

Viking man lost weighty gold ring in Essex 1,000 years ago, say archaeologists

Curator Carolyn Wingfield on the almost pure gold ring lost by a Viking man in Essex

"The size and weight of the ring suggest that it was most likely worn by a man. It weighs over 32 grams and we know from X-ray fluorescence analysis at the British Museum that the metal is over 95% gold, the rest being silver and copper.

That's fairly common for gold of this date, to be a good standard. Vikings were very concerned with the purity of the metal. On silver coins you sometimes find little nicks made with a knife blade where they were testing that they'd got decent quality silver.



Fig 1: This weighty gold ring, dating from between the 10th and 12th centuries, was lost by a Viking in the Essex town of Thaxted© Saffron Walden Museum



Fig 2: A metal detectorist reported the ring after finding it in 2013© Saffron Walden Museum

It's got a little bit of damage - probably hit by a plough or something in the thousand years that it's been buried - but it's our policy to preserve the ring as found and not try to restore it to 'as new' condition.

The ring was made by twisting two strands of gold wire and then twisting these with two tapering gold rods to form a hoop. The thin ends of the rods and wires were joined at the back of the hoop by beating them together into a flat, diamond-shaped plate. The plate is decorated with tiny punched circles.

This is a fairly widely-known style that goes throughout the Viking period. But the particular style we've got here, where they've hammered the rods into the plate at the back, is thought to be a feature of things made in Scandinavia. That's the opinion of the British Museum report for the coroner because there are rings with a similar sort of plate on the back of the hoop found in Viking graves in Scandinavia.

Otherwise, because they're such portable objects, it's often a bit difficult to know where these things might have been made because they might have travelled and changed hands from the smiths to the final owner. But it looks like we've got a Viking ring actually made in Scandinavia which has somehow ended up in Thaxted.



Fig 3: Other finds in north-west Essex include a small silver Viking ingot, from Manuden, and a rare coin from Little Chesterford© Saffron Walden Museum



Fig 4: To the Vikings, such jewellery acted as portable currency and a sign of status. The ring was probably made by a Viking goldsmith in Denmark, Norway or southern Sweden© Saffron Walden Museum

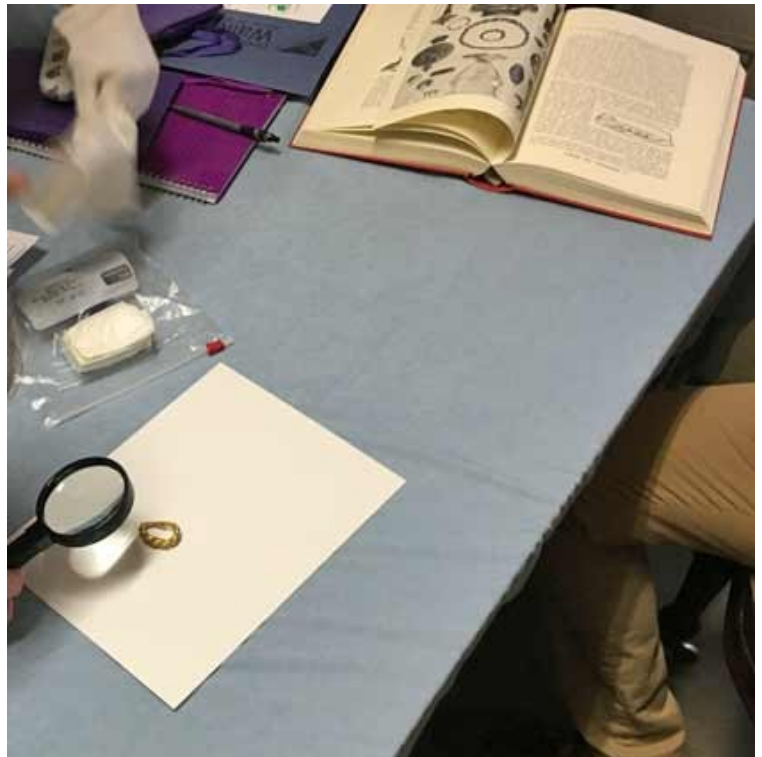
We've now got a scatter of Viking-style finds from right across this part of north-west Essex. I've been searching a bit online and it turns out the British Museum, in its collections, has another Viking ring from Thaxted which they acquired as part of the Franks Bequest in the 19th century. That is just a plain gold ring bent in a loop: effectively a portable bullion as well as a ring.

Then they've also got another ring of twisted wire and rods, very similar in style to ours – that one came from West Bergholt, near Colchester, over the other side of Essex.

That in itself is quite interesting. Essex would have apparently been just within the Dane law, maybe not as well settled and controlled as the Viking kingdom of East Anglia based in Norfolk and Suffolk. But we are now seeing this scatter of finds through north Essex, along the Cambridgeshire Suffolk border.

Although we haven't got the same density of finds and Viking-type place names that you find further north, there is this witness to Viking presence. Then, of course, we've got the later Viking raids under [Sweyn](#) and [Cnut](#) in the reign of [Ethelred the Unready](#). Our ring could have been dropped at any time between those two lots of Viking raids. We can't date it accurately.

We want people to spot the other Viking finds in the archaeology gallery. We've got some in the same treasure case and in another one round the corner. A well-known [Viking pendant](#) was excavated locally in the 19th century.



*Fig 5: The ACE/V&A Purchase Grant Fund helped the Saffron Walden Museum Society in the purchase
© Saffron Walden Museum*



Fig 6: (Left to right) Tony Watson, the Museum Society Chairman, curator Carolyn Wingfield and Ken Baker, the Custodian of Thaxted Guild Hall© Saffron Walden Museum

To add to that we've got a number of examples of Viking coins from the Ashton area, just north along the Cambridgeshire border. Now we've got a silver ingot from west of the district, near the Hertfordshire border, a gold ring from east, in Thaxted, and a silver formed hammer pendant from the south of the district, The Rodings.

All these metal detectorist finds are gradually filling out a picture of where there's been a bit of Viking activity, or at least where Viking objects have ended up. You're never quite sure what's going to come up next.

Obviously we're still only dealing with a very small number of finds compared to, say, the Saxon and Viking gallery in Norwich Castle, where you've got a fantastic array of stuff from right across the county. But we have a lot of agricultural lands in north-west Essex which are obviously open to detectorists.

I'm interested in seeing what turns up next from this period because there's very little in the historical sources and what there is mostly covers the big military campaigns. This is giving us a different view of life and there may have been more casual commerce and even a bit of settlement, or at least travelling or foraging across the district by groups of Vikings.

You can't extrapolate too much from what is still a handful of random finds but it's giving us a nice picture. With the rings and little ingots we've now got examples of all the little types of bullion that they wore and used for trading."

Scandinavians in the south

- **Viking raids in the ninth century led to military campaigns, settlements and Vikings taking control of most of the Anglo-Saxon kingdoms.**
- **Only Wessex held out, under the leadership of Alfred the Great, who made a treaty with Guthrum the Viking leader. Alfred's successors gradually re-asserted Saxon control across the rest of England.**
- **Essex was just within the Danelaw in about AD 900. But historical sources from that time contain only occasional references to events in Essex.**
- **From the late tenth century, England was subjected to a new wave of Viking attacks, this time a military campaign mounted by Sweyn Forkbeard, king of Denmark, and his son Cnut ('Canute'), who succeeded to the throne of England in 1016.**

The ring will be on display as object of the month at the museum from Saturday (January 9 2016). Open 10am-4.30pm (closed Monday, 2pm-4.30pm Sunday and Bank Holidays); March-October open until 5pm (closed Monday).