

Ancient Monuments Laboratory  
Report 88/90

AN EXAMINATION OF THE COPPER ALLOY  
LACE TAGS FROM ACTON COURT

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Summary

A large collection of copper alloy lace tags was recovered from Acton Court, Avon, a house dating from the Tudor period. The tags enclose the ends of laces which were commonly used as fastening devices on clothes from the 14th - 17th centuries. This report discusses their typology and investigates the type of lace they contain.

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AN EXAMINATION OF THE COPPER ALLOY LACE TAGS FROM ACTON COURT,  
AVON (AML SITE NUMBER 1998)

Excavations were carried out between 1986 and 1988 at Acton Court, Avon, on a house dating from the Tudor period. The lace tags, which enclose the ends of laces commonly used as fastening devices on clothes from the 14th -17th centuries, form quite a large proportion of the copper alloy small finds. The earlier tags had practical uses, such as holding the hose to the paltock, while the later, more decorative, 15th -16th century examples were often used as fastenings for sleeves and the like (Crowfoot, AML Report forthcoming).

In total, 237 tags, not all complete, were found at Acton Court. Lace tags can be divided into 3 types (Oakley and Webster, 1979, 262-3, and Bayley *et al* 1985, 47), although only types 1 and 2 were identified at this site. Nine of the tags could not be grouped.

Type 1 tags of which there are 97 (?+5) are produced from a piece of sheet metal rolled around a lace, to form a butting (AML no 876664, 876682, 881326) or overlapping (AML no 876995, 877005) joint. The majority are riveted a few millimetres below the top of the tag to secure the lace in place, or, alternatively, the end may have been pinched to hold the lace. The ends of Type 1 lace tags are usually neatly rounded off and generally tapered to a point (Oakley and Webster, 1979, 263, and Bayley *et al*, 1985, 47). The length range of the complete Type 1 tags from this site varies between 16 and 30 mm.

The rivets are usually copper alloy, as with those from Acton Court, although iron rivets have occasionally been found (Oakley and Webster, 1979, 263). There is normally only one rivet running through a transverse hole in the tag. However, there are sometimes two parallel rivets placed directly below each other. The lace tags from Acton Court include 6 examples of this type, 4 of which still contain copper alloy rivets (AML no 876954). There are 47 examples of transverse riveted tags, 32 of which still contain copper alloy rivets. There is one possible example of a single rivet with only one rivet hole on one side of the lace tag.

Type 2 tags of which there are 122 (?+4) are generally longer and thicker in diameter, the complete length range from Acton Court varying from 22 mm to 40 mm. They are produced by a sheet piece of metal being folded over at each end to grasp the lace (AML no 876698). They are rarely riveted (Bayley *et al*, 1985, 47). No examples of riveted type 2 tags were identified from Acton Court.

There were 13 examples of decorated lace tags recovered. Of the Type 2 tags, 3 possessed a similar lattice decoration (AML no 876961), while another tag (AML no 876905 (12)) was decorated with 2 incised lines at the top of the tag and two at the bottom. There were also 3 varying examples of incised groove decoration, AML no 881321 showing an example of this. Of the Type 1 tags, 4 possessed a transverse groove decoration (AML no 876682) which Bayley (1985, 47) suggests may have been caused by the use of ridged pliers.

Many of the tags were found to contain remains of the lace, either textile or leather. Analysis of the textile remains was carried out by Elisabeth Crowfoot (AML report forthcoming) while Glynis Edwards analysed the remainder of the organic material. Of the Type 1 tags, 16 were identified as having textile remains and 11 as having leather. Of the 26 other tags which had organic material inside, the majority of it was thought likely to be leather. Of the 85 Type 2 tags possessing organic material, 27 had textile remains, 10 leather. It has been suggested that the typological differences between Types 1 and 2 indicate a difference in the type of lace used, Type 1 being bound around a leather thong or rolled braid, Type 2 around a flat, ribbon-like lace (Bayley *et al*, 1985, 47).

Several tags have a very shiny black patina, 3 of which (AML no 876722, 877002, and 881312 (a)) were analysed by energy dispersive X-ray fluorescence analysis by Michael Heyworth. The first 2 proved to be brass (copper-zinc alloy) with a minor trace of lead while the third was simply brass. No trace of a coating was found on any of them. A further 2 tags (AML 876704 and 886156) which did not exhibit the black patina were also analysed, and both were shown to be brass with a minor trace of lead.

Only three of the Type 2 tags predate the late 16th century, and two of those are from contexts which could contain later intrusive material. There is one Type 1 lace tag from a late 13th century to early 14th century context but it is also possibly intrusive. The results from Acton Court appear to confirm other results (Oakley and Webster, 1979, 263 and Bayley *et al*, 1985, 47) that the Type 1 tags were most popular during the 15th and 16th centuries. From the 16th century onwards there is a reduction in the number of Type 1 tags found at this site with a corresponding increase in the number of Type 2 tags from the late 16th century onwards. This view is given weight by the heavy concentration of material from beneath a subsided wooden floor in Room 30. The material had accumulated beneath the floor boards while the room was in use. The majority of lace tags recovered from this context, dated between the late 16th and mid 17th centuries, were Type 2.

#### BIBLIOGRAPHY

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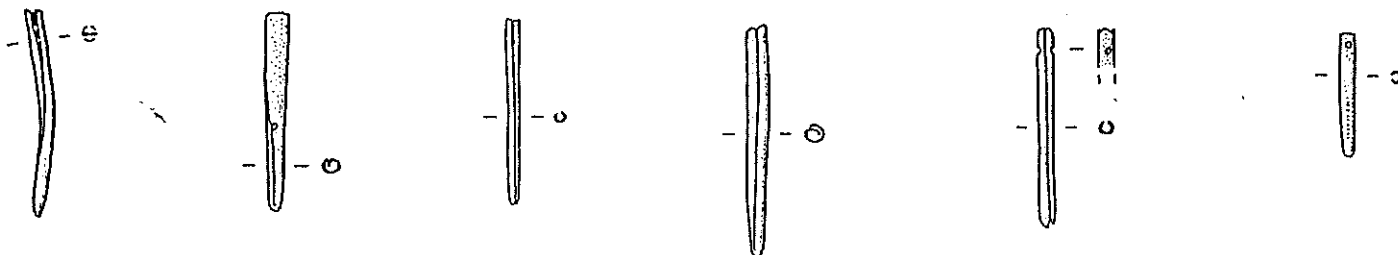
Goodall I H 1975 "Tag ends" In Excavations at Hadleigh Castle, Essex, 1971-2 Drewett P, J Brit. Archaeol. Ass. Series 3: 38, 144-5.

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Goodall A R 1984 "Lace ends" In Medieval and Post-Medieval Finds from Exeter, 1971-1980 Allan J P, Exeter Archaeological Reports: 3, 339.

**ACTON COURT  
COPPER ALLOY LACE ENDS**

**TYPE 1**



AML 876954  
AC'87 (281)  
/650\

AML 877005  
AC'87 (1014)  
/767\

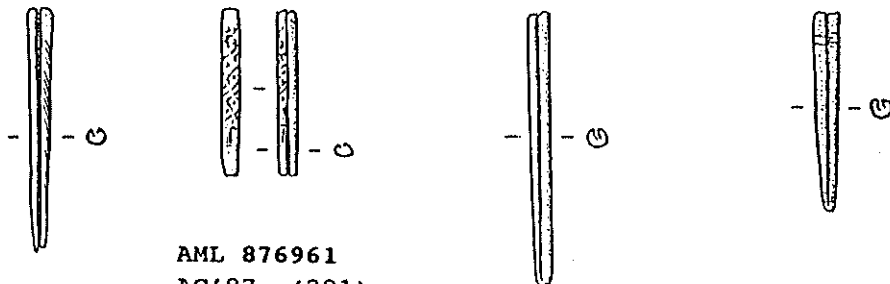
AML 881326  
AC'87 (2215)  
/1246\

AML 876995  
AC'87? (1014)  
/746\

AML 876664  
AC'86 (533)  
/93\

AML 876682  
AC'86 (539)  
/114\

**TYPE 2**

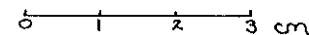


AML 881321  
AC'87 (2089)  
/1231\

AML 876961  
AC'87 (281)  
/659\

AML 876698  
AC'86 (184)  
/145\

AML 876905 (12)  
AC'86? (136)  
/512\



**SCALE 1:1**