

## Celtic cash cow hoard

**A**T 9.15am on Tuesday, 12th August this year, a cow's leg-bone containing twenty Celtic gold staters was unearthed on the site of a Saxon cemetery at Sedgeford in north-west Norfolk, formerly the tribal territory of Queen Boudica and only a few miles from Sandringham, the country home of Queen Elizabeth II.



Three of the 39 Gallic War gold staters found at Sedgeford.  
Photo: John Hocknell, Eastern Daily Press.



An Ecenian warrior ready for battle. His sword scabbard and shield are styled on finds from Congham and Ringstead, Norfolk. Artist: Sue White.

Excavations in the Boneyard Field, Sedgeford, August 2003.  
Photo: John Hocknell, Eastern Daily Press.



Nineteen other gold staters have been found at this site—eleven this year, eight in previous years—making thirty-nine in all. They are all presumably from the same hoard and all of the same type—Gallo-Belgic E, commonly known as Gallic War staters. They were struck around 60–50 BC by the Ambiani tribe, who lived in the Somme valley, northern France, and whose name survives in modern Amiens. The Sedgeford hoard of thirty-nine Gallic War gold staters may represent the mercenary pay of a British warrior-chieftan who returned to his home in Norfolk, land of the Ecenii or Iceni, after fighting the forces of Julius Caesar in northern Gaul.

In his own account of the Gallic War the famous Roman commander writes: "*Caesar made active preparations for an expedition to Britain, because he knew that in almost all the Gallic campaigns the Gauls had received reinforcements from Britain*" (De Bello Gallico IV.20). The gold coins may have been buried in a cow's leg-bone for safe keeping. Or they may have been a votive gift to the gods. There is possibly some evidence of ritual activity during the late Iron Age at Sedgeford.

The remarkable Celtic "cash cow" find was made only two days before the close of this year's seven-week excavations in the aptly named Boneyard Field in the quiet Norfolk village of Sedgeford, which has probably seen almost continuous occupation since the Bronze Age. Generations of villagers have been aware of a burial ground in the vicinity of the dig, because of the human bones which have frequently come to the surface and given the field its nickname, Boneyard. When deep ploughing was planned in the field in the 1950s, the presence of burials was confirmed by test pits dug by Professor Peter Jewell from Cambridge University. The annual excavations commenced in 1996 after academic archaeologist Dr Neil Faulkner, now a co-director of the Sedgeford Historical and Archaeological Project (SHARP), was told about the cemetery by the owner of the land, Professor Bernard Campbell of Sedgeford Hall. Registered as a non-profit making charity (no.1064553) and run by a multi-talented team of directors – Dr Neil Faulkner, Dr Pat Reid, Dr Keith Robinson, Chris Mackie, Sophie Cabot, Gareth Davies, trustees (chaired by Jean McGinty OBE) and supervisors, SHARP has built up an international reputation for hands-on community archaeology. Investigations of the two principal sites, Boneyard and Reedham, are undertaken by volunteers from as far away as America and Australia. They range from experienced archaeologists through archaeological students to enthusiastic amateurs, underlining the project's commitment to creating opportunities for all to participate in hands-in-the-dirt, feet-in-the-mud archaeology.

SHARP's ultimate objective is to create a complete history of Sedgeford village and digging is now in its eighth season. Each summer sees a continuation of an extensive excavation of a Saxon cemetery in the

valley of the Heacham river, which has so far revealed nearly 200 human skeletons and emerging evidence of an Iron Age settlement.

The Sedgeford Historical and Archaeological Project is a prime example of democratic archaeology: prehistory of the people, by the people, for the people. The cow-bone hoard was not excavated by a professional archaeologist, but by a "man of the people", an amateur archaeologist with a metal detector, 42-year-old Kevin Woodward of Boston, Lincolnshire. Kev, as he prefers to be known, works for the Royal Air Force at Coningsby, as an engineering controller on Tornado F3 fighter-planes. I met him at 7.00pm on site at Sedgeford two days after he had made his news-making find.

