

HUGE DRUID HOARD FROM LEICESTERSHIRE

Chris Rudd

On 7 April 2003 the British Museum announced that "Amateur archaeologists have discovered the site of the largest hoard of Iron Age gold and silver coins ever found in Britain, along with a unique Roman gilded silver helmet."

Described by Dr. Jeremy Hill of the British Museum as "the Iron Age equivalent of an open-air cathedral" the site is located in a five-acre plot of farmland on a hilltop near Market Harborough in south-east Leicestershire, not far from Leicester (ancient *Ratae* "the fort") which, 2,000 years ago, was one of the main centres of the Corieltauvi tribe, whose name means "people of the land of many rivers".

One of these rivers, the Welland, flows through Market Harborough. The British Museum says: "Evidence for feasting at the site suggests that the coins were probably offerings at an important open air religious centre, possibly associated with the Druids."

It is unusual to hear professional archaeologists talking publicly about the Druids. So I asked how much evidence there was of religious activity at this hilltop site? Vicki Priest (she has the right name, doesn't she?), who directed the excavations carried out by University of Leicester Archaeological Services, confirmed that plenty of evidence of ritual sacrifice and ritual feasting had been uncovered. She said that they had found the broken bones of many pigs and two sheep, some of which bore the knife marks of butchery; that these bones were definitely not deposited as domestic rubbish (the settlement was 100 metres away from the religious enclosure); and that they had been deliberately buried in shallow pits. Ms. Priest also told me that 13 of the 15 caches of coins had been buried near the entrance of the enclosure, apparently as votive offerings, and that each cache of coins still retained the shape of the bag that had contained them. It is significant that most of the animal bones found came from pigs.

The Greek geographer Strabo (circa 60 BC-AD 20) tells us that the Celts especially enjoyed fresh pork and salted pork. Irish myths, some of which are of Iron Age origin, say that pork formed



Archaeologists say the Leicestershire hoard site, described as "the Iron Age equivalent of an open-air cathedral," may be linked to the Druids. Classical writers confirm that Druidic rites were conducted outside, not in temples. (Coloured aquatint from S.R. Meyrick & C.H. Smith, "The Costume of the Original Inhabitants of the British Islands", 1815)



More than 3,000 coins were excavated, mostly silver coins of the Corieltauvi tribe. Three larger Celtic coin hoards have been found in Britain, but not by archaeologists.

(Photographs courtesy of the British Museum, news release 7 April 2003)

the basis of feasting in this world and the next. Moreover, almost all the earliest silver coins and gold quarter staters of the Corieltauvi carried the image of a boar (*Sus scrofa*), which is simply a wild pig with a brown bristly coat. Were boars and pigs held in high esteem by the Corieltauvi? It would seem so. In 1826 an Iron Age bronze shield was dredged from the river Witham in Corieltauvian territory. This, too, was a votive offering and also bore the image of a boar.

The initial discovery of the huge Market Harborough hoard was made by an amateur archaeologist, Ken Wallace, aged 62, who formerly taught design technology. In December 2000 he was walking across a ploughed wheat field with a good view over the surrounding countryside. But Mr. Wallace wasn't admiring the scenery; he was walking with his eyes on the ground, looking for pieces of broken pottery.

