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THE ALTON CELTIC HOARDS

Chris Rudd

In March 1995 two hoards, together consisting of 256 late Iron Age gold staters and some Roman jewellery, were dug up on farmland near Alton, Hampshire. The finders were two metal detectorists, Peter Murphy (47) a retired Royal Marine, and Peter Beasley (55) a bricklayer.

On 10 May this year, a coroner's inquest at Alton declared the hoards to be Treasure Trove. An independent committee will assess their market value, which is likely to be well over £100,000, and the finders will share the money with the landowner.

The gold staters were struck from about the mid-1st century BC to the first quarter of the 1st century AD, by the Atrebates. This was the main Celtic tribe south of the river Thames - with territory embracing Surrey, Sussex, Berkshire, and parts of Hampshire - and with mint sites including Silchester (Calleva Atrebatum) and Chichester (Noviomagus).

Thirteen of the gold staters carry the name of "Tincomarus". This was an Atrebatian king who was previously thought to have been called "Tincommios" after his predecessor King Commios (a former Gaulish ally of Julius Caesar who fled to Britain after the siege of Alesia in north-east Gaul in 52 BC, when Vercingetorix was defeated).

Tincomarus means "the big fish" an appropriate name for the ruler of a maritime tribe who controlled much of the cross-Channel trade prior to the Roman conquest of Britain, and whose food supply depended in part on fishing.

Commenting on Celtic fishing the classical author Athenaeus writes: "Those who live beside the rivers or near the Mediterranean or Atlantic eat fish in addition, baked fish that is, with the addition of salt, vinegar and cumin."

The larger of the two hoards consists of 206 gold staters, the smaller hoard comprising 50 gold staters. As well as the thirteen staters of Tincomarus, there are also staters minted by Commios, Eppillus, and Verica, including many previously unknown types.

Both hoards were probably deposit-



The second Alton hoard of 50 gold staters, which includes rare types struck by Tincomarus and Eppillus. (Photo: British Museum).



One of the thirteen gold staters of Tincomarus, the "big fish" who was previously thought to have been called Tincommios. (Photo: British Museum).

something I do to relax and because of my interest in local history". He said that he had seen the gold staters trickle into a hole he had dug after picking up a faint signal from his metal detector.

The two men took the first hoard home and told the landowner next day, before taking the coins to the

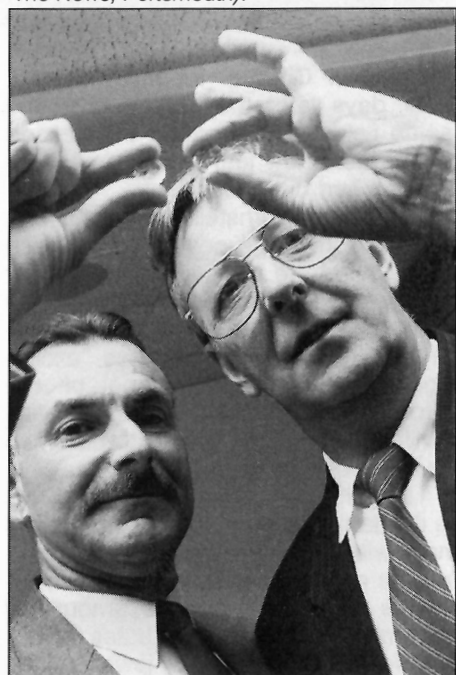
ed early in the reign of Verica, the Atrebatian king whose appeal for Roman military aid possibly precipitated the Claudian invasion of Britain in 43 AD.

Peter Murphy discovered the first hoard. He said: "We were given permission by John Dalton, the farmer, to search his land with metal detectors. Up to this date I don't think we had come up with anything more than a few bits of scrap metal and the odd rusty nail or two."

Peter Beasley said Mr Murphy suddenly shouted that he had found a hoard. "I didn't believe him at first and he had to shout three times before I came over to him. Then I saw his face was red with excitement and it dawned on me that he had found something really important."

Peter Murphy continued: "You dream about a find like this and I still can't believe it. Treasure hunting is

Peter Murphy (left) and Peter Beasley, finders of the Celtic coin and Roman jewellery hoards near Alton, Hampshire in March 1995. (Photo: The News, Portsmouth).





Winchester Coroner for safe keeping. Four days later they returned to the same field and unearthed the second hoard just a few feet away from where the first had been found.

John Orna-Ornstein, a curator and expert in Iron Age coins at the British Museum where the find will eventually be displayed, praised the two metal detectorists for reporting their discovery. He described the find as "exceptionally exciting" and one of the strongest proofs that Celtic and Roman civilisations mixed before the Roman invasion of Britain.

He told the coroner's inquest: "This is probably the most interesting hoard I have witnessed. Its historical value cannot be overestimated, as it has provided us with an enormous amount of information about the Atrebatas tribe".

He said: "The Roman jewellery, the

The first Alton hoard of 206 gold staters. The die cutting is of Roman style providing evidence of contact between late Iron Age Britain and Roman Gaul. (Photo: British Museum).

ring and the band, are very good quality gold, much better than today. The ring is about 99% pure gold and the band 92% pure. Each coin would have been worth £1,000 at that time. This collection was worth more than

£250,000. The safest place was underground".

The British Museum is now expected to carry out its own investigation of the site, the precise location of which is presently being kept secret.

Chris Rudd is a fellow of the Royal Numismatic Society and a specialist in Celtic coins.

Gold staters of Commios (BM 729), Tincomarus (BM 767), Eppillus (BM 1125), and Verica (BM 1147) in the British Museum.

