

DATASHEET 50

Copper-alloy Purse Components: A new classification using finds from England and Wales recorded by the Portable Antiquities Scheme

by

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Introduction

In 1940 John Ward Perkins published a classification of 15th- and 16th-century purse bars and frames largely using material from London and drawing also on images of purses shown on monumental brasses and other contemporary sources. Bars were classified into Types A, B and C. Ward Perkins' Types A3-A6 are of iron; iron purse components are rarely found (but see two iron examples of Class A from Sutton Park, Surrey (Bird 2011, pl.8, nos.70a-b)) and are not considered further in this Datasheet which is concerned wholly with copper-alloy purse components.

Over 2000 purse components were recorded by the Portable Antiquities Scheme (PAS) by 2017 and this has allowed access to a far greater dataset than was available to Ward Perkins; as a consequence it has been found necessary to update his classification. This larger dataset has allowed the relative importance of the different types to be seen in greater clarity. It has also allowed the distinguishing of a small number of previously unrecognised Classes (Classes D, E, G and L in this new classification). Purses not recorded by the PAS have, with a few excavated exceptions, not been considered here.

All of the examples quoted here and recorded by the PAS can be seen on the PAS website (finds.org.uk/database).

The purses

To distinguish the classification proposed here from Ward Perkins' classification the term **Class** has now been used and supersedes Ward Perkins' **Type**.

Of the two main Types of purse distinguished by Ward Perkins those of his Type A (long bars) are the more commonly found, accounting for approximately half of the recorded purses considered here. Ward Perkins' Type A bars remain unchanged in this new classification. Bars of his Type B no longer appear to form such a discrete group and have been expanded to take the new material into account. Ward Perkins' Type C (now Classes K and L) had the frame cast integrally with the rotating loop. Strictly speaking Class K and L are probably not purses and may not have been intended primarily for holding coins. A small number of these unusual items have been recorded by PAS. Other PAS records comprise unclassified loops, terminal knops (mainly Class B), and a few simple bars that are

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difficult to classify. A few early PAS records have no accompanying photograph and are insufficiently detailed to allow their classification.

The metal components of a purse usually comprise:

1. A bar with two arms and a central block pierced vertically to take a swivelling loop.
2. A swivelling loop for attachment to a belt (or hung from a separate belt fitting, considered below).
3. One or a pair of roughly penannular or semi-circular frames that pivot on the narrowed ends of the arms of the bar.
4. Three roves which secure the loop and frames to the bar. Bars of Classes K and L clearly had no attached frames.

Class A, Long Bars with attached frames

Class A1 (Figs 1-3)

This is the most commonly found type of purse bar and frame and is easily recognised. Bars of Class A1 have a circular cross-section and the arms emerge from a pair of devolved gripping animal heads that abut the central block. Two flat tabs with round holes (2 or 3 holes each side) project from the lower side of the arms and from these the bag was hung.

Frames of Class A are always L-shaped in cross-section and also have a series of small holes for the suspension of the outer part of the purse bag. Wire loops for the suspension of the purse survive in a number of both bars and frames (e.g. Fig. 1). Decoration on both bar arms and frames invariably comprises a double-strand lattice pattern inlaid with niello. The resulting diamond-shaped fields within the lattice are often each filled with a short band of engraved zigzag work. Only a few examples of triple-strand lattice have been recorded and a similar number of single-strand. In a few examples this simple form of decoration also extends to the sides of the suspension loop. Exceptions to this pattern of decoration are rare; notable examples include HAMP-EF48E6; SF8332; ESS-5CC316;

NMS-88EC86 and WAW-20B368, although these still retain some form of lattice.



Fig. 1: Class A1 bar with central rectangular block, two animal heads, two roves to secure the pivoting frame, and double-strand lattice decoration inlaid with niello. BERK-87D436



Fig. 2: Class A1 bar with rounded central block and double-strand lattice decoration inlaid with niello. One wire attachment for the purse bag survives. SWYOR-A810F5

Decoration of the central block is less standardised, although some form of lattice, often in the form of an X or W is commonly seen (e.g. SUSS-13DF60).

