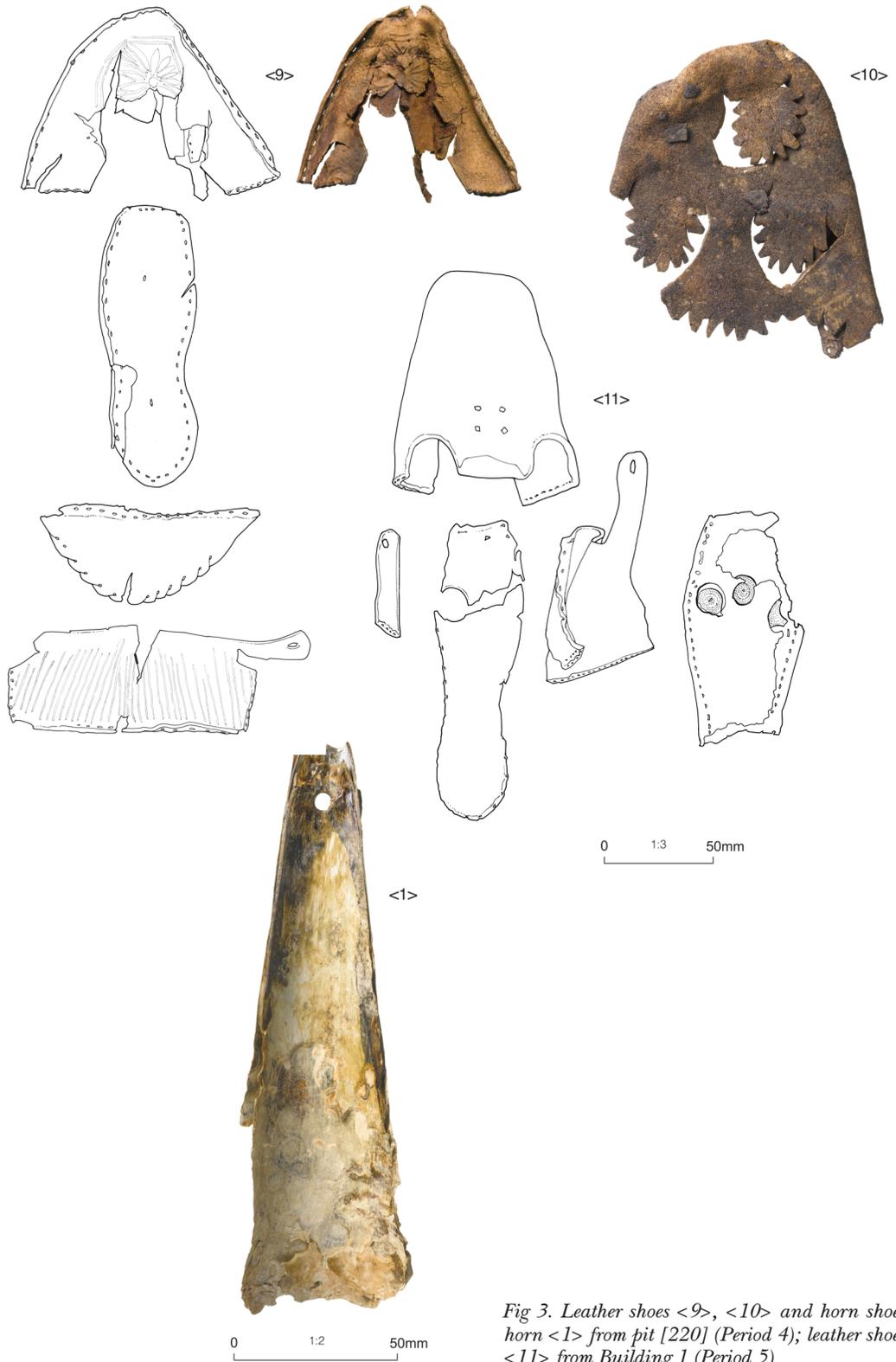


Fig 3. Leather shoes <9>, <10> and horn shoe horn <1> from pit [220] (Period 4); leather shoe <11> from Building 1 (Period 5)

Leather shoe (Fig 3)  
<10>, [219]; period 4, OAI  
Incomplete. Adult shoe; vamp and welt fragment only.

Vamp flesh surface outer with working from this side. Three three-quarter circular dagged flaps with decorative stab marks cut from vamp, one over toe, two over instep. Vamp edges also dagged. Associated ceramics date to 1630–60.

Leather shoe (Fig 3)  
<11>, [208]; period 5, B (building) 1  
Near-complete. L (insole) approx. 135mm, max W (width) 41mm. Youth/small adult, latchet-fastening shoe, right foot. Sole, insole, welt, quarters, vamp.

Narrow, square toe, nail holes for raised heel: remains of nails (a repair) between sole and insole tread area. Vamp cut away to form throat flap with four holes over instep for lace/buckle fastening. L side of two-piece quarters extending into latchet with lace hole at the end; latchet from the right-hand quarter has e/f stitch holes for attachment. Associated ceramics date to 1660–80.

#### LINING MADE FROM TEXTILE AND COPPER-ALLOY LOOPS (<21>)

Over one hundred twisted copper-alloy rings, many linked and stitched to pieces of textile, were found in a 17th-century pit (Fig 2). Each ring has a diameter of approximately 10mm. The textile-backed rings are almost certainly part of a mesh lining from a pouch or purse, inserted as a defence against cut-purse thieves. Wire rings of this type are often found singly; this rare survival shows how they were attached and used.

#### *Discussion and Description*

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The wire rings appear to have been stitched to a textile backing in such a way as to cover completely both the rings and the backing. The needlework is poorly preserved, so that the exact technique is unclear, but most if not all of the rings have threads radiating outwards from the centre, like the spokes of a wheel. Where the backing has decomposed, this cartwheel effect is also visible on the back of the ring. In some places on the front, the path of the thread can be traced moving from the centre of the ring to the edge and then dipping down into the base fabric,

before moving on towards the next ring. The needlework has been accomplished in a fine off-white S-spun yarn, and the backing, which is barely visible, is an undyed textile, possibly twill, with Z-spun yarn in warp and weft. A sample of the sewing yarn was examined by transmitted-light microscopy and proved to be a plant fibre, either flax or fine hemp. The fibre of the ground weave was too poorly preserved to identify, although it was coarser than that of needlework.

In association with the covered rings are some fragments of a fine black organic material in two layers, probably leather or alum-tawed skin. On the surface of this is the imprint of a fine twill, much finer than the backing for the needlework. Some traces of the original textile have been preserved in the imprint and the appearance of the fibre suggests silk. The largest area of the black organic material is 30 x 25mm, but there may have been more originally on the back of the needle-worked rings. The function of the leather/skin and fine silk twill in relation to the needlework is unclear, but a credible interpretation of the whole complex would be that this was a skin or leather pouch, strengthened internally with a layer of rings on a textile backing, with an additional silk twill cover or lining.

#### ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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