

# Collecting Bronze Age artefacts

by Vincent McCarthy



*A flat copper axe from Co. Antrim. Early Bronze Age. 10cm long. Value £100.*



*A bronze palstave from Sussex. Middle Bronze Age. 13cm long. Value £220.*

**Early: c2000BC-1400BC**  
**Middle: 1400BC-1000BC**  
**Late: 1000BC-600BC**

The picture order is significant but not definitive. The numbering is for reader reference only.



*A flanged axe head from Yorkshire. Early Bronze Age. 12.5cm long. Value £150.*



*A bronze palstave with side loop from Berkshire. Middle Bronze Age. 13cm long. Value £245.*



*A bronze axe of Arreton Down type with cable decoration on the flanges. Early Bronze Age. Found in Berkshire. 12.5cm long. Value £395.*



*Bronze rapier with broad rib. British. Middle Bronze Age. 26cm. long. Value £850.*

The people living in Britain towards the end of the Stone Age were predominantly farmers. They tilled the fields and grew crops including wheat and barley. They kept cattle, some sheep and goats. Families lived in houses grouped to form hamlets or villages. Where soils were rich such as Wessex, populations could number a hundred souls or more. There was a distinct social structure with rules, leaders and possibly priests. They had the vision, drive and skills to build stone henges such as Avebury, Stonehenge and Durrington Walls. Millions of man hours were needed to construct Silbury Hill!

The first metal artefacts arrived towards the end of the second millennium BC. They were brought into Britain by the so called 'Beaker People' migrating from the European mainland. This rather quaint name derives from the distinctive pottery beakers found in their burials.

The immigrants were a sturdy and warlike people. They brought with them some useful new skills along with their knowledge of copper working. They were experienced at rearing horses, possibly for food as there is no evidence of domestication. This was a useful boost for a fast growing population with an increasing need for food.

In the absence of any written history most of what we know comes from excavation of the burials and odd finds. Beaker type burials usually contain a sword, a spear head or two and possibly a polished stone battle axe or mace head. Decorative items of personal adornment such as bangles and dress pins are sometimes included. Archery was obviously important for we find archer's stone wrist guards and finely worked flint arrowheads of tang and barbed type, quite different from the leaf shaped examples used for hunting in Stone Age Britain. These flint arrowheads must have been effective as they continued to be used right into the metal-working age.

Some time after 2000 BC the local British workers learned the technique of copper working. This needed a certain degree of organisation in mining the ore, smelting out the impurities and casting in a furnace. Sites have not been definitely identified. This may indicate small scale operations, like a cottage industry.

Amongst the first home produced artefacts were flat copper axes cast in open stone moulds. The edges were finished and shaped using stone hammers

and sharpened using sand and quartz. They also made short bladed and tanged knives or daggers and tanged spear heads with side loops for fixing the shaft.

These flat axes are available to collectors. A decent example should cost between £100 and £200. Spear heads are harder to find and may well cost around £250 or so. Tang and barb flint arrowheads will be around £50 whilst an intact stone axe-hammer will be from £150 to £300 depending on type and size. These early copper axes were soft and would have been easily broken in use. Hardly improving on their stone predecessors as tools, nevertheless their value as status symbols must have been considerable.

In time the foundry workers discovered true bronze by adding 10% tin to the mix. This heralded the next phase of the Bronze Age around 1500 BC. This new metal was easy to cast and was harder and more durable in use than the pure copper of the earlier phase.

The foundry workers began to turn out a wider range of tools and weapons of more elaborate form cast in clay and stone moulds of two or more pieces. A new type of axe known as a palstave became common. This had a deep stop ridge and longer tang to aid in hafting to the shaft. The palstave soon replaced the older flat or flanged type of tool over most of the country. Judging by the numbers which turn up in hoards today, the manufacture of palstaves reached almost mass production levels.

We also find socketed spear heads, again with side loops to aid in fixing as well as slender rapiers with tangs drilled with holes for fixing a wood handle with nails or pins. These weapons may have been used for thrusting attacks although the handle may have become detached in use. Or their purpose could have been decorative. There are also wood working tools such as tanged chisels with broad or narrow blades as well as punches and awls for leather working.