Other combinations include **star//X** (YORYM-E705F4); **HA//rose** (GLO-1C2B48); **W//crosshatch** (SUSS-84C764); **radiating lines** (e.g. WMAS-8B8C21); **zigzags//crosshatch** (SF-3FA776); **star//star** (SF2451); **T//W** (NLM6150); **R** (KENT3340); **ten-petalled flower//A** (WILT-297C63); **radiating lines with dots** (NMS-21C695); **M//X** (KENT-2E6404). PUBLIC-A618E4 bears an elaborate design.



Fig. 3: Frame fragment from a purse of Class A1 showing double-strand lattice and holes for suspension of the purse bag. SUR-5CD912

Class A2 (Figs 4-6)

This group is perhaps the most interesting of the whole series by virtue of its extensive, mainly religious, inscriptions. These are inlaid with niello and cover both sides of the bar arms as well as the frame. Apart from the inscriptions Class A2 can be distinguished from Class A1 by the tapering bars, which have a rectangular or flattened-oval cross-section. The animal heads are also lacking.

Hume (1863, 274-6) illustrates a fine and complete example of a Class A2 purse that was found in a pond near Barham, Norfolk sometime before 1859. The illustration is shown here in Fig. 4. On this example the inscription (quoted below) also extends onto the inner surface of the frame and has stops in the forms of lis, stars, crosses, saltires and colons and ends in a scroll. The length of the bar as given by Hume is 8.25 inches (210mm).

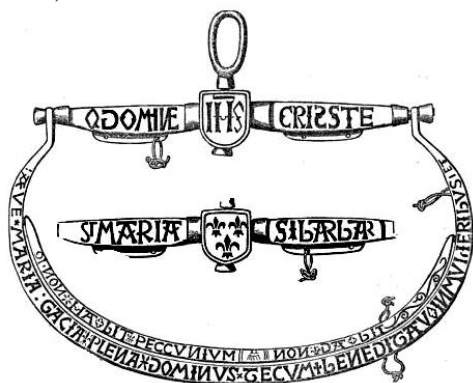


Fig. 4: Purse bar frame of Class A2 from Barham, Norfolk (Hume 1863).

Hybrids between bars of Classes A1 and A2 are few; IOW-361831 and LVPL-6C9265 are the only examples recorded by the PAS.

As Ward Perkins observed, the religious inscriptions are often abbreviated as well as being surprisingly illiterate and incomplete; the letters N and S are often reversed. The same mistakes can be seen on individual bars, which may suggest a common source of manufacture for these at least. Inscriptions on the frames are usually interspersed with scrolling forms (e.g. LON-D8DAE7 (Fig. 6)). The central blocks are also decorated simply - S, M, W, XX, IHS, A above M are all recorded. Three lis and IHS occur on the central block of the bar from Barham (Fig. 4) and on KENT-BA88C3. KENT-BB3F94 bears an apparent portrait of Henry VI while LANCUM-F0C8B7 shows a pair of scissors.



Fig. 5: Class A2 bar fragment with niello-inlaid inscription. SUR-A59505



Fig. 6: Frame fragment of a Class A2 purse with niello-inlaid inscription. LON-D8DAE7

The inscriptions on Class A2 purses

Inscriptions on PAS records (often from the Hail Mary, Apostles' Creed, Prayers for the Dead, and perhaps other prayers) include the following:

1.

**O DOMINE / CRISTE // ST
MARIA / ST BARBARA** on the
bar,
**AVE MARIA GRACIA PLENA
DOMINVS TECVM BENEDICTA
TV IN MVLIERIBVS ET // QVI
NON HABIT PECCUNIUM NON
DABIT** on the frame.

O Lord Christ St Mary St Barbara
Hail Mary full of grace may the Lord be with
you. Blessed art Thou amongst women.
Those with no money do not spend.

This complete inscription is shown in the
example illustrated in Hume 1863. Variants of
this inscription are the most commonly
encountered (e.g. SUR-A59505 (Fig. 5)).

2.

**LAVS DEO PAX VIVIS REQUIES
DEFVNCTIS**

Praise be to God, peace to the living and rest
for the dead (BH-C238C7; NMS-8281F5).