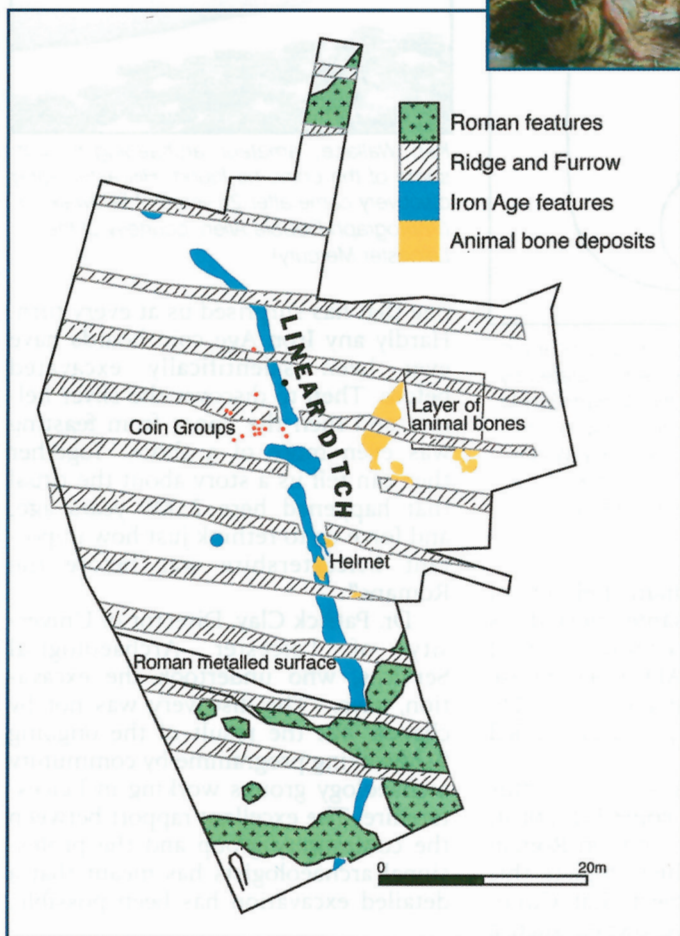
Suddenly, he caught sight of “a couple of coins glistening in the sun”. He hurried home and returned with his Garrett GTI metal detector to find 188 Corieltavian silver coins, one silver coin of King Cunobelin, six bronze cores of plated Iron Age coins, 17 Roman Republican *denarii*, 9 Roman Imperial *denarii*, 34 Roman Imperial copper-alloy/base-silver coins and three modern coins.

“I’ve been doing field walking for 26 years” says Mr. Wallace, “but the best I’ve found was a couple of Bronze Age axe heads.”

He says the hoard was a find of a lifetime. “I’m not excited about the



The hoard was found to the south-east of Leicester, known in Roman times as *Ratae Coritanorum*. This is an artist's view of Leicester in the Late Iron Age. (Picture Mike Codd, courtesy of Leicester City Council Museums Service)



Most of the coins came from near the entrance of a sacred hilltop enclosure, which was defined by a curved linear ditch of Late Iron Age date. (EDM survey by University of Leicester Archaeological Services)



Many groups of coins were still in the shape of the bags they were buried in. Each group was lifted from the ground in its block of earth, so that the coins could be removed at the British Museum. (Photograph courtesy of the British Museum, news release 7 April 2003)

money. It's never been about that. I didn't realise how significant the coins were. I was absolutely astonished when I found out. I'm just pleased we have found a perfect piece of community archaeology which will help people to learn more about the Corieltavi, the Iron Age tribe they belonged to.”

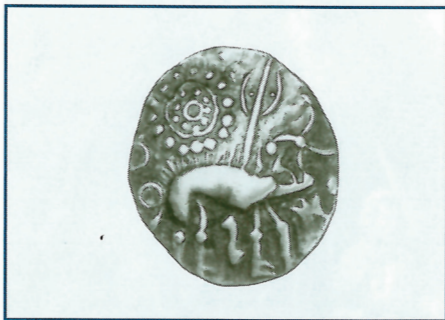
Mr. Wallace's wife Hazel, aged 58, is also a fieldwalker and says: “We were bursting to tell people, but we knew we

couldn't. When somebody tells you something is this valuable, you don't believe it's happening to you.”

Mr. Wallace took his find of 188 coins to Peter Liddle, who is Leicestershire County Council's senior archaeologist and who immediately realised their importance. However, a full archaeological excavation was blocked when the farmland where the coins had been found was quarantined,

due to foot and mouth disease. It took almost a year before archaeologists from Leicester University, funded by English Heritage, BBC Television and the British Museum, could get onto the site and begin digging.

