

CHRIS RUDD

# KING'S GOLD HOARD

## from Suffolk

**I**N Spring 2008 a hoard of 783 ancient British gold coins was discovered by a metal detectorist near Wickham Market in southeast Suffolk. It is one of the largest hoards of iron age gold coins ever found in Britain and is one of the most important because it was unearthed virtually in situ, where it was buried 2,000 years ago in an earthenware pot. A small-scale excavation of the hoard site, jointly funded by the British Museum and Suffolk County Council, was conducted over October 14–15. The two-day dig revealed that the hoard had been deposited within a ditched enclosure of late iron age date and produced 42 more gold coins, bringing the total to 825. Two intersecting ditches were partially excavated; the sherds of wheel-thrown pottery found in them suggests one was open in the late iron age and the other was dug and filled in later during the Roman period.



*A hoard of 825 late iron age gold staters was found with the base of a pot near Wickham Market, Suffolk, 2008. Was the hoard a votive offering? A war chest? Or tribute money? (Image courtesy of Judith Plouviez, © Suffolk City Council).*

All but two of the 825 gold coins were minted in East Anglia by the Icení, Queen Boudica's tribe. The two "foreigners" came from Lincolnshire. Five of the gold coins—the earliest in the hoard—were made about 40–30 BC and are known as Snettisham Type after a hoard excavated at Snettisham, Norfolk, in 1987–89. The vast bulk of the Wickham Market hoard—818 coins—are all Freckenham Type gold staters, named after 90 or more found in a pot in a garden at Freckenham, Suffolk, in 1885. They were minted over a period of two or three decades, probably sometime around 20 BC–AD 15, perhaps by two or three different rulers of the Icení who may have governed concurrently. John Talbot, a specialist in the iron age coinage of East Anglia—he is also chairman of the English National Ballet and managing director of Johnson Cleaners—visited the excavation and believes that the Wickham Market hoard may have been buried sometime around AD 15 or shortly afterwards. During the past nine years John Talbot has made a detailed die study of more than 9,000 coins of the Icení and is regarded as the foremost expert in this field. His deposition date of approximately AD 15 therefore carries some weight—a welcome bonus for Suffolk archaeologists who are accustomed to working with much broader chronologies in the iron age.

The main part of the hoard came to light last Easter when Michael, a 60-year-old motor mechanic, was detecting on farmland

on the outskirts of Wickham Market (old English *wic-ham* means "homestead associated with a vicus, i.e. an earlier Romano-British settlement"). He had been metal detecting in the area for 25 years, on Sundays and bank holidays, but had never found a gold coin before. After consulting an old map, he decided to explore a field which had been under pasture for almost 30 years.

At first he found very little—just a rusty iron nail. Then on Sunday, March 16, 2008, he found his first gold coin. He looked on the internet and identified it as a Freckenham gold stater. By the next weekend the field lay under a thin carpet of snow and it was freezing cold. Undeterred, Michael returned to the meadow on Easter Day with his Minelab Quatro detector and, despite a blizzard of sleet which would have kept most folk indoors, found another eight gold staters within close proximity to the first. Then, to quote his own technical terminology, "my machine suddenly went doolally and I knew for sure I was standing right on top of a crock of gold." He marked the "hot spot" with a couple of stones and, showing remarkable self-control, walked away from it and went home for tea. He says: "I thought to myself, these coins have been waiting two-thousand years for me to find them, so they can wait one more night for me."

On Easter Monday, March 24, Michael returned to the "hot spot" and sunk his spade into the sticky clay which had not been ploughed since 1980—"it was like cutting slices of chocolate cake" he says—and carefully dug out 774 gold staters. Most of them lay only six to eight inches below the surface and many were still nestling in the base of a black earthenware pot; the top of the pot had been broken by a ploughshare, scattering the coins across five to ten metres. When he got home he washed the coins in warm water and then handed them over to the landowner,

*Main types of Freckenham gold staters in Wickham Market hoard (reduced). Two-thirds of coins in hoard are like the two lower coins, with double moon emblem. (Image the Celtic Coin Index © Institute of Archaeology, Oxford).*



*The double moon emblem was devised by the Catuvellauni and copied by the Icení. Was there an alliance between the two tribes?*



who immediately reported the discovery to Suffolk County Council Archaeological Service.

When I met Michael at the excavation I asked him how it felt to find a hoard of gold coins. "Like winning the lottery," he replied. "But it's not the money that interests me. It's the history that turns me on. I've been collecting old coins all my life and this gold hoard is the find of my lifetime. No, I don't care what it's worth and I don't want the publicity either. I'm old enough to remember when Mr Tricker found five gold neck torcs at Belstead in 1968. He got £45,000 for them and told me that he was forever being pestered by people looking for a handout. So please keep my surname out of this. Just call me Michael."