3.

ORATE PRO EVM QVIS ME FECIT

Pray for him who made me (NMS-5EEC94).

4.

**CREDO IN DEVM PATREM
OMNIPOTENTEM CREATOREM COELI
ET TERRAE**

I believe in God the Father Almighty, Creator
of heaven and earth (the Apostles' Creed)
(CAM-6EF6F3; SF-05BF26; SUR-428401).

5.

SOLI DEO HONOR ET GLORIA

Honour and glory be to God alone (Timothy 1
v.17)

(e.g. BH-05C0A7; LIN-62CA41; NLM6148;
NMS-1557B5 etc.), all on frames.

6.

**TIBI SOLI PECCAUI ET MALVM
CORAM**

To thee only I have sinned and have done evil
before thee (Psalms 50(51) v.6) (SUR-
91D8B6; SUSS-83B955) on frames.

7.

O MATER DEI MEMENTO MEI AMEN

O Mother of God remember me, Amen (DEV-
C40218; SUR-B93AC3).

8.

AGL[A]

Amuletic, and usually translated as: Atah
Gibor Le-olam Adonai: You, O Lord, are
mighty forever (LIN-DDF4D4), on a frame.

9.

+ABCDEF

Alphabet (NMS-B963F3), on a frame.

**Classes B-F, Short Bars with attached
frames**

Class B (Figs 7-8)

This is a group of distinctive diminutive bars
(Ward Perkins' Type B5) that are perhaps
capable of further subdivision. Class B bars
share with Class A bars a pair of pierced tabs
on the lower side of the arms for suspension
of the bag. Groups of 2, 3 and 6 holes have
been recorded on each flange. A prominent
group within this Class has a yoke-shaped bar
which rises on each side towards the
swivelling loop. Some of these have a pair of
prominent lipped projections on their upper
sides where the bar meets the frame (Fig. 7).
None of this class is additionally decorated
save for an integrally cast vertical rib placed
centrally or at some point on the outer parts
of the bar. Loops, where they survive, are
mostly rectangular but a small number are
quatrefoil (BH-4954E5; IOW-E02212). A
pair of complete frames survives on NMS-
AC2542.



Fig. 7: Class B yoke-shaped bar with rectangular loop and lipped projections. SWYOR-CE33E6



Fig. 8: Class B bar with quatrefoil loop. BH-4954E5

Class C1 and C2 (Figs 9-13)

A varied series of very short bars with either shield-shaped (Class C1 (Ward Perkins' Type B1)) (sometimes square) or rounded blocks (Class C2 (Ward Perkins' Type B2)). Only one bar similar to Ward Perkins' Type B2 with separate globular terminals and with a globular spacer between loop and bar has been noted (WMID-18C601) and this has been included amongst the other bars of Class C2 that have rounded blocks. A few complete bar, loop and frame combinations have been recorded (e.g. HAMP695; NARC-182644 (which has wire attached to the frame for the attachment of the bag); and SUR-7C8248).

The blocks on Class C1 bars are usually simply decorated and the range of decoration is similar to bars of Classes H and J but with greater use of dots. The rounded blocks of

Class C are not decorated. BH-B30611 is a squat and globular oddity.



Fig. 9: Class C1 bar with attached loop and complete frame. SUR-7C8248



Fig. 10: Class C1 bar with attached loop and fragments of the frame. SF-D7FD28



Fig. 11: Class C2 bar with plain rounded block, circular loop and a fragment of the frame. BERK-885F32



Fig. 12: Bar of Class C. Detail from portrait of Jan Vermeyen, engraving by Johannes Wierix, 1572. Museum Boijmans van Beuningen. The frame shown here is unusual.

Frames belonging to bars of Class C are distinctive, having a circular cross-section and a number of integral loops projecting from their lower edges. In some cases the frames are themselves decorated with groups of short grooves (e.g. NMS-CD7FF5; SUR-8A0742 and SF-5F3443).