DRUID HOARD



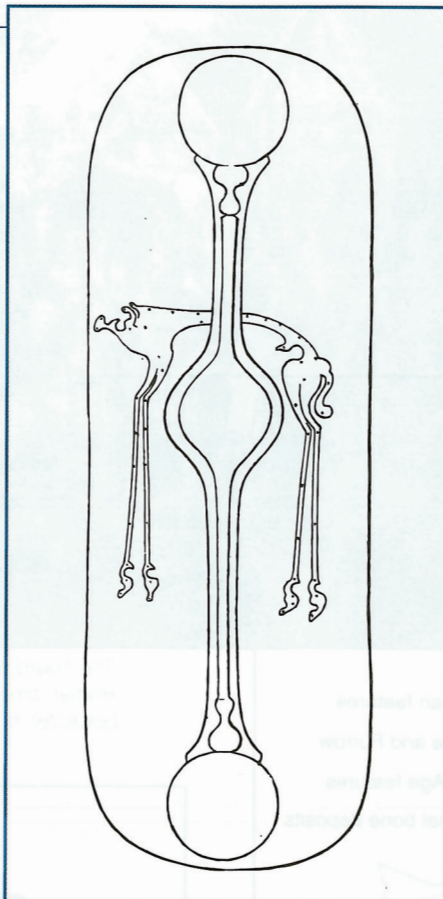
Pigs were slaughtered for ritual feasting and it may be no coincidence that boars feature prominently on silver coins of the Corieltavi. This boar, with a solar symbol and swastika above, has been ceremonially speared by a sun-sceptre.

(Photograph Chris Rudd List 63)

As a result of the excavations conducted in 2002 well over 3,000 more coins were found, including many great Celtic rarities, and fragments of a silver decorated cavalry helmet - the only one ever discovered in Britain. Found in hundreds of pieces with one of the caches of Iron Age coins, the helmet was lifted out of the ground in a large block of earth and taken to the British Museum, where it is being examined. It is made of iron and sheathed in gilded sheet silver, richly decorated with embossed images of drapery, stylised hair, a wreath of laurel leaves and a lion. A similar Weiler type helmet was found at Xanten in West Germany.

The British Museum states that "Such helmets were worn by high-ranking officers on parade and evidence indicates that it might have been buried before the Roman conquest. This raises the intriguing possibility that a Leicestershire man may have travelled to the Roman Empire and served in the Roman cavalry before Britain was conquered by Rome."

Did a Corieltavian prince serve overseas with the Roman cavalry before returning home to Leicestershire prior to the Claudian invasion of AD 43? The Market Harborough helmet is similar to this gilded silver cavalry helmet found at Xanten, West Germany. (Photograph H. Ilienthal, courtesy of Rheinisches Landesmuseum, Bonn)



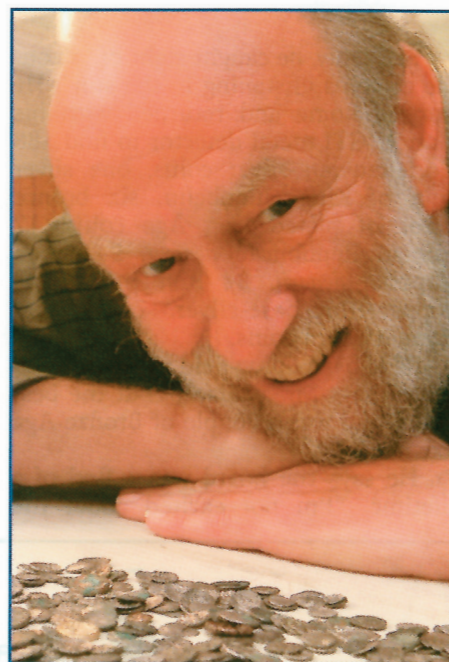
The enduring popularity of pigs and boars in the East Midlands is further demonstrated by the wolf-like male boar on the Witham Shield, 100cm long, made of bronze and wood in the late 3rd century BC and found at Washingham, near Lincoln, circa 1826.

(Drawing courtesy of the British Museum, Iron Age Guide, 1925)

Why not? A Roman helmet of approximately the same period is proudly displayed on a bronze coin of King Cunobelin, circa AD 10-41, whose court, according to archaeologist Dr. John Creighton, "was probably riddled with Romans."

Did the Celtic engraver copy this helmet from a Roman coin? I doubt it, because I can't find a common Roman coin of the period, which depicts this type of helmet. I suspect that Cunobelin himself may have owned such a helmet and that the head on the coin is his, as suggested by Sir John Evans in 1864.