*"My machine went doolally" says detectorist Michael (right) who found the Wickham Market hoard in March 2008. Another 42 gold staters were found when the hoard site was excavated in October 2008. John Newman (centre), Suffolk County Council Archaeological Service, directed the dig. (Image courtesy of Judith Plouviez, © Suffolk City Council).*

It will be some months before the finder and landowners find out what the Wickham Market gold hoard is worth. Ian Leins, curator of iron age coins at the British Museum, has prepared a detailed report of the coins with the assistance of John Talbot. This report will be submitted to Dr Peter Dean, Her Majesty's Coroner for Suffolk, who will hold an inquest on the coins, possibly around Easter 2009. After that the Treasure Valuation Committee will determine what their current market value is with the help of independent valuers. Trying to guess at this stage what their total value may be is futile. All one can do is say that Spink's *Coins of England* (2009) prices a fine Freckenham Type gold stater at £250 and a very fine one at £700.

What might the Wickham Market hoard have been worth 2,000 years ago? Once again we are entering the realms of speculation. My guess is that the hoard originally contained 900 gold staters and that there are still some hiding in Wickham's sticky clay. What would 900 Freckenham type staters have been worth when they were buried early in the 1st century AD? Dr John Sills, an expert in early Gaulish and British gold coinage, says: "Your question is almost unanswerable. It's meaningless to ask what the modern value of an ancient coin is likely to have been because the ancient Britons couldn't buy a TV set or fridge and because we don't buy spears or shields for everyday use. Almost the only transaction for which we have documentary evidence is the purchase of military service in the 3rd and 2nd century BC, where a gold stater perhaps bought around a month's service in the 3rd century BC and five gold staters an infantryman for the duration of a campaign in the 2nd century BC, with ten gold staters buying a cavalryman. Everything else is speculation." But it's fun to speculate, isn't it? In 1996, when the Alton, Hampshire, hoard was discovered, Dr Roger Bland and John Orna-Ornstein of the British Museum both suggested that each gold stater was likely to have been worth in the region of £1,000 when minted. Bearing in mind Dr Sills' comments on military pay, that sounds plausible to me. Guessing that the Wickham Market hoard may originally have comprised 900 gold staters, I fancy that the hoard may have been worth around £1 million to the person or persons who buried it. Possibly more, in my view, but probably not less, despite the fact that these Freckenham Type staters are base gold staters—what dealers like me euphemistically call "rose gold" staters—with an alloy mix of about 40 per cent copper, 20 per cent silver and only 40 per cent gold. As soon as we place a notional

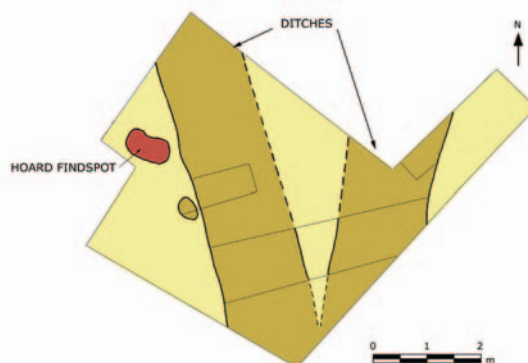
ballpark figure of around £1 million for the iron age value of the hoard, we begin to realise how very important these gold coins must have been to their owner or owners.

Who accumulated and buried the Wickham Market hoard? And for what purpose? The sheer quantity and value of the original deposit—possibly 900 gold staters worth the iron age equivalent of at least £1 million, according to my estimate—indicate that the coins must have belonged to no less than a wealthy king (or queen) of the Icenii or southern Icenii, or to the people they ruled; in other words it could conceivably have been a communal hoard, collected and buried for the benefit of the community. Such a huge accumulation of gold cannot plausibly have been the savings of a rich merchant, a prosperous farmer, a skilled craftsman or a mercenary warrior. Its owner must surely have been a tribal king. If the gold coins belonged to a king, then it was most likely a king of the Icenii who ruled immediately prior to King Anted (or one of his co-rulers).

For what purpose would such a large sum of money have been accumulated? Was it the lifetime "savings deposit" of a king who died (or was killed) without telling Mrs King where he had stashed the royal family fortune? Or were all these gold coins collected to make a very specific and very important payment of some kind? If so, to whom and to what end? The fact that the Wickham Market hoard comprises solely gold staters—no gold quarter staters, no silver coins, no gold jewellery, no gold or silver bullion—and the probability that they were mostly minted within 20–30 years of deposition suggests to me that they were hoarded, and hoarded very quickly, to make a specific payment. But what sort of payment? Three possibilities occur to me: 1. The hoard was a votive offering, made on behalf of the tribe during a period of anxiety. 2. The hoard was a "war chest" in waiting, gathered in anticipation of an imminent military threat. 3. The hoard was harvested as a tribute payment to a more powerful tribal king. I'll briefly examine these three possibilities.