Fig. 13: Frame fragment from a Class C purse bar. LVPL-C26BA8

Class D (Fig. 14)

This previously unrecognised group of five bars (LVPL1708; HAMP-6A9F51; LEIC-4243F2; SF-B4F8A4 and SF-E2A163) is derived from bars of Class C. The central blocks are more or less heart-shaped with a prominent vertical groove running down the upper part of the block. None is further decorated. Where they exist the separate terminal roves are spherical. The loops (two out of the group of five survive) are tall and narrow and almost parallel-sided and there is a, apparently separate, globular component between the loop and the top of the bar. Remains of two separate frames survive on SF-B4F8A4.



Fig. 14: Bar of Class D with heart-shaped block and fragments of two frames. SF-B4F8A4

Class E (Fig. 15)

This group of squat, flat-faced bars also appears to be derived from bars of Class C. The group is also previously unrecognised. Three basic shapes are present:

E1. Bars that flare out from rounded hollows on either side of the loop.

LANCUM-A7FD95 and ESS-821155 are plain; SOMDOR1134 on the other hand is decorated with a continuously looping form composed of punched and gilded annulets. There also appears to be a white metal coating.

E2. Similar to E1 but with a flat top to the block. Decoration is confined to simple overlapping bordering lines (e.g. PUBLIC-9EDAF3; WAW-0BD046).

E3. A plain bar with four incurving corner scrolls, and with separate roves (NMS-06F124).



Fig. 15: Bars of Classes E1, E2 and E3. LANCUM-A7FD95, WAW-0BD046 and NMS-06F124

Class F (Figs 16-17)

Ward Perkins' Type B4. A loose grouping of very simple, plain, flat bars which are occasionally waisted where the loop passes through. There is no block. Provision is made for a frame. The loop may be rectangular.



Fig. 16: Plain bar and rectangular loop of Class F. SF6547



Fig. 17: Plain bar and oval loop of Class F. SUR-7CF525

Class G (Fig. 18)

A single example of a distinctive bar on the lower side of which is a second narrower parallel bar, presumably to attach the bag. (WMID-D25D17). The loop is rectangular.



Fig. 18: Class G bar. WMID-D25D17

Classes H-J, Short Bars without attached frames

Classes H1-3 (Figs 19-21)

The three subclasses of Class H, Classes H1-H3 (formerly Ward Perkins' Types B6-8) share identical bars and can only be distinguished from each other if the attachment loops (or secondary bar in the case of H3) are present. Class H comprises simple bars with integral biconical, globular or mushroom-head terminals. The central block is either rectangular or shield-shaped and sometimes has a recess on its lower side to conceal the rove at the lower end of the loop. No bars of this class appear to have held a frame, the bag being presumably attached directly to the bar (as suggested on the effigies of John and Thomas White in Tenby).

Decoration is confined to the central block and again is simple, comprising double strand shapes in the form of an N, M, V or X. Slightly more complicated decoration can be seen on e.g. SWYOR-6AE344 and GLO-5390C6.

Class H1 (Fig. 19)

Bars as described above and with an oval or circular loop passing through the central block.



Fig. 19: Class H1 bar with niello-inlaid X. SF-9CEC27

Class H2 (Fig. 20)

Bars as described above but with a tapering sleeve-like loop (e.g. BUC-EEDCC1; ESS-ECF117; NCL-2FB1C2 and SUSS-D7BBF5). The Essex example (Fig. 20) is extensively decorated, on both the central block and the loop, with a symmetrical foliate pattern made up of punched dots. Ward Perkins notes this form of decoration on bars of his Types B7 and B8 (and see also LEIC-EE4066). Loops of this form appear to be imitating the fabric sleeve shown on the portrait of Sir Thomas Gresham (Fig. 30), which conceals the suspension loop.



Fig. 20: Class H2 bar with punched decoration on both loop and block. ESS-ECF117

Class H3 (Fig. 21)

Bars as described above but with a separate T-shaped attachment bar in the place of a loop. These were presumably attached to the belt by a pair of leather slings. Where complete pairings survive decoration is either missing or slight (a single vertical groove on SOM-DC82F3). However on LEIC-EE4066 both central blocks are profusely decorated with punched annulets. This and H2 bar ESS-

ECF117 are likely to share a common manufacturing origin.