I asked him how he discovered the "cash cow" hoard. He said: "I'm an amateur archaeologist who just happens to use a metal detector as one of his many tools. Over the course of this season's excavation at Sedgeford two signals had emerged which needed investigating and clearing before we closed the site. I thought one of the signals may have been caused by a metal stake which had been used to hold up a hosepipe and which had fallen into the silt. When I returned to this part of the site I picked up a signal of something dead straight. With a small trowel I cleared about two inches of sludge away until I got down to the archaeology layer. The signal was still there, so I asked the site supervisor, Gareth Davies, if it was okay for me to dig down and investigate. After carefully scraping away another four inches of earth, a bone came to light, lying on its side. I took the bone out and laid it to one side. The site is full of bones, animal bones as well as human bones, and I had no reason for thinking there was anything special about this one. So I checked the hole again and—yes, the signal was still there—dug down some more. Then I checked again with my detector and the signal split into three lots. Within a minute I had five gold staters in my hand. You can imagine how I felt. In fourteen years of metal detecting I'd never found anything like this before. To make sure I hadn't missed any staters, I checked my spoil heap and the bone. Much to my amazement I was still getting a signal. I moved the bone away and laid the detector head directly on it. It registered metal again. I looked inside and could see two coins jammed in the top and I realised the weight of it then – it was quite heavy. You could shake it and it was like a tube of Smarties; you could feel the coins rattling around inside". I asked Kev how he felt when he realised what he'd found. "I felt complete euphoria" he said. "It was a dream come true. I've been detecting 14-odd years now and I've read lots of stories about people finding these sorts of things. But to actually find it and still in its proper context is ideal. It's hard to curb your enthusiasm". Kev then confessed that it was actually his wife, Jenn, who had originally picked up the signal of the cow-bone cache the previous week, but she hadn't been given permission to dig down and investigate it.

In order to confirm the contents of the cow bone, the archaeologists decided to get it X-rayed. Chris Mackie, one of the co-directors of SHARP, said: "First of all I took the cow bone to the Queen Elizabeth Hospital at Kings Lynn, but it was far too crowded, packed with people requiring urgent attention. So I then took the bone to Sandringham Hospital, which is a private hospital. The radiographer was very helpful and as excited as I was.



When the bone was X-rayed we could see that there were at least 18 or 19 coins in it. A picture was then taken with an X-ray video camera.

The twenty gold staters were carefully removed from the cow bone in Sedgford by—guess who?—the finder, Kev Woodward. "I never thought I'd be allowed to remove the coins myself" he told me. "But that's what I've been doing here today. I thought they were going to be whisked away to the British Museum. To be asked to do it myself is a great honour. I am quite humbled really—you're actually handling these coins for the first time in 2,000 years. The great thing is that it was all processed here in Sedgford within two days. What's more, we did it all ourselves. The coins didn't have to be sent away to London for weeks, awaiting identification. We already had our own Iron Age coin expert on site—Megan Dennis, who works with the Celtic Coin Index, Oxford. That's the good thing about SHARP. It's not hierarchical. It's public access in its nicest form".

This feeling of self-sufficiency and local independence was not, I discovered, confined to the diggers on site. It extended beyond the excavation to the people of Sedgford. "SHARP would like the cow bone and the coins to stay in Norfolk" said co-director Sophie Cabot. "The villagers of Sedgford also want the coins to remain in Norfolk, in their own county, and don't want them removed like the timbers of Seahenge were. SHARP is very much a communal project and we are sensitive to local feelings".

