Illus 1 Socketed axeheads from Tillicoultry. (Courtesy of the Society of Antiquaries of London)
Two Late Bronze Age socketed axes from Tillicoultry, Clackmannanshire, and other lost axes from northern Britain

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Among the drawings of Bronze Age metalwork by the well-known antiquary Albert Way in the library of the Society of Antiquaries of London, there is one showing two socketed axeheads, annotated ‘Found in a sandpit at Tillicoultry [sic] near Stirling’ (MS 700/III/2 113; Illus 1). Way’s pencil drawings are of the highest standard. In each case, he illustrates one face and the side with the loop, enabling detailed descriptions of the axes to be made.

Both axes are complete. The left-hand axe has a deep conical collar surmounting a single shallow moulding, from which the broad loop springs. The blade has a slightly concave profile and expands to a broad, slightly curved, cutting edge. Casting seams are clearly shown. There is no section, but the view of the face suggests this must be almost rectangular. Assuming the drawing is full size, this axe would be 120mm long and its cutting edge 70mm wide.

The right-hand axe has relatively deep collar moulding with a shallower moulding above and below; the broad loop springs from the lowest moulding. Concave-profile sides expand to a crescentic cutting edge. Below the loop, the edges of the blade face appear to be raised, emphasising the junction between face and sides. The axe bears elaborate ornament. On the drawn face, at the level of the loop there are two small rings each with a central pellet and about two-thirds of the way down the face there are three similar rings, of which the outer two have a central pellet. Straight ribs link each of the upper rings with the outer lower rings; two shorter ribs descend from the upper rings to join at another ring midway between the upper and lower rings and another rib descends from this middle ring to the central lower ring. The other face is not drawn, but a ring containing a pellet is annotated ‘on the other side all are’, implying the presence of a similar pattern with all the rings containing pellets. Below the lower rings, but above the cutting edge, is a band of what appear to be hammer marks. Casting seams are shown. Compared with the other axe, the section would be slightly hexagonal. This axe is shown 112mm long with its cutting edge 79mm wide.

From the distinctive motif on the right-hand Tillicoultry axe, we can be sure that this is not illustrated in the corpus of axes from Scotland published by Schmidt and Burgess (1981) and none of the plain axes seems to have exactly the conical collar of the left-hand axe. However, their list of axes not included in their catalogue does contain an entry for ‘nr. Tillicoultry’ (ibid, 258=Coles 1962, 68, Clackmannanshire 2) which refers to the exhibition at a meeting of the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland on 13 January 1862 of:

a bronze socketed celt, showing an unusual variety of ornament on its sides, consisting of lines ending in small rings, in slight relief. Mr Albert Way considers these projecting rings may probably represent some more secure mode of attaching the axe to its wooden haft, than could be effected by the mere open loop at the side. It was found thirty-five years ago [ie, 1828] in a sandpit at the foot of the Ochil Hills, near Tillicoultry, Clackmannanshire.

(Proc Soc Antiq Scot, 4, 1861–62, 382)

This axe was exhibited by R B Wardlaw Ramsay of Whitehill, in Midlothian. The Wardlaw Ramsay family were significant landowners and in addition to Whitehill had property at Tillicoultry.

At a meeting of the Archaeological Institute in London on 7 November 1856, Mr G R Wardlaw Ramsay had exhibited:

Two bronze socketed celts in remarkably fine preservation. They were found on his property at Tillycoultry … They lay at about the depth of ten feet, one of them embedded in moss, but in a sandy soil; the other, a specimen with very highly-polished patina, in a bed of green sand, which possibly had been the cause of its perfect condition… The sides are ornamented with raised lines, and circles …

(Archaeo J, 13, 1856, 412)

There can be little doubt that the two axes drawn by Way are those exhibited in London by G R Wardlaw Ramsay in 1856 and that the decorated example was exhibited in Edinburgh by R B Wardlaw Ramsay in 1862. According to information kindly provided by Susan Mills, G R Wardlaw Ramsay bought the land at Tillicoultry and was the father of R B. Albert Way would have had ample opportunity to examine the Tillicoultry axes. He attended the meeting of the Archaeological Institute at which they were exhibited, where he showed an illustration of a spearhead from Hill of Roseisle, Duffus, Moray, in Elgin Museum that had presumably been available to him at the Institute’s meeting in Edinburgh the preceding July (ibid, 413;
Walker 1974, 106); he was also a Fellow of the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland in 1862 when the axes were exhibited in Edinburgh (Proc Soc Antiq Scot, 4, 1861–62, xv). Way was Honorary Secretary of the Archaeological Institute from 1845 to 1868 and edited many of the early volumes of the Archaeological Journal (ODNB 2004, 770–1).