Three bars of H3 have terminals that are otherwise only present on bars of Class J.



Fig. 21: Class H3 bar. DUR-A81FF1

Class J (Figs 22-23)

This is a ubiquitous and simple class (Ward Perkins' Types B1-2). As with Class H there is no provision for a frame. The Class is distinguished by integral spherical terminals and rectangular or shield-shaped blocks.

Two forms of spherical terminal occur. One has a prominent ridge running around its centre and a slot running diametrically across its outer face; these may be intended to represent bells. The other form has twisting grooves. The central block is usually plain. Where ornament exists it is again simple, consisting of radiating grooves (e.g. HESH-814916; LEIC-D680B5) or crosses and an A (WILT-5E4CB7).



Fig. 22: Class J bar and loop with bell-shaped terminals and radiating grooves on the block. CAM-EA9050

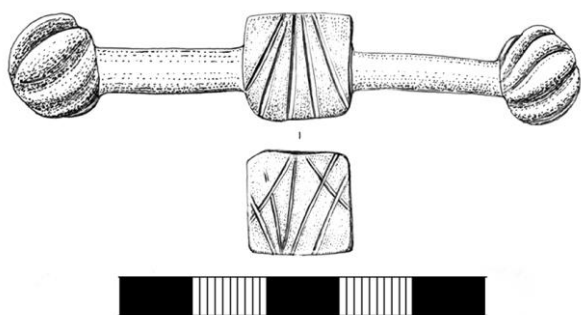


Fig. 23: Class J purse bar with twisted and grooved terminals (showing both sides of the central block). IOW-E201F7

‘Purses’ with integral frames: Classes K and L

Ward Perkins noted the existence of purses with integral frames, which he called Type C. Only two types of this purse have been recognised in the PAS records. Some at least may have been used for holding tools rather than coins.

Class K (Fig. 24)

A group of previously unrecognised and distinctive bars with integral frames; a complete example has been recorded (BUC-82D836). The flat wing-like bars emerge from prominent ribs placed either side of a simple cylindrical block and curve sharply downwards to form the integral circular frame which has cast scrolling foliate designs on both sides. The loops are small and circular and have prominent collars and roves. A number (e.g. SUR-9D48F7; NARC-B914D8; and perhaps SWYOR-BB72F0) retain a separate fitting which is attached to the loop and which was hung from the belt.



Fig. 24: Fragment of bar and frame of Class K with cast decoration and circular loop. LANCUM-9D6657

The frame has a T-shaped cross-section. One bears what appears to be cast devolved lettering. The complete example has seven holes for suspension of the bag. About twenty examples of this type were recorded by 2017.

Class L (Fig. 25)

A small group of integral bars and frames in which a pair of debased animal heads support the central block. They also have a pair of distinctive upwardly-angled projections. A complete example was found in excavations in Townwall Street, Dover (Parfitt et al 2006, 305-6); this has a pear-shaped frame with an L-shaped cross-section. Similar examples include HAMP-FBCEA0, CORN-CD6D96 and PUBLIC-A55047. CORN-CD6D96 also has worn niello decoration on the block. The purpose of the projections, if any, is unclear, although they could have been used to secure a flap over the large purse opening.

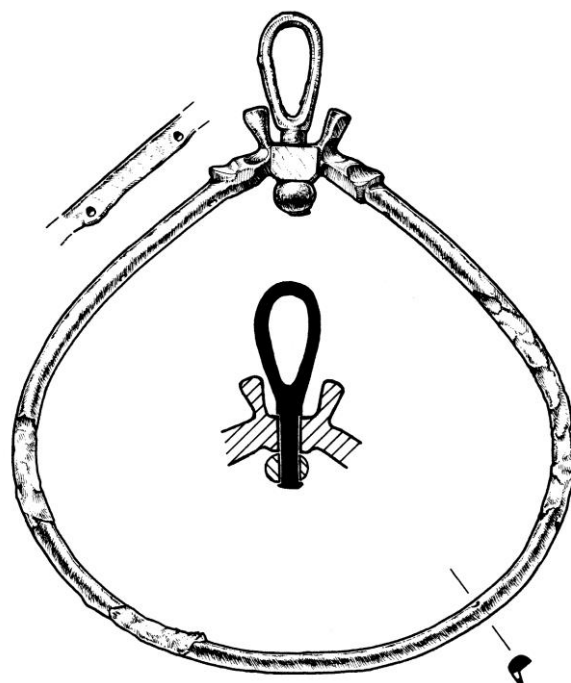


Fig. 25: Class L ‘purse’ with integral frame and bar, Townwall Street, Dover. Width 145mm, height 169mm