It is of special interest to SHARP archaeologists that all the coins from the cow bone hoard are of the same type, all Gallic War Uniface staters and that they are all in what Megan Dennis described to me as "pristine condition". Unlike the vast majority of uninscribed Celtic gold coins, Gallic War Uniface staters can be dated quite accurately. I asked Dr John Sills about this. He is Britain's premier authority on these coins and his book, *Gaulish and early British gold coinage*, was published in September (Spink, £95). He says: "Although uniface Gallo-Belgic E staters are probably the commonest Celtic gold coins, they are also some of the most important. They belong to a select group of types that can be dated with reasonable precision, in this case because of their association with the Gallic Wars, Caesar's invasions of Gaul and Britain, between 58 and 51 BC. We can say this because production undergoes a quantum leap at the start of the series at the same time as staters like those from Sedgford flood into Britain to pay for mercenaries and war material and in the hands of refugees. Simone Scheers identified seven different classes in 1977, but only classes 1 to 4 are found in any quantity in England, implying that class 4 was the type current on the continent when Caesar launched his massive second invasion of Britain in 54 BC, which was expressly designed to reduce the cross-Channel trade in men and equipment. The Sedgford find fits into a pattern of 'clean' single type hoards, usually found near the coast, that appear to have been buried very soon after they arrived in the country".

Why were the coins buried in the mud-filled distal humerus of a cow? Was the leg bone simply being utilised as a convenient Iron Age money-box and concealed by the owner with every intention of

retrieving his investment in the earth? If so, he must have died a disappointed investor. Or were the gold coins donated to some Celtic deity, as thanksgiving for some blessing or as an insurance payment for protecting him, his family, his home and his land? I think the fact that the coins were buried inside the bone of a cow might perhaps indicate that their owner was specifically concerned about his livestock. This idea gains some support from the presence of two Iron Age horse burials within twenty yards of the golden cash-cow cache.

The Sedgford hoard is not the only ancient British hoard to be found buried in a bone. On November 7, 1893 a small find of coins and artefacts was made on the estate of William Brooke of Northgate Mount, Honley, Yorkshire. They were contained in a hollow ox bone, 15cm in length, and "were concealed in a cavity behind a piece of rock, and were discovered by workmen who were breaking away the rock". The hoard consisted of a small bronze seal-box, a bronze fibula, two small bronze rings, eighteen Roman coins (mostly Republican denarii) and five Celtic silver half units of Volisios Dumnocoveros, Volisios Dumnovellaunos and Volisios Cartivellaunos, struck by the Corieltauvi tribe around AD 30–45.

At the time it was thought that the Celtic silver coins had been issued by the Brigantes (though Sir John Evans doubted it) and the one inscribed CARTIVE[L] had probably been minted by Queen Cartimandua, who treacherously surrendered the defeated Celtic prince Caratacos to the Romans. The Honley ox-bone

hoard was probably deposited a few years after AD 73, during the British wars against Frontinus or Agricola.

According to *The Times* and the *Daily Express* the present value of the Sedgford hoard of 39 gold staters is about £13,000. Bearing in mind that all the coins were apparently found in mint condition and that today's average retail price for an extremely fine Gallic War Uniface stater is £350, then £13,000 would seem to be an appropriate valuation. Because the coins were discovered during the course of an archaeological excavation, the finder of the cow-bone coins cannot expect to receive any financial reward for them. Two days after the find was made the *Eastern Daily Press* said: "The discovery of the bone is a real coup for members of the Sedgford Historical and Archaeological Research Project. We will never know if this ancient saver was happy with his investment, but in archeological terms it is worth its weight in gold". In reality it is worth many times more than its bullion value, both numismatically and archaeologically. As Chris Mackie said to *The Times*, "It is an extremely exciting find of national importance".

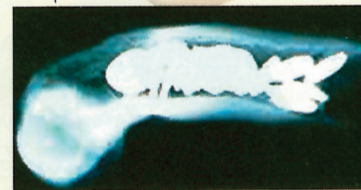
## Acknowledgements

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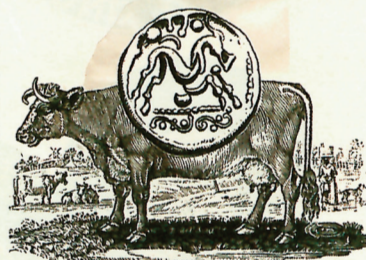


Kev Woodward removing a gold stater from the cow bone he found.

Photo: John Hocknell, Eastern Daily Press.