Britain was a busy place trading all over western Europe. The population was growing quickly. Society was becoming sharply divided into a warrior leadership and peasant farmers. This is shown by the very rich grave goods found in excavations. Gold from Ireland was popular and used to make highly decorative and artistic armlets, cups and spectacular necklets of lunate form. These rarely come on the market these days!

Around 1300 BC there was a dramatic change in the climate. The weather became wetter. People moved away from the low lying settlements to higher ground. Forest clearance had an adverse effect on hunting leading to even more domestication of animals.

Stonehenge was finished to its present form around 1250 BC. Stone monuments appear to have been abandoned soon afterwards, possibly due to cultural or religious changes or even the change in the weather.

Palstave axes are found in a variety of regional styles influenced by imports from present day France or Germany. Collectors can find pleasant examples from around £150 to £225. Looped spearheads are around the same price but smaller tools such as chisels and knife blades should be available for £100 or so. Complete and intact rapiers are scarce and expensive, around £1500. A damaged or broken and repaired weapon is still worth collecting and will cost much less.

From around 1000 BC, we find a country busily trading in bronze goods very widely in some cases with Mediterranean countries. We know this from the many objects which are found here and by the way these 'foreign' items influenced our own metal workers. New types of tools and weapons arrived including swords with integral handles. The type known as the 'carps tongue' because of its shape is found widely distributed over Europe. This type of sword could be used for cutting and slashing movements being more robust than earlier types. A type of socketed spearhead of leaf shape appears with holes drilled into the ferrule for fixing with pins to the shaft. The newest axes were socketed, easily made in moulds and more easily hafted.

The composition of the bronze underwent a change around this time. Perhaps supplies of tin were becoming scarce after a thousand years of use. Lead was increasingly used. The lead-bronze mixture was easy to use and foundry workers were able to produce ever larger and more decorative pieces. Analysis shows that later Bronze Age swords contain around 4 or 5% lead. Socketed axe heads may contain up to 15%. Almost unusable as tools except for the lightest work, they may have been for display or barter.

The range of tools from this late period is extremely varied and includes socketed axes, chisels, socketed gouges, hammers, knives, awls, punches, razors and many more. These are sometimes found in large hoards, including what are termed 'founders hoards', collections of broken weapons and tools and scrap metal. These were buried by the travelling metal worker to be retrieved at a later date. Most of these weapons and tools continued to be used up to 600 BC or later into the so called Iron Age.

Collectors should be able to find a wealth of fascinating material all, apart from complete swords, relatively inexpensive. A good socketed axe head will cost between £150 and £200. Spear heads a little less. Chisels and gouges should be around £95. Knife blades, punches and awls range from £35 to £75. Socketed hammers and sickles are rare and will cost over £200. The value of an object depends on a number of factors. Style, condition and patination of the metal are as important as scarcity. I suggest that you buy whatever takes your fancy and enjoy owning and handling these ancient artefacts which are a real and very tangible link to our ancestors who completed Stonehenge.

**In our next edition Vincent McCarthy will be covering the Iron Age and Celtic Britain.**



*A basal looped spear head from Newbury. Middle Bronze Age. 17cm long. Value £225.*



*Bronze tanged dagger blade from Ireland. 10cm long. Bronze razor from East Anglia. 5cm long. Both late Bronze Age. Approx £75 each.*



*Socketed spear head with peg holes from Ireland. Late Bronze Age. Value £195.*



*Socketed bronze axe, possibly a currency type from Southern England. Late Bronze Age. 10cm long. Value £195.*



*Socketed gouge from Suffolk. Late Bronze Age. 7.5cm long. Value £95.*



*Leaf shaped tanged sword from Ireland. Late Bronze Age. 57cm long. Value £1500.*



*Socketed axe from Suffolk. Late Bronze Age. 8.5cm long. Value £125.*



*Socketed spear head from Suffolk. Late Bronze Age. 13cm long. Value £145.*



*A bronze knife with tanged handle of European type. A scarce item. 15cm long. Value £145.*