

## The Arrington Bell

During recent fieldwalking on National Trust land near Ermine Street at Arrington, the star find was a very well preserved brass crotal bell, shown in Figure 1. Apart from the inevitable bits of plough and agricultural metalwork, it is not common to spot such metal items because it is often hard to distinguish the greenish patina against the colours of most soils.



*Figure 1. The top of the Arrington crotal bell (photo courtesy of Stephen Reed)*

The bell has a diameter of 30mm, is 36mm in overall height and weighs 47 grams.

Based on manufacturing and stylistic grounds, the bell can be dated to some time in the 16<sup>th</sup>/17<sup>th</sup> century period. These bells are said to be quite common finds but, in fact, there are only two listed on the Portable Antiquities Scheme database for Cambridgeshire. The UK Metal Detectorist website database lists a total of ten for the same region. Either way, reported examples are relatively

rare and so our find, especially because of its fine condition, makes an important addition to the database.

So what can we say about this item?

The word Crotal comes from the Latin word “*crotalum*”, meaning a bell or rattle, which is itself from the Greek “*krotalon*” said to mean a rattle, castanet or little bell. Crotal bells were circular bells often used on animal harnesses. They were made in a range of sizes, from about 2cm up to 10cm, to fit sheep, cattle and (mostly) horses. The earliest crude examples made from hammered metal sheet date to the 13<sup>th</sup> century but by the early 16<sup>th</sup> century one-piece cast bells were common. Approximately 5 foundries were believed to have operated in the late 13<sup>th</sup> century, rising to a maximum of nearly 60 by 1700 and then declining to just 2 in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century.

Our find is a copper alloy bell cast in a single operation and with its iron pellet in situ – after some gentle cleaning it still rings. The integrally cast suspension loop, shown in Figure 1, is of rectangular shape with chamfered external corners and with a circular drilled hole. This feature helps date it to the 16<sup>th</sup> /mid 17<sup>th</sup> century (later bells used cast lugs with a rectangular hole which eliminated the need for drilling). There are two circular holes (one slightly damaged) in the top half of the bell chamber – they do not produce the sound but are part of the casting technique. The sound-producing bow is in the lower half and consists of two circular holes joined by a slit, as seen in Figure 2.



*Figure 2. The lower half of the bell (photo courtesy of Stephen Reed)*

Both halves of the bell chamber are decorated with a sunburst petal design, seen best in Figure 1. This further helps date the bell, as later 18<sup>th</sup>/19<sup>th</sup> century designs are often decorated only on the lower half. A bell founder's hammer symbol in a shield-shaped cartouche occurs on one side of the sound slot, shown clearly in Figure 2.

The lower petals contain an obscure motif, which may be a stylised number "8" or a pair of joined diamond shapes, best seen in Figure 2. No maker's mark or initials can be seen (unless the double diamond/8 symbol is such a mark, but it is not listed in any reference list anywhere) so it is not possible to determine where it was made. There is a modest circumferential rib, seen in Figure 1, between the two halves that is a result of the casting technique.

An excellent article on the types of crotal bells and how they were cast can be found on the UK Detectorist website at [www.ukdfd.co.uk/pages/crotal-bells.html](http://www.ukdfd.co.uk/pages/crotal-bells.html)