

## **Pilgrims' Ampullae (ampules)**

(Nathalie Hetherington, June 2022)

For those of you who don't know... We have our very own detectorist in the village, Hugh Vincent, who has discovered many wonderful items over the years, including a number of pilgrims' ampullae. Before you read on about Hugh's finds, do read the information below which is taken from a website about medieval London contributed by Nick DeBellis:

*During the twelfth through to the fourteenth centuries, pilgrims were likely to purchase an ampulla, a type of container filled with holy water or oil; these could be purchased outside the shrines of a revered saint. In doing so, they hoped that some degree of the saint's sanctity would be imparted to them. In fact, it was thought that the figurative gap between humans and the divine could be closed by placing the ampulla against the shrine in order to initiate the transmission of saintly powers. The lure of the ampulla as an object capable of bestowing holy miracles gave it the same appeal as a relic. Thus, when pilgrims were not wearing their ampulla around their necks, they were using the contents within them to try to administer cures.*

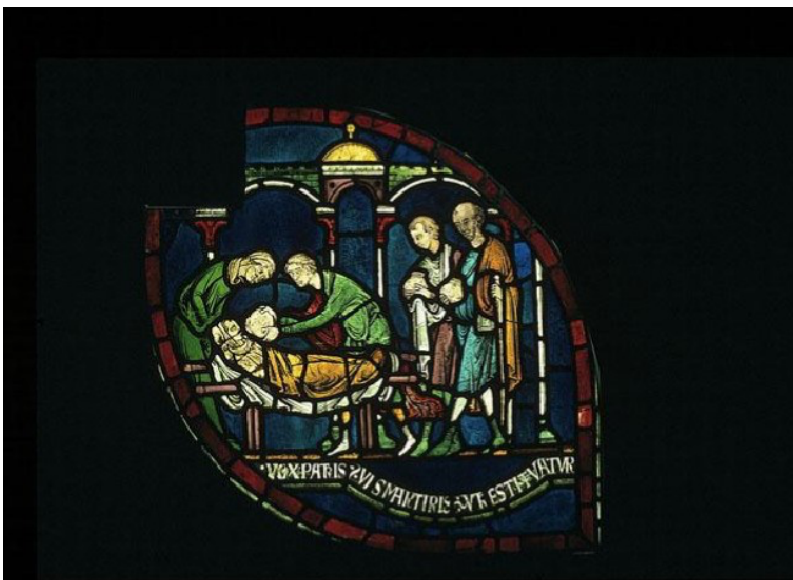
*Ampullae, the plural form of ampulla in Latin, are often found in England and Wales. The range of designs they feature and the multitude of locations at which they have been discovered suggest that there were several places where they were manufactured. They were typically made from metals like lead and lead-tin alloy, since these materials were pliable and not of a particularly high quality. In other words, the 'low melting point' at which these metals broke down rendered them easy to work with, and therefore ideal for items like the ampulla being manufactured in large quantities. These melted metals would have been cast in two different moulds, usually made of limestone or some other sedimentary rock. In terms of their durability, the moulds have rarely been found intact. Ampullae, while often found intact, are usually in poor condition.*

*The condition in which ampullae are often found might suggest something about how they were used. While age and construction techniques certainly played a role, many ampullae appear to have been purposely damaged, perhaps because they were ritually destroyed as a way of blessing the farmland or the souls of the dead, as they have often been discovered in fields and graves. Ampullae are also sometimes found in riverbanks; it is thought that they may have been*

*deliberately cast away in order to express the end of their owners' 'vow of pilgrimage'.*

*The demand for souvenirs by less wealthy visitors to cathedrals led to the creation of the ampulla, as it was the first type of pilgrim sign to be sold in England; its cheap construction made it affordable, and its elaborate detail and supposed divine properties made it intensely attractive. As such, the ampulla grew in popularity particularly between the late twelfth and early thirteenth centuries, in large part because of its accessibility. Pilgrims were not made to feel as though they needed to be rich to gain access to this object of holy significance. Indeed, access to medieval shrines was not limited in any measurable way to people of lower social classes. The pilgrims' activities at the shrine were not regulated or forced upon them by any governmental body; they were customary behaviours practised by all believers regardless of whether a person was royal or a mere peasant. The essence of a person's belief in the saint and the power of his or her relics crossed social boundaries.*

*Despite the fact that the Bible did not mandate visits to holy sites, Christian pilgrimage became increasingly prevalent in the Middle Ages. In fact, hundreds of thousands of Christian pilgrims flocked to cathedrals of their choice in the hope that placing their ampulla against a shrine would help them in some way. As such, ampullae were more than simple souvenirs. A person in possession of one signified an individual who had undergone a transformative life-changing journey. Indeed, ampullae may have actually served as symbols of status. In fact, there is some evidence to suggest that people bearing signs of pilgrimage in the late medieval period were frequently given gifts for having completed their journey.*



*This stained-glass window depicts the miracle of William Fitz-Eisulf, a boy who was healed by the water of St. Thomas of Canterbury (mid-11<sup>th</sup> century). The ampulla is being used to administer*