There is one further unpublished reference to the initial discovery of an axe and the stone circle at Tillicoultry, kindly drawn to the writer’s attention by Trevor Cowie. Bound into the manuscript volume of communications to the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland are four pages of roughly drafted notes, apparently in more than one hand (Communications to the Society of Antiquaries, V (1828–1829), 224–5). The most likely authors would have been E W A Drummond Hay who was Secretary of the Society until 1829 or James Skene who was then Curator of the Museum (Stevenson 1981, 71). The notes give details of a number of objects mainly from Fife and Kinross that had then recently been presented to the Society—or, in the case of the Tillicoultry axehead, simply brought to its attention.

The transcription of the section referring to Tillicoultry reads as follows:

Mr Ramsay of Tillicoutry [sic] has in his possession a beautiful and large battle axe head of bronze found within a Druidic Circle where a Roman camp is said to have been placed immediately to the south of his House. The Druidic Circle was removed about a twelve month ago by the proprietor.

Although this record of the Tillicoultry find is not itself dated, the pages of draft notes were almost certainly compiled in early 1829 shortly prior to the meeting of the Society held on the evening of Monday 26 January at which the formal announcement was made of the donations of the other artefacts mentioned in the notes (Society of Antiquaries of Scotland, Minutes, November 1827 – May 1840, 84–7). The Society’s minutes do not refer to the axehead from Tillicoultry so it is unclear whether this find was brought to the attention of the meeting. However, despite their brevity, these notes are of interest in that they suggest the axehead was found actually within the circle; they also help to establish the date of the stone circle’s first phase of destruction.

The Tillicoultry axes appear to have been found at a location known as the Cuninghar (or Cunninghar) at the east end of the village (NGR NS 9259 9705). The Cuninghar contained a sandpit that was the site of a stone circle and it also produced several Early Bronze Age urns (Robertson et al 1895; Coles 1899, 358–65; RCAHMS 1978, 4 no 12). Most of the area except the south end now contains houses. The National Monuments Record of Scotland (NS99NW 3) notes two finds of what were probably Bronze Age axes from the Cuninghar: according to the Ordnance Survey, ‘A small copper axe was found in 1820 about 5 yards west of the cemetery gatehouse’, while the New Statistical Account published in 1845 states that, ‘About twenty years ago, a small axe, apparently of brass, was found in a bed of sand, at the south end of the mound on which the Druids circle stands’ (Vol 8, Clackmannanshire, 71). Unless we have a third lost axe from the same area the New Statistical Account could refer to the decorated axe, said by G R Wardlaw Ramsay to have been in a bed of sand. Five yards west of the cemetery gatehouse would be under the present road into the cemetery, which is by the wall running south of the bench–mark on F R Coles’s plan (Illus 2). This findspot is at the south end of the mound on which the stone circle stood – the topography today appears to be the same as recorded by Coles – so both early records could be for the same decorated axe. The significance of this is that at least one, and probably both, of our axes were found close to, or even within, the Cuninghar stone circle and this would be another example of Late Bronze Age activity on such monuments in Scotland (Bradley and Sheridan 2005, 278–9). Richard Bradley has kindly advised that he does not consider the Cuninghar stone circle itself to be Late Bronze Age.

Both axes belong to the Sompting type (Burgess 1969; Schmidt and Burgess 1981, 241–4; O’Connor 2007, 68). The plain axe can be compared to an example from the Ingleton area, West Yorkshire (Schmidt and Burgess Illus 2 The Cuninghar, after Coles 1899 fig 7. The Ordnance Survey bench-mark is still in place to the left of the gate into the cemetery.
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There appears to be no exact match for the pattern on the decorated axe, but related M and W motifs are known (Coombs 1979, 262). The hexagonal cross-section of the Tillicoultry decorated axe can be matched on one of the well-known pair of moulds from Stittenham, Rosskeen, Ross-shire (Wilson 1851, 223–4; Schmidt and Burgess 1981, no 1609). The raised edges on the blade face of the Tillicoultry axe would also have been a feature of the products of this mould assembly; similar emphasis of the edges occurs on some surviving axeheads (eg, an example from Seamer Carr, North Yorkshire: Ibid, no 1595).

The Rosskeen moulds had been found in 1847 and casts were displayed at the exhibition held to mark the visit of the Archaeological Institute to Edinburgh in 1856; indeed casts were also made of the axeheads from these moulds and these could be obtained from their exhibitor Henry Laing (Catalogue of Antiquities, Works of Art and Historical Scottish Relics 1859, 21–2). It is tempting to speculate whether awareness of the discovery and distinctive form of the Rosskeen moulds might have been a factor in prompting the Wardlaw Ramsays to bring their axes to public notice.