Peter Liddle says: "This is by far the most dramatic archaeological find ever made in Leicestershire". Dr. Jeremy Hill, who is Curator of the British Iron Age Collections at the British Museum, displays even greater enthusiasm, declaring: "This is not just a premier division discovery. It is European super-league stuff - absolutely incredible. I went to the site last year and every two minutes a digger was coming over with more coins. This is a discovery of international significance, and



Ken Wallace, amateur archaeologist, with some of the coins he found. His astounding discovery came after 26 years of fieldwalking. (Photograph Debbie Allen, courtesy of the Leicester Mercury)

one that has surprised us at every turn. Hardly any Iron Age coin hoards have ever been scientifically excavated before. Then to discover the silver helmet and then the bones from feasting was even more of a shock. Together they can tell us a story about the ritual that happened here 2,000 years ago, and force us to rethink just how important Leicestershire was before the Romans".

Dr. Patrick Clay, Director of University of Leicester Archaeological Services, who undertook the excavation, says: "The discovery was not by chance, but the result of the ongoing fieldwalking programme by community archaeology groups working in Leicestershire. The excellent rapport between the community group and the professional archaeologists has meant that a detailed excavation has been possible,

The crested helmet on this bronze coin, struck at Camulodunon (Colchester) circa AD 10-41, is Roman, not British, and probably belonged to the man on the coin, King Cunobelin himself.

(Photograph Chris Rudd, List 59)



revealing this unique religious site”.

Jon Humble, the regional English Heritage Inspector of Ancient Monuments, says: “We were delighted to fund the investigation of this tantalising site. It was hugely important that the discoveries were recorded very carefully in the field, and then examined in further detail in the laboratory. The discovery of the Market Harborough hoard has been one of the best-kept numismatic secrets of all time. Normally, when thousands of Iron Age coins pour out of the ground, I get to hear about them within a couple of weeks, if not a couple of days. But not this time. Like most people, the first I heard about the Leicestershire hoard was when I read a report of Ken Wallace’s initial find in the *Treasure Annual Report 2000*, published by the Department for Culture, Media and Sport in July 2000. This didn’t even reveal the finder’s name, as is the usual practice, and referred discreetly to the find spot as ‘Leicester area, Leicestershire.’ It wasn’t until 7.15pm, 7 April 2003, when I was watching Channel 4 News, that I learned how breathtakingly big the Market Harborough hoard really was. The next day I contacted Dr. Jonathan Williams of the Department of Coins and Medals at the British Museum and asked him if he could give me some more detailed information on the coins, which he kindly agreed to do, despite being bombarded by many similar requests from all over the place.”

Dr. Williams says: “There are somewhere between 3,000 and 4,000 coins in this hoard. It is impossible to give a more exact total at the present time (April) because the coins are still being extracted from the blocks of earth in which they were found. Fifteen different deposits of coins were excavated in situ. The important thing about this huge hoard - the largest Iron Age hoard ever excavated - is that it has been legally recovered under controlled archaeological conditions and that it was discovered as a result of a community archaeology project. This immediately differentiates it from other major Iron Age hoards found in Britain. The majority of the coins in this hoard are inscribed silver coins of the Corieltavi, though there are also around a hundred gold staters, plus some gold-plated staters. The inscribed Corieltavian types include Vep, Vep CorF, Aun Cost, Iisuprasu, Lat Ison and silver units with a blundered legend apparently reading Ovovo. There is a previously unrecorded gold stater of Lat Ison, plus coins from other areas, such as two floral-type gold quarter



Three extremely rare silver coins of the Corieltavi, found by Ken Wallace. Inscribed Ovovo, Lat Ison and Cvta Chavo, they were issued in the early 1st century AD.

(Photographs courtesy of the British Museum DCMS Treasure Annual Report 2000)



The Market Harborough hoard has produced the first recorded specimen of a solid gold stater of Lat Ison. Only four other staters of this obscure ruler are known - all contemporary forgeries: (Images courtesy of the British Museum)

