

BEITH BRONZE AGE SHIELD

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At a meeting in 1791 the Society was presented with this bronze shield (LDSAL 80). This had been found a few years earlier with four or five other shields in a peat bog 'on a Farm called Luggtonrigge' south-east of Beith in Ayrshire, Scotland. The exact find-spot is no longer known because several farms bear the modern name of Lugtonridge; the shield has come to be known after Beith. The shields had been carefully deposited, 'regularly placed in a ring'. The minutes of this meeting appear to be the only record of the provenance and deposition of these shields.

The shield is complete, though slightly damaged, 672mm in diameter. Its body is made of a single sheet of bronze about 0.5mm thick. There is a central boss inside which a handle for carrying the shield is attached and two tabs would have held a shoulder strap. The face of the shield is covered with twenty-nine concentric rings of small bosses alternated with concentric ribs. Around the rim is a slightly larger rib.

Twenty-two shields of this type survive, most from different parts of Britain with two from Ireland and one from Denmark, plus some which have been recorded but no longer survive like the others from Lugtonridge Farm. They were normally deposited complete, usually in bogs or rivers. Dating evidence is limited but bronze shields were probably produced in Britain and Ireland during the last centuries of the second millennium BC. Spearheads would have been used throughout this time, with the later types of rapier and the earliest swords. The shields were probably display versions of organic shields made of wood or leather, which survive less frequently.

Bronze shields would have been hammered out of a single piece of metal. This process is apparently simple but in reality would have been very difficult, requiring perhaps two hundred alternate rounds of hammering and annealing (heating and cooling to prevent the metal from becoming brittle). The difficulty would have been compounded by producing the numerous ribs and bosses on shields like ours. To achieve the finished examples which have come down to us would have required years of practice by the people who made them, implying the existence of specialist workshops and a system for apprentices. And if these shields were personal property, only certain people would have been able to commission their manufacture or own them.

For many years it was received wisdom that bronze shields would not have resisted bronze weapons and must have been non-functional. However, that was based on experiments with reconstructed shields of copper, which is softer than the tin-bronze of which prehistoric shields were made. But while a few show marks that could have been made by spearheads, the bronze shields were probably not intended for combat but for display in this world, perhaps both on and off the battlefield, and as offerings to the other world.

[See the catalogue entry online here.](#)

[View the object as part of our 2007 tercentenary online exhibition, *Making History*, here.](#)