LVPL-5F3514 has a fluted block and downward facing heads and probably also belongs to Class L.



Fig. 26: Class L 'purse' fragment with double projections adjacent to the block. PUBLIC-A55047



Fig. 27: 'Purse', broadly of Classes K or L. Detail from *The Weeding*, engraving by Johannes Wierix, c.1575-1585. Museum Boijmans van Beuningen

Addenda

Attachment Loops

There is a limited range of shapes of loop.

Oval and large circular loops are the only shapes used on Class A bars. Tall narrow loops with a series of collars below are mainly confined to bars of Class C although other forms occur on this class. Small square loops appear only on Classes B, F and G.

Small circular loops are mainly confined to Class K. A quatrefoil loop occurs on two bars of Class B.

Frames

Frames with an L-shaped cross-section are confined to Class A (and probably L). Most other frames have a circular cross-section except for Class K whose frames have a T-shaped cross-section. Classes H-J do not appear to have been equipped with frames.

Miscellaneous bars and frames

There is a very small number of bars, some simple, which do not fit easily into the above classification. These include CORN-066B71; ESS-1EDEE7; SF-A09FC8; NMS-C4C2E3; BH-E5F4E8 and NMGW-2B27A1. GLO-D44092 has a pair of inward facing animal heads and a moulded scallop-like block. Frame NMS-594D54 (though this is not certainly a frame) has a U-shaped cross-section and a decorative series of deeply-drilled pits.

Possible associated fittings (Figs 28-29)

Two other classes of fittings are probably associated with purse bars, partly in view of the distinctive niello-inlaid decoration that they often share.

A series of sliding fittings were probably the means by which bars were suspended from belts (Fig. 28). These sometimes have an animal head terminal, which may mimic the devolved heads on A1 bars. DEV-E7FBA6 has a terminal similar in form to those on purses of Class J. These fittings are also similar to the sliding loops attached to Class K purses (e.g. SUR-9D48F7). An iron example is also recorded (SUR-73C763).

A frequently found type of hollow hooked fitting, invariably with the niello-inlaid lattice decoration found on Class A1 components, is of uncertain purpose although the hook appears too weak for the suspension of purses (Fig. 29).



Fig. 28: Sliding belt hook. BH-6A99D5



Fig. 29: Hooked fitting with niello inlay. SF-EFECE2

Chronology, Function and Distribution

Ward Perkins concluded that metal purse components were in use for a relatively limited period from c.1450 to c.1550. The earliest representation he records is on a memorial brass dating to c.1460. A representation of a purse bar is also depicted on an English ivory of c.1440 (Evans 1949, 55) as well as on Flemish panel paintings by Petrus Christus (*St Anthony with a donor*, National Gallery, London) from c.1444 and Rogier van der Weijden (Royal Library,

Brussels) from 1448. In a 1565 portrait of Sir Thomas Gresham an elaborate purse of probable continental origin is clearly still sufficiently fashionable to be displayed on the dress of a member of the gentry (Fig. 30).



Fig. 30: Purse bar of Class C on portrait of Sir Thomas Gresham c.1565, detail. National Portrait Gallery

Three bars of Class J (using the proposed new classification), with bell-shaped terminals, were recovered from the wreck of the *Mary Rose* (sunk 1545) (Gardiner and Allen (eds) 2005, 112-3, fig.3.7). Purse bars of possibly Classes H or J can be seen in St Mary's Church, Tenby, on the effigies of John (d. c.1507) and Thomas White (d.1482), both mayors of Tenby.