Sompting axes are characteristic of the Llyn Fawr phase of the British Bronze Age dated between 800 and 600BC (Schmidt and Burgess 1981, 244; Rohl and Needham 1998, 109; O’Connor 2007, 71–3). The Tillicoultry axes fill in the sparse distribution of Sompting and related axes in central Scotland (Schmidt and Burgess 1981, pl 131). Although the Tillicoultry axes were presumably found close together, G R Wardlaw Ramsay’s account suggests they were not in direct association. There is a contemporary sword from Cambuskenneth Abbey, also now lost but recorded in the manuscript catalogue of Alloa Museum (No 785, 8 January 1884) as found in 1834 (Cowen 1967, 445 no 201, pl LIX, 7; Colquhoun and Burgess 1988, 121 no 750, pl 110).

We may take this opportunity to record two other Sompting axes from northern Britain known only from old illustrations. The first was published in 1710 by Sir Robert Sibbald in his Miscellanea quaedam erudita antiquitatis quae ad borealem Britanniae majoris partem pertinent … as figure 6 (Illus 3, left), reproduced by Stuart Piggott (1989, fig 11). The engraving shows a looped socketed axe in face and side view, which has a collar moulding with a shallow rib below and a slightly expanded blade decorated with three columns of small V-shapes. Axes from Skipsea, East Yorkshire, and Winwick, Lancashire, bear columns of herringbone ornament between vertical ribs (Schmidt and Burgess 1981, nos 1624 and 1631). The provenance of Sibbald’s...
ax is given as ‘in praefectura Abredoniensi’ or Aberdeenshire so this is presumably another example listed by Schmidt and Burgess among those not included in their catalogue (Ibid, 258=Coles 1962, 66, Aberdeenshire 28), which includes only one other Sompting type from that county (Schmidt and Burgess 1981, no 1633).

The second axe was illustrated on plate XXXVIII of William Bell Scott’s Antiquarian gleanings in the north of England published in 1851 (Jervis 2005, 336, pl 38, 4; Illus 3, right). It can be attributed to the Sompting type by its ornament of three vertical ribs each with a double ring-and-pellet at the bottom. Again, no exact comparison can be found, but an axe from Cayton Carr, North Yorkshire, has triple ribs ending in double ring-and-pellets (Schmidt and Burgess 1981, no 596). This axe is said to be in the Museum of the Society of Antiquaries of Newcastle upon Tyne. Perhaps it was the one mentioned by Sir John Evans (1881, 125): after noting the motif on the Cayton Carr axe (ibid, fig 138), Evans stated that ‘A nearly similar specimen is in the Museum of the Society of Antiquaries of Newcastle-on-Tyne’, then housed in the Black Gate of Newcastle Castle. However, the axe illustrated by Scott does not appear to be in the Museum of Antiquities in Newcastle University, which now houses the collections of the Society. Most of Scott’s material was from Northumberland, Durham, Cumberlind or Westmorland (Jervis 2005, 306–7), but it is interesting to note that there appears to be a gap in the distribution of Sompting axes between the Tees and the Tweed (Schmidt and Burgess 1981, pl 131), so a provenance in the north-east of England would be unusual.

To conclude, we may note another lost axe probably from a hoard and recorded by no less an antiquary than William Stukeley. He visited Dr Christopher Hunter, a physician and antiquarian, in Durham on his last archaeological tour in 1725 (Piggott 1989, 73–5). Stukeley was in Durham on 12 September: ibid, 164). Hunter’s collection included ‘a recipient celt found with some others and an odd piece of cast brass at Wearmouth near Sunderland by the sea side … tis 3 … inches long, being pretty much worn but sharp yet’; Stukeley’s notes in his manuscript Iter Boreale of 1725 are accompanied by a rough sketch which shows a looped socketed axe with collar, single horizontal rib, three vertical ribs and recurved cutting edge (Lowther 1980; Miket 1984, 91 no 2, fig 29, 2). The unembellished ribs suggest this is not a Sompting axe and the quoted length, c90mm, would be consistent with a Yorkshire axe rather than any other type (Schmidt and Burgess 1981, 223–39). Whatever the type, it does seem that Stukeley recorded an otherwise unknown Late Bronze Age socketed axe hoard from Wearmouth, Co Durham.

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Abstract
Presents drawings of two lost socketed axes of Sompting type from Tillicoultry and notes three other axes known from old drawings.

Keywords
Late Bronze Age
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