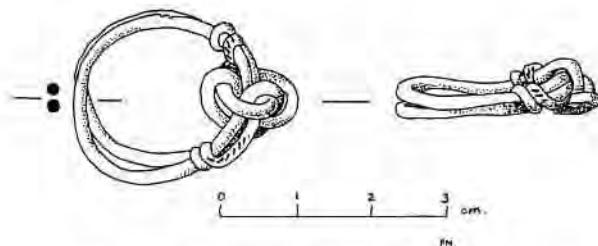


A SAXON RING FROM WEDMORE

A copper alloy wire finger-ring, identified by the British Museum as being of 6th-7th-century date, was found in a flowerbed in the front garden of Brooklands, Cheddar Road, Wedmore (ST 43714830) in April 1988.

Brooklands is one of a pair of cottages built between 1841 and 1886, possibly in the 1870s; they adjoin and are associated with Red Hill Farm, built between 1791 and 1820. No evidence has been found of any building or settlement on this site earlier than 1791. It is not one of the 'old austere' manorial tenements of medieval Wedmore. No other finds were made in association with the ring.

The area known as Red Hill lies on the northern shoulder of the mouth of the shallow Lerburne valley, north of the village of Wedmore which is centred around the Lerburne stream. The locality takes its name from the distinctive colour of the soil, and in 1595 was known as 'Redlinche'. The reference to the red soil, the term 'lynch' and the field patterns all suggest it was ploughland, part of the arable field-system just outside the village. This reinforces the lack of evidence for any occupation before the late 1700s. The area became pasture and orchards in the



Copper alloy wire finger ring from Wedmore. Scale 1 : 1

16–1700s. Field O.S. no. 919, east of the site, was ploughed in 1984; subsequent field-walking produced no finds at all.

The main settlements of Wedmore, both Roman and later, appear to have been around the Lerburne. Roman finds have been made at West End, near the Old Vicarage opposite the church, and at Combe Batch. Then, in the first written reference to Wedmore, c. 680 × 685 A.D., King Centwine of the West Saxons granted a large estate at Wedmore and a small area at Clewer to Wilfrid, Bishop of York, the distinguished Saxon churchman and missionary. Some time between then and 709 A.D., Bishop Wilfrid gave these Wedmore and Clewer estates to the Abbot of Glastonbury.¹ Wedmore therefore existed as an important and sizeable royal estate in the late 600s. The charter texts have not survived, so there are no details of the estate, or the village, if any then existed. By the late 800s, Wedmore was back in the hands of the Kings of Wessex; and in 878 it was the place where King Alfred made his peace settlement with the Danes.

The *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* and Asser's *Life of Alfred* refer to the *villa regia*, the royal mansion or estate in Wedmore where Alfred entertained King Guthrum and his entourage for twelve days.² It is assumed that there must have been a church or chapel, where the important ceremony of chrism-loosing which marked the baptism of King Guthrum, as part of the agreement, could have been carried out with due solemnity. It is thought that the royal house and church or chapel where all this took place was most probably on the site of the present Manor House and church, which adjoin each other on a self-contained shelf of land above the Lerburne. Any village settlement would probably have clustered around the church and manor house, at the upper end of Church Street. However, no physical evidence of 9th-century date has ever been found in Wedmore itself, in contrast to the discovery, in 1960, of the royal palace of the same period at Cheddar, then part of the same royal estate.³

In Wedmore, at the east end of the churchyard, on the edge of the postulated Saxon church/manor precinct, a hoard of 200 coins was buried in a pot, in or shortly after the 1040s. This hoard, found in 1853, has hitherto been the sole item of Saxon archaeological evidence recorded from Wedmore; and it belongs to the very end of the Saxon period, long after the time of King Alfred. By Domesday Book in 1086, Wedmore was still part of the royal estates, but held by the Bishop of Wells. The Bishop and Dean of Wells subsequently became lords of the manor.

The absence of any archaeological evidence in Wedmore between the Roman period and the 1040s has always been a puzzle and frustration to historians, given Wedmore's well-documented moment of glory under King Alfred in 878. The discovery of this ring fits into this gap in our knowledge.

The Wedmore ring appears to be a stray find, in a 19th-century farm cottage flowerbed, lacking any context or associated finds. It seems highly unlikely that the ring could be associated with a Saxon burial. The Saxons were more or less

Christianised by the time they penetrated this area, and all religious activity including burial was probably already centred around the present church. The ring could have come to Brooklands in farm rubbish, garden compost or soil dumped from anywhere in the locality, at any time from the 1800s onwards. It could have been dropped by a Saxon in the ploughed field of Redlinche. It could, even more easily, have been lost by a Saxon passer-by using the road which runs past the present cottage. The present Cheddar Road is an early 19th-century turnpike, but it follows a minor ancient field route out of Wedmore to the northern hamlets and fields. Soil cast up from the ancient unmade track could easily be spread as far as Brooklands front flowerbed.