A useful summary of purse finds in the Netherlands has recently been published (Goubitz 2007). While this mainly deals with purses that do not comprise metal components, framed purses are also studied (op. cit. 47-59). While many of these are broadly similar to those found in this country there are also a number of more elaborate examples that do not appear to have parallels here. Similarly, many of those found here do not appear to occur in the Netherlands to any great extent. Purses with metal components occur frequently in Dutch paintings and engravings of the period as well as sculptures (Fig. 31).



Fig. 31: Purse bar, uncertainly of Class C1. Detail from *The Surgeon*, engraving by Lucas Van Leyden, 1524. University of Leiden

Bars and frames of Class A2 are probably the earliest of the whole series. One example (KENT-BB3F94) bears, on its central block, a portrait apparently intended to be Henry VI (r.1422-61). The latest use of metal purse bars and frames is unclear but it does appear that they were no longer in use much after c.1600. The latest representation of a purse with bar of which the author is aware is on a Dutch engraving dated 1605 (Fig. 32). Class K may be the latest of those discussed here, by virtue of its more developed form; a date in the early part of the 17th century is quite possible for this. A simple ‘purse’ with integral frame appears in a still life painting of fowling equipment by Johannes Leemans (c.1635-88). An engraving of 1555 (Fig. 33) shows a similar ‘purse’ containing a small dog!



Fig. 32: Purse bar. Detail from *The Barbershop*, engraving by Claes Jansz. Visscher, 1605. Museum Boijmans van Beuningen



Fig. 33: Detail from *The Lute-Maker*, engraving by Frans Huys, c.1555. Museum Boijmans van Beuningen

All the purse components considered here are spread widely and occur in most English and some Welsh counties; interestingly they do not seem to be present in Scotland (pers. comm. Stuart Campbell, Scottish Treasure Trove Unit).

From their sometimes capacious size it seems probable that some purses were used for items other than money, although coins were clearly kept secure in them (Fig. 34). The cessation in the use of suspended purses by at least the beginning of the 17th century seems to be due to fashion, perhaps with the introduction of pockets.

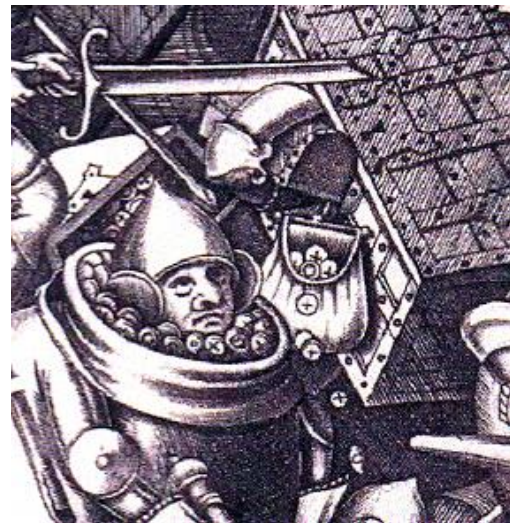


Fig. 34: Detail from *The Fight of the Money-Bags*, engraving by Pieter van der Heyden, c.1570-2. Museum Boijmans van Beuningen

Acknowledgments

I would like to thank the late Geoff Egan for his initial encouragement to work on purses; it is sad that he is no longer with us to see the fruits of the seeds he sowed. Quita Mould and Annemarieke Willemsen kindly read an earlier draft and the latter drew my attention to references to 15th century depictions of purses. A number of colleagues also read drafts. Laura Burnett and Rob Webley provided great help in interpreting some of the (often fragmentary) inscriptions on the A2 purses as well as drawing my attention to

the Barham A2 purse and those from the Mary Rose.

Any resulting errors remain my own.

The Author

David Williams was the Finds Liaison Officer for Surrey from 2003 and East Berkshire from 2009 until his untimely death in December 2017. He had been researching purses for a number of years and was adding the finishing touches to this datasheet in the months before his death.

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A note from the Datasheet series Editor

We are pleased and proud – as was he – that David's datasheet should be our 50th produced since the first was published in 1985. We are however heartbroken that it is published posthumously and our fellow Finds Research Group member, archaeologist, finds specialist and friend is very much missed.

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