

Linen Smoothers

(a summary by Roman Glassmakers)

There are two types of linen smoothers or 'slick stones' (also called 'slickers', 'sleekstones', 'slickenstones' and 'calenders'). The earlier variety, without a handle and often of dark green glass, was in use from the Viking into the Medieval period. They are usually 6.5 - 8.5 cm in diameter, a comfortable size to hold in the hand, and the wear patterns show that both sides were used. Examples from the Viking period have been found together with a small 'ironing' board made of whalebone.

The later variety, with a handle, appeared in the 16th century and continued in use until well into the 19th century, long after the introduction of metal irons - flat irons.

They were likely used cold, with the material to be smoothed and polished being damp. Their use was probably confined, but not totally restricted, to smoothing and starching collars and cuffs.



Glass linen smoothers have been found in female burials throughout the Viking world. This one is from the Orkney Islands.

There are signs of abrasion both on the dome-shaped upper surface and on the flat, lower surface.

Hunterian Museum and Art Gallery

References for Viking linen smoothers:

Andersson, Eva (2003) 'Tools for Textile Production from Birka and Hedeby' Birka Studies 8: Excavations in the Black Earth 1990-1995. Stockholm

Biddle, Martin (1990) 'The nature and chronology of bone, antler, and horn working in Winchester' in Biddle, M. (1990) 'Object and Economy in Medieval Winchester' Oxford University Press pp. 252-264

Charleston, R. J. (1990) 'Slick-stones ('linen smoothers') in Biddle, Martin (1990) 'Object and Economy in Medieval Winchester' Oxford University Press pp. 240-242

Fitzhugh, William W. and Ward, Elisabeth I. (eds) (2000) 'Vikings: The North Atlantic Saga' Smithsonian Institution Press, Washington DC

MacGregor, Arthur (1976) 'Anglo-Scandinavian Finds from Lloyds Bank, Pavement, and Other Sites' The Archaeology of York: The Small Finds 17/3. York Archaeological Trust

MacGregor, Arthur (1985) 'Bone, antler, ivory and horn: The technology of skeletal materials since the Roman period' Croom Helm, London

Mainman, A. J. and Rogers, N. S. H. (2000) 'Craft Industry and Everyday Life: Finds from Anglo-Scandinavian York' Vol 17: The Small Finds, Fasc. 14. York Archaeological Trust

Roesdahl, Else and Wilson, David M. (1992) 'From Viking to Crusader: The Scandinavians and Europe 800-1200' Rizzoli, New York

Linen smoothers with handles have been found on excavations of 16th and 17th century glassworking sites in England, such as Hutton and Rosedale in Yorkshire (colours not recorded) and Haughton Green, near Manchester. Handles may be plain, or have ribs and bulges to aid the grip. See the following extracts from the excavation reports:

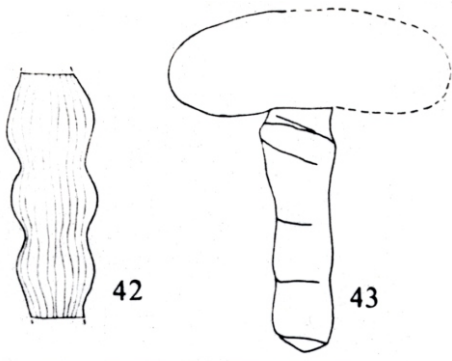


FIG. 62
Glass linen-smoothers from Rosedale

Crossley and Aberg (1972), Hutton and Rosedale:
The calendering of linen had in early medieval times, as in comparatively modern times in Scandinavia, probably been done by means of bun-shaped discs of glass or stone, convex on the lower surface and slightly concave on the upper. In the 16th century these 'slick-stones' grow a handle, giving the general impression of an inverted mushroom. Examples have been found at Woodchester, in London, and in the Weald.

Fig. 62:42 Vertically ribbed handle, with horizontal constrictions to fit the hand. The vertical ribbing is found on a presumably later linen-smoother from Spain in the Victoria and Albert Museum; the horizontal constrictions recur on a handle from the Weald.

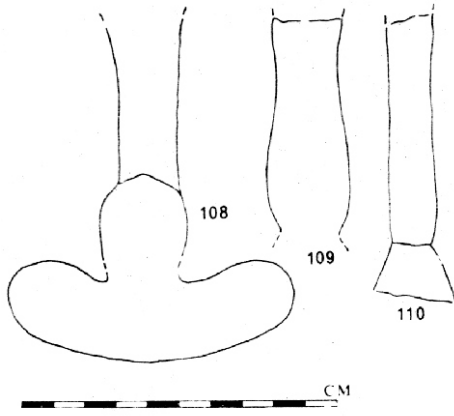
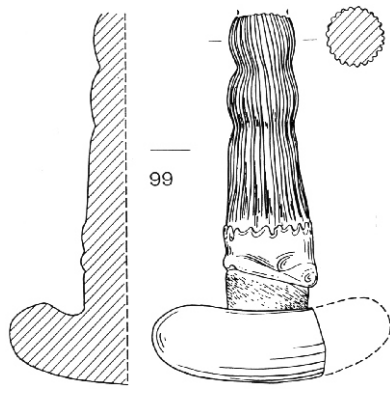
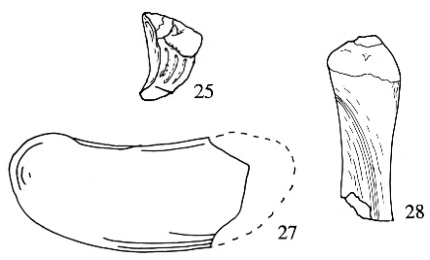


Fig. 62:43 Handle and part of the base of a linen-smoother. For the constrictions on the handle, compare the previous item.

