

A Fragment of Scottish Mail

BY TOBIAS CAPWELL

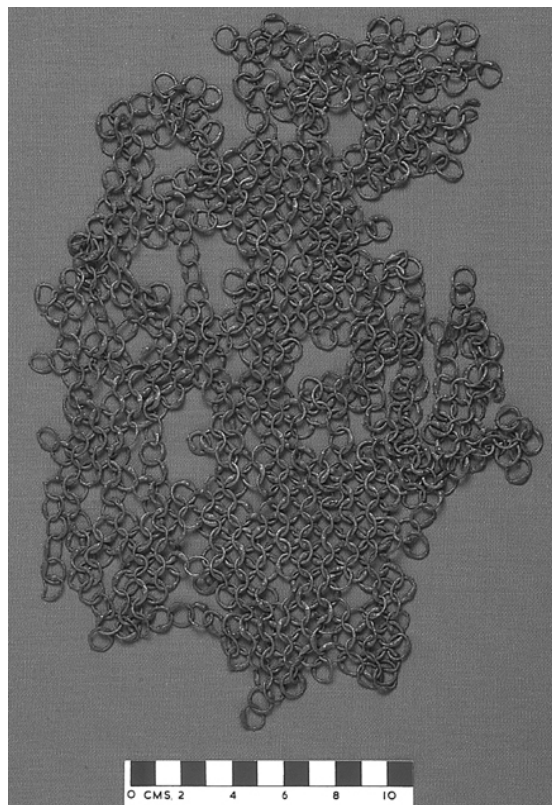
In the collections of Glasgow Museums is a small, somewhat forlorn piece of mail (Figure 1). It measures roughly 20cm by 27cm, and is in a rather tattered state. It is impossible to determine the sort of garment from which it came, since it is not large enough to contain any real clues.

Yet it is quite an important fragment. The reason for this is that it is one of only a few examples of Scottish mail known. The fragment can tell us little about itself, although a few facts are however known about its find context.

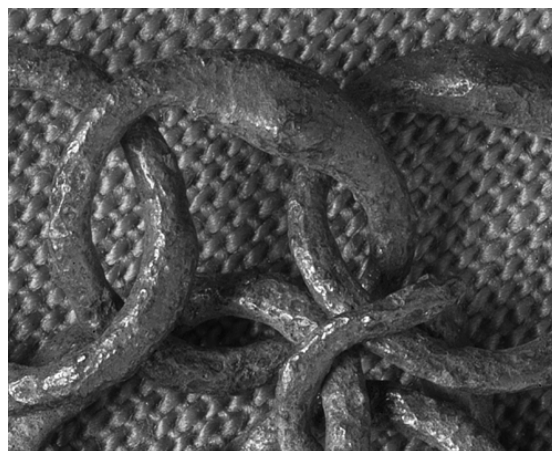
The fragment was given to the Art Gallery and Museum, Kelvingrove, in 1884 by A.G. McIntyre. It was apparently found by one William Fisher of Balfon (north of Glasgow), 'while cutting peat in Flanders Moss at a depth of seventeen feet.'¹ It was thought at the time to be a 'portion of a jacket of chain mail',² although there is simply not enough of the material left to be sure whether it was indeed part of a mail shirt; it equally could have come from a coif, mantle, or from some other garment.

This was not the only time something of interest has been found in Flanders Moss. A Bronze Age bucket, several swords, and even Britain's oldest known wheel have also emerged from the boggy depths of this area, which is today a national nature reserve. The Moss is a small remainder of what was once the great Forth Valley boglands that stretched from Aberfoyle to beyond Stirling; it now forms the largest raised bog left in the British Isles. Since this area contains so much evidence, of thousands of years of change in the landscape and in human culture, it is impossible to assign a date to this piece of mail or to associate it with a particular event. Mail was known in Britain in pre-Roman times, and probably remained in use into the seventeenth century in Scotland; thus it is difficult at the present time to reduce the possible date-frame.

The fragment is composed of iron rings having an internal diameter of between 5mm and 8mm. Some metal has clearly been lost due to corrosion (Figure 2). The links are round (or possibly ovoid) in section. A number of links are broken or bent out of shape, but for the most part the piece is in a remarkably good state of preservation. Each of the rings is riveted to four others, two above and two below, in the standard man-



1. Scottish mail fragment Inv. 1884.54 . (Photo courtesy Glasgow Museums: Art Gallery and Museum, Kelvingrove)



2. Close-up of links showing considerable corrosion. (Photo courtesy Glasgow Museums: Art Gallery and Museum, Kelvingrove)