*the cure. The centrality of the ampulla is perhaps why the object appears to be so much larger than it actually was; the creator may have wanted to emphasise the fact that it was truly an object larger than life in terms of its capacity to heal those in need of healing.*

If you would like to explore this topic further, follow these links:

<https://intriguing-history.com/english-medieval-pilgrimage>

<https://finds.org.uk/database/artefacts/record/id/862684>

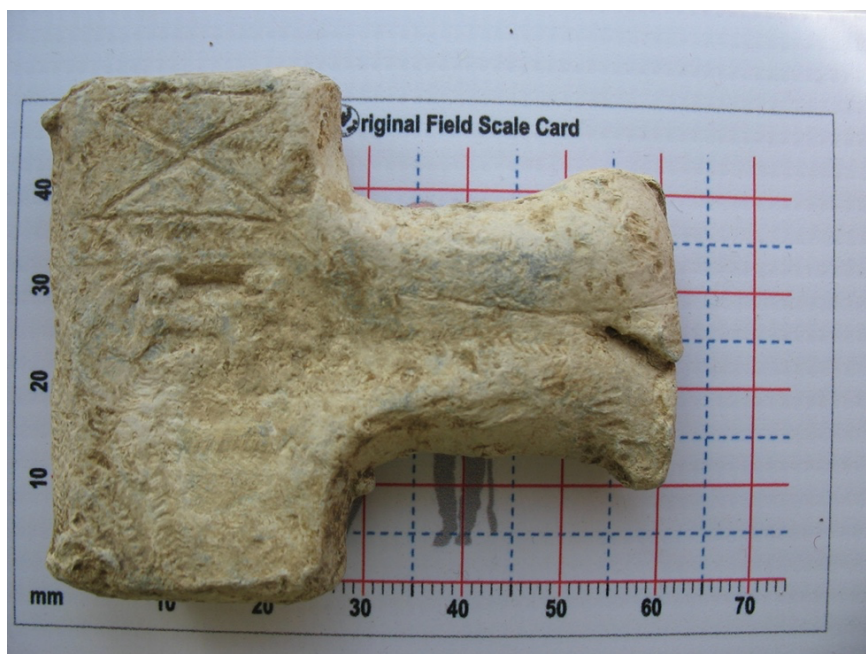
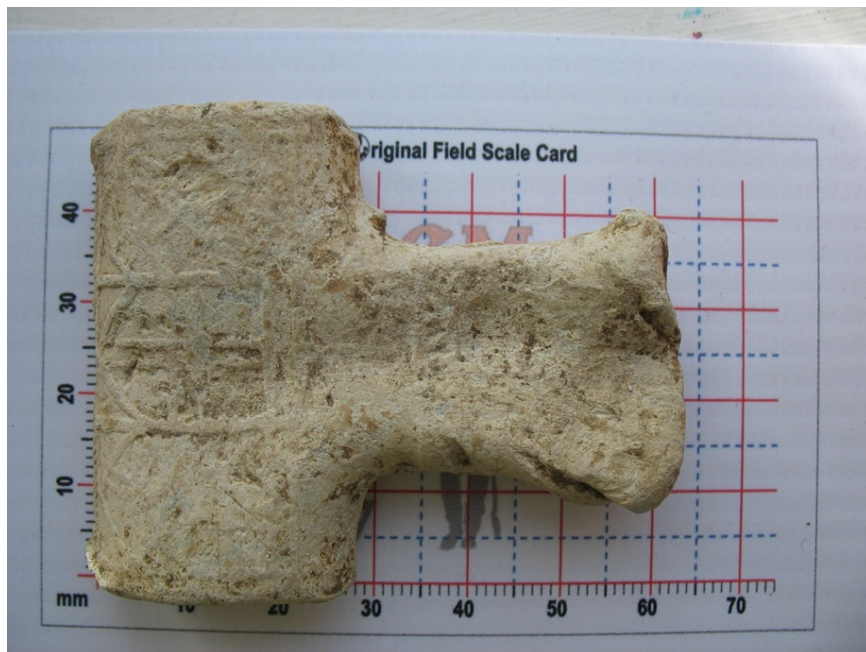
[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pilgrim\\_badge](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pilgrim_badge)

**Go to page 4 to learn about Hugh's finds.**

### **Hugh's Finds:**

The ampullae that Hugh has found are made of lead and measure between 30 and 50mm on their short side and between 50 and 60mm on their long side. All of his ampullae have been found to the north of the village in just two fields, possibly indicating the owner of the field made regular pilgrimages.

On this one there is a good level of decoration on it but it is difficult to be certain of its meaning - possibly a Thomas Becket attribution:





This one is in relatively poor condition and therefore it is not possible to link it to a particular shrine:



This one is probably associated with Walsingham, Norfolk (<https://www.walsinghamanglican.org.uk/>); note the *W* on one side.

There is more information on this find here: <https://finds.org.uk/database/artefacts/record/id/75066>