The finger-ring is made of one length of copper alloy wire, formed into a double ring with a raised bezel of wire twisted into a decorative interlaced knot pattern. The ends finish in twists around the ring on either side. Very slight hatching decorates the upper parts of the twisted ends; otherwise the wire is undecorated. The bezel has been slightly wrenched out of alignment, and a small double nick on one side of the ring was perhaps caused by contact with something sharp while it was in the ground. It is otherwise undamaged. The external measurement of the ring from the bezel to the opposite side of the ring is 29.5mm; its external diameter, measured at right angles to the above, is 22mm. The wire itself is approximately 2mm diameter; and it is estimated that the length of wire used to make the ring and its knot is about 336 mm.

The British Museum dated this ring to the 6th–7th centuries, on the basis of its similarity to a ring found in the Anglo-Saxon cemetery at Droxford, Hampshire.⁴ The Droxford ring is also copper alloy wire, with one flattened circlet forming the ring and a similar style of twisted wire decoration. The author of the excavation report suggests a late 5th–6th century date for the grave goods of which this ring was part, even earlier than the British Museum's dating.⁵ The knot pattern of the Wedmore ring is considerably more elaborate than the Droxford example.

This dating is based on the evidence of the pagan Anglo-Saxons in Hampshire, where they arrived early. The Saxons did not, however, reach Somerset until considerably later, although there might well have been some interchange of goods such as personal jewellery between Romano-British and Saxon at an earlier date, as evinced by the mixture of grave goods found in the cemetery at Camerton. The pair of silver wire ear-rings, each strung with a blue glass bead, found in grave 94B at Camerton resemble the Wedmore finger-ring in the way that the wire ends are finished off by twisting closely around the ring.⁶ A date in the late 600s, towards the end of the date-range suggested by the British Museum, would fit neatly into the historical context, described above, of Wedmore as a newly acquired piece of frontier territory, given c. 680 × 685 by King Centwine of the West Saxons to Wilfrid, Bishop of York, and subsequently passed on by him to Glastonbury Abbey.

Other examples suggest the possibility of a later date. The Saxon palace site at Cheddar unfortunately produced no datable bronze rings, and none resembling the Wedmore example. It is obviously not in the same category as the elaborate gold rings given as gifts by Alfred (praised by Bishop Wulfseige of Sherborne as his exemplar and his 'ring-giver')⁷ and the later Saxon kings; but its twisted pattern is not unlike that of an altogether more elaborate gold wire finger-ring from Dorchester which is dated to the 8th–9th centuries A.D.⁸ Nearer Wedmore, a finger-ring formed of gold wires interlaced into figure-of-eight patterns, again in much the same style as the simpler bronze Wedmore ring, was found in Bath in 1893 during building works on the site of the Guildhall near the Abbey, and is also dated to the late Saxon period.⁹ Such comparisons might carry the Wedmore Saxon

ring into, and beyond, the period of King Alfred's association with Wedmore in the late 800s.

The ring therefore appears to be an isolated find, that cannot be too precisely dated; but it is one which is important to Wedmore history, filling a major gap in the sequence of archaeological evidence from the village. It acts as an encouragement that other physical evidence of Wedmore and its inhabitants at the time of the Saxons in general and of King Alfred in particular may yet be discovered.

H. HUDSON, F. NEALE

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Wedmore references are derived from S.H.A. Hervey, *Wedmore Chronicles* (1880s-1890s) and the researches of H. Hudson, F. Neale. Other references are as follows:

1. P. Sawyer, *Anglo-Saxon Charters* (1968), pp. 456-7 (nos. 1667, 1668, 1674, 1675); H.P.R. Finberg, *The Early Charters of Wessex* (1964), pp. 110-111 (nos. 362, 363, 366).
2. S. Keynes & M. Lapidge, eds., *Alfred the Great* (1983), p. 85.
3. P.A. Rahtz, *The Saxon & Medieval Palaces at Cheddar*, B.A.R. 65 (1979).
4. John Cherry, Deputy Keeper, & Mrs. Webster, British Museum: correspondence, citing F.R. Aldsworth, as (5) below.
5. F.R. Aldsworth, 'The Droxford Anglo-Saxon Cemetery, Soberton, Hampshire', *Proc. Hampshire Field Club & Arch. Soc.* vol. 35 for 1978 (1979), pp. 137, 147 (fig. 35.21).
6. SANHS vol. 79 for 1933 (1934) ii, pp. 39-63; Very Revd Prior Ethelbert Horne, 'Anglo-Saxon Cemetery at Camerton, Somerset, Pt. II'; especially p. 60; Grave 94B. The ear-rings are now at Somerset County Museum, accession number A.851.
7. S. Keynes & M. Lapidge, *op. cit.* p. 188.
8. D.A. Hinton, *Alfred's Kingdom* (1977), p. 27.
9. Roman Baths Museum ref. BATRM 1983.39; corresp. with Stephen Bird, Bath Museums Curator. *V.C.H. Somerset* vol. i (1906), p. 380; and plate 2 no. 2 (facing p. 378).