Approximate locations of the four largest hoards of Iron Age coins found in Britain. The Market Harborough hoard is the only one excavated by archaeologists and the only one that will be fully recorded and published. (Map Chris Rudd)



staters of Addedomaros (BMC 2416), Atrebatian Qc staters, and some gold quarters of Cunobelin. In addition, there are several hundred Roman silver *denarii* from the same hoard - late Republican and early Imperial. There is no doubt in my mind that this hoard represents a votive offering and, though it is far too soon to be talking about a deposition date - much work has yet to be done on the coins - it is likely that the hoard was buried sometime around the mid-1st century AD. Whether it was before or after or during the Claudian invasion has still to be decided. I am hoping that our examination of the early Imperial coins will help us determine if the hoard is pre- or post-invasion. This is an absolutely fascinating find and I shall continue to work on the coins myself for many months ahead, with some assistance from Geoff Cottam, whose forthcoming book on the coinage of the Corieltavi will be of great help to me. The hoard is of such enormous importance that I feel sure that it will eventually be acquired by a Leicestershire museum or the British Museum.” Perhaps the most important coin from this massive Druid hoard is an excessively rare gold stater inscribed lat iso[n], struck early in the 1st century AD by an obscure Corieltavian ruler who is known to us solely from his few surviving coins. Only five staters of Lat Ison have been recorded by the Celtic Coin Index and the Leicestershire coin is the only one that is made of solid gold alloy. The other four examples are all contemporary forgeries: one is gold plated, and three are bronze cores of plated staters. When I published the first recorded Lat Ison stater in 1997 (Chris Rudd list 9, no.55) Dr. Jeffrey May, author of *Drag-onby* and a leading authority on the coinage of the Corieltavi, wrote: “It is tempting to think that the mint site for the Lat Ison series was Old Sleaford (south Lincolnshire), where there was a major Iron Age settlement which yielded circa 4,290 coin pellet mould

fragments. The Lat Ison stater is a most important addition to our knowledge of the coinages of the East Midlands. My guess is that the series as a whole was issued by a separate authority in southern Lincolnshire, drawn for much of the later Iron Age into a wider Corieltauvian hegemony whose heartland lay in Lindsey, further north, but perhaps minting its own coins for a short period near the end of the Iron Age in the early first century AD."

What was - and is - the value of the Market Harborough hoard of coins? David Keys, archaeology correspondent for *The Independent*, reports that the coins were "worth the equivalent of about £200,000 at the time of the Roman conquest."

Having been declared treasure by the Coroner on 8 April, the present-day market value of the coins will be estimated by the Treasure Valuation Committee, probably later this year, in accordance with the guidelines given for the 1996 Treasure Act.

Dalya Alberge, arts correspondent of *The Times*, says "one estimate suggested that the value might be up to £350,000."

I don't know who her informant was - media estimates of hoard values are notoriously inaccurate and rightly ignored by the Treasure Valuation Committee but - in this instance, the suggested sum may not be entirely unreasonable. If we value 3,000 Iron Age silver coins at, say, £100 each on average, and 100 gold staters at, say £500 each on average (the Lat Ison gold stater alone must be worth at least £3,000), then we might well end up with a total of £350,000. But, of course, this is wild speculation because the coins are still being extracted from their blocks of soil and haven't all been identified yet by Dr. Williams at the British Museum.

All we can say for certain at this



The Romano-Celtic temple site at Wanborough. This reconstruction shows how the temple may have looked in its heyday.
(Picture David Williams, courtesy of Surrey Archaeological Society)

stage is that the Market Harborough hoard is unquestionably the most valuable Iron Age hoard of coins - archaeologically valuable, historically valuable, numismatically valuable, financially valuable - ever found in Britain. The only other British Iron Age coin hoards of comparable quantity are the Wanborough hoard, Surrey, 1983-85 (over 9,000 coins), the Bowl Hoard, Norfolk, 1991, (over 8,000 coins in a bronze bowl) and a Wessex hoard found some years ago (over 5,000 coins in two wooden tubs).

Tragically these three colossal Celtic hoards were never reported by their finders and most of the priceless information these coins could have given us has been lost forever, due to greed, dishonesty and vandalism. By contrast, the archaeological integrity of the Leicestershire hoard makes it a national treasure and its finder, Ken Wallace, a national hero.

TH

Acknowledgements

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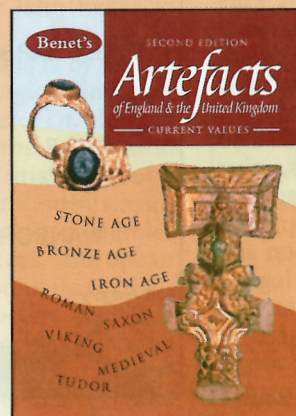
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