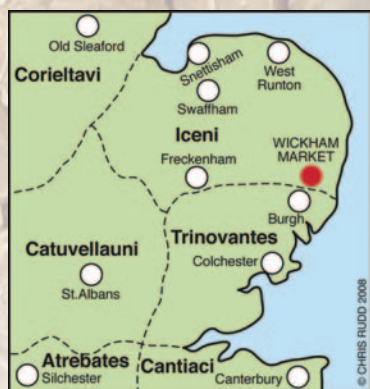
1. Votive offering? It may be significant that the Wickham Market hoard was buried close to the boundary (a liminal locus) of a ditched enclosure which was itself close to the southern tribal border of the Icenii (another liminal locus). Several large iron age coin hoards were deposited on tribal borders, which some consider were of sacral import. Was this ditched enclosure a sacred place? In 1994 I argued that the infamous "Bowl hoard"—an undeclared collation of about 7,600 silver coins, 600 gold and billon staters, 108 gold quarter staters, plus silver bullion, nighthawked at Snettisham, Norfolk, in 1991—was "a gift to the gods" and a coroner's jury agreed with me. However, the Wickham Market hoard is, in my view, of a completely different character (gold staters only) and of a different date (much earlier) than the 'Bowl hoard'. I think it was secular, not sacrificial.

2. War chest? The decade of AD 10–20 seems to have been a time of great change in East Anglia and was perhaps a time of great threat to the Icenii, whether real or perceived. Tasciovanos, "killer of badgers" and king of the Catuvellauni for 30 years, had died around AD 10 and his son Cunobelin had captured Camulodunon (Colchester) and had presumably made the Trinovantes of Essex—allies of



*The Wickham Market hoard was found near the boundary of a ditched enclosure of the late iron age. (Image courtesy of Judith Plouviez, Suffolk City Council).*





*The Wickham Market hoard was buried on the southern border of the Iceni c.AD15, not far from the Trinovantian fort of Burgh. Similar Iceni gold hoards were found at Freckenham (1884), ?Swaffham (1995) and West Runton (1990s).*

the Iceni in the Boudican rebellion—subservient to the Catuvellauni. During AD 10-20 Cunobelin apparently strengthened the Catuvellauni's control of the Cantiaci in Kent and,

by about AD 35, his uncle Epaticcus had crossed the Thames and taken Calleva (Silchester) from the Atrébates. It is therefore entirely likely that the Iceni saw Cunobelin as a potential threat to their security—he may even have challenged them in combat—and prudently laid hoards of gold staters in store, in readiness for a military campaign against the aggressively expansive Catuvellauni. At the time of the Gallic War (58–50 BC), and for three centuries before it, gold staters are thought to have been the payment of choice for tribal fighters and there is no reason to suppose that a warrior's preference for wages of gold had changed by AD 15. I think that the Wickham Market gold hoard could well have been a war chest in waiting. After all, Wickham Market is only 27 miles from Cunobelin's Colchester and only five miles from the late iron age fort at Burgh which may also have come under his control by AD 15 (crochery from the kilns of Camulodunon has been found

at Burgh). Three other hoards of Freckenham type gold staters—Freckenham 1883 (90+ staters), ?Swaffham 1995 (c. 50–60 staters), West Runton 1990s (c. 70–80 staters)—are all of similar composition to the Wickham Market hoard (nothing but gold staters), which may imply that they were all accumulated at around the same time and for the same purpose: to fund an anticipated military defence of Icenia. If so, why did the Wickham Market hoard stay in the soil? Was it owner killed? Did Cunobelin change his mind about invading the Iceni? Or was he bluffing?

3. Tribute money? Coin finds indicate that Addedomarus, king of the Catuvellauni (c. 45–25 BC), not only ruled in Hertfordshire, but also occupied Suffolk. There is numismatic iconographic evidence, albeit flimsy, that his proximity to the Iceni may have prompted a political alliance between the two tribes—an alliance of compliance, with the Iceni as the weaker partner. When Cunobelin invaded the Trinovantes sometime around AD 10 he may have scrapped this putative treaty and demanded a massive payment of tribute from the Iceni in exchange for not invading them too. Were the Wickham Market and other Freckenham hoards collected as tribute money? If so, why weren't they paid?

Before we fantasise further about the Wickham Market hoard we need more information about its archaeological context. For example, what was the purpose of the ditched enclosure? Residential? Or religious? Or what? At the very least a geophysical and topographic survey is required.

*Bronze coin of Cunobelin "hound of Belenus" in Roman-style helmet. Did he invade the Iceni? Or was he just barking? (Image the Celtic Coin Index © Institute of Archaeology, Oxford).*



For their help I thank Elizabeth Cottam, Ian Leins, Michael (the finder), John Newman, Judith Plouviez (archaeology officer, Suffolk County Council), John Sills and John Talbot. Particularly Jude.

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