

BASINGSTOKE AEOLIPILE

By our guest curator, Dr Arthur MacGregor, FSA FLS, former curator of the Ashmolean Museum.



Though modest in its aesthetic appeal, the Society's aeolipile (or hearth-blower) forms a characterful example of late medieval metalwork and a splendid relic of 18th-century antiquarianism. Its arrival is recorded in the Society's minutes for 14 February 1799, when Edmund Fry formally presented it as having been 'dug up from the bason of the canal at Basingstoke in Hampshire and purchased by him at an old Iron Shop in that town, to the proprietor of which it had been sold by one of the labourers'.

Although potentially obscure, its significance was immediately seized by the meeting, when the Secretary compared it to another such figure, then at Hilton Hall in Staffordshire and known by the name of Jack of Hilton, which had been mentioned in relation to a curious ritual marking the payment of rent described in Robert Plot's *Natural History* of the county in 1686: 'The Lord of the Manor of Essington . . . shall bring a goose every new years day, and drive it round the fire in the Hall at Hilton, at le[a]st 3 times . . . whil'st Jack of Hilton is blowing the fire.'

Jack of Hilton (recently presented to the Ashmolean Museum) and the Basingstoke figure share many features in common, as does a third example first recorded at Arnington Hall near Tamworth, around 1830; on its inheritance by a family member at Henley on Thames in 1896, the Tamworth figure evidently so offended its new owners as to be cast into the depths of a pond where it remained for nearly 40 years before being recovered and presented to Reading



Museum. A description of the Antiquaries' piece serves to characterize all three figures. (See Jack of Hilton on left; AN2013.1 © Ashmolean Museum, University of Oxford.)

It is 27 cm high, hollow-cast in copper alloy in the form of a kneeling ithyphallic youth; the torso is rather voluminous in its lower parts (presumably to increase its internal capacity); the left hand rests on the left thigh while the right arm is raised to the brow, with both elbows extended. Apart from a circlet around the hair (more carefully rendered on the Antiquaries' piece than on the others), the presence of clothing is indicated by an incised neckline, closed by an annular brooch, and by a buckled girdle at the waist; the lower extremity of

the garment is unmarked, but it signally fails to cover the phallus.

From a functional point of view, there is a circular hole some 3 mm in diameter at the back of the neck, which allowed it to be filled with water; after this hole had been plugged, the figure would have been set by the hearth to heat up, to the point where steam issued in a jet from a pin-hole marking the mouth (the cheeks of the figure are puffed out to emphasize its blowing function). When directed towards the fire the jet of steam caused it to flare up, though the physics of the process are disputed: rather than merely acting to fan the flames, it is suggested that the steam combines at a molecular level with the gases of combustion, causing the flames to burn more brightly. The looped arms on all three figures allowed them to be hooked out of the embers when the water had been exhausted.

There is no suggestion that all of these figures were employed ritually in the way that Jack of Hilton was: more probably they were conversation-pieces, for the amusement of guests. Exactly where the Basingstoke aeolipile performed this function is impossible to determine, but in an interesting article Elizabeth Edwards draws attention to the Cromwellian sack of the nearby manor of Basing House in 1644, when the entire contents were pillaged and the house burned to the ground.

Whatever its early history, it now forms an intriguing exhibit, richly-layered with meaning, in the Society's museum.

Further Reading:

Elizabeth Edwards's paper on 'The Aeolipile from Basingstoke', is in *Hampshire Field Club & Archaeological Society Newsletter* 47 (2007), 4-8, with further bibliography.

See also Arthur MacGregor, 'Jack of Hilton and the history of the hearth-blower', *Antiquaries Journal* 87 (2007), 281-94.