A glance at Fig 67:108-110 will show the curious uncouth formation of the Hutton smoothers, with their solid, sometimes swelling, handles apparently strengthened at the base by a stout collar of glass, perhaps drawn up from the surplus 'metal' of the 'mushroom'.



Ruth Hurst Vose (1994), Haughton Green:
Remains of mushroom-shaped objects generally regarded as linen smoothers were found, the most complete (99) showing that the product was made in two pieces, the mushroom and beginning of stem from its centre was made first, then the handle with vertical rib decoration nipped in two places to provide better grip joined to it. Unfortunately the tip of the handle was lost, but its minimum height measured from the remainder was 15.2cm., the mushroom at its widest being 9.5cm. in diameter. The material is described as 'green glass'.

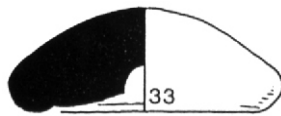


Ruth Hurst Vose (1995), Bickerstaffe:
25: Green glass fragment of a linen smoother
27: 'Black' glass mushroom-shaped end of a linen smoother.
28: 'Black' glass fragment of a handle of a linen smoother.

From Charleston (1984), *The Glass from Exeter*, p.259:

A. MEDIEVAL GLASS:

..... In a 12th - 14th century pit at Mary Arches Street was found one example (G.33) of a 'slick stone' or 'calender', a depressed hemisphere of solid glass used in the calendering of textiles, but probably also in a variety of other industrial processes requiring a smoothing action. A considerable number of examples were found in medieval layers in the industrial area of Winchester, ranging in date from the 12th -14th century, and in size from 65-85mm but mostly in the 65-75mm range, some of them showing signs of heavy wear hardly to be expected from the mere calendering of linen. An example of probably late 17th century date at Exeter is provided by G.151.



Charleston 1984
The Glass from Exeter
G.33: Fragments of a linen smoother, originally of green glass, now heavily weathered with denatured surfaces. Probably English.
12th, 13th or early 14th century.



Charleston 1984
The Glass from Exeter
G.151: Linen smoother; dark green bottle glass. English.
c.1690-1720.

Selected References:

Charleston, R. J. (1984) 'The Glass', in Allan, J. 'Medieval and Post-Medieval Finds from Exeter, 1971-80' *Exeter Arch. Report 3*, pp.258-278. Exeter: Exeter City Council

Crossley, D. W. and Aberg, F. A. (1972) 'Sixteenth-Century Glass-Making in Yorkshire: Excavations at Furnaces at Hutton and Rosedale, North Riding, 1968-1971' *Journal of Post Medieval Archaeology* 6 pp.136-141 (fig. 61), 146 (figs. 64 - 65)

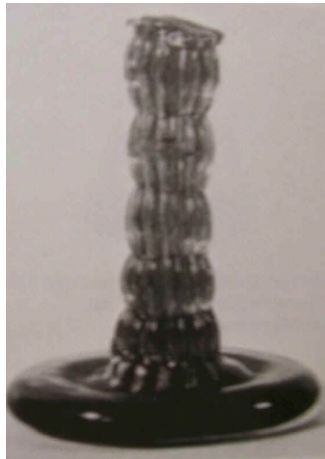
Hurst Vose, Ruth (1994) 'Excavations at the 17th century glasshouse at Haughton Green, Denton, near Manchester.' *Journal of Post Medieval Archaeology* 28 pp.26-30 (figs. 9-11, nos. 26-68)

Hurst Vose, Ruth (1995) 'Excavations at the c.1600 Bickerstaffe Glasshouse, Lancashire' in *Journal of the Merseyside Archaeological Society* Vol. 9, 1995 pp. 1-24 (pp. 9-12 (figs. 5,6, nos. 3-19))

Examples of 17th to 19th century linen smoothers from Britain and Colonial America:



17th Century Colonial America, excavated at Jamestown



18th century Colonial America, possibly of English origin



Mid 19th century linen smoother in the Science Museum



Three 17th - 18th century linen smoothers in the Museum of London (Mortimer Wheeler House, Ceramics and Glass store - Post-Medieval section)

www.museumoflondon.org.uk/ceramics/pages/glass.asp (North European 'potash' glass - Miscellaneous)

5500: London (City of London)

H 155 mm; DM 123 mm

5502: Basinghall Street, Cheapside, London

H 80 mm; DM 100 mm

A14715: Shoreditch, London (Hackney)

H 145 mm; DM 87 mm



Early 19th century glass calendars in the Museum of Welsh Life, St. Fagans



This illustration is taken from
Lensink, H. And L.(2008) 'Glas: Een
greep uit vijf eeuwen
glasgeschiedenis' PolderVondsten:
www.poldervondsten.nl

Diameter of lowest smoother: 7.0cm

Made in the Netherlands or Germany

16th to 18th centuries

These black glass linen smoothers, reproduced at 1:1, show weathering patterns typical for this type of glass (also often found on 17th and 18th century shaft and globe bottle and onion bottle fragments).

The pontil scars are clearly visible on the undersides of these examples.



This linen smoother was found in a field in England, and was probably made in England
Diameter: 7.2cm

16th to 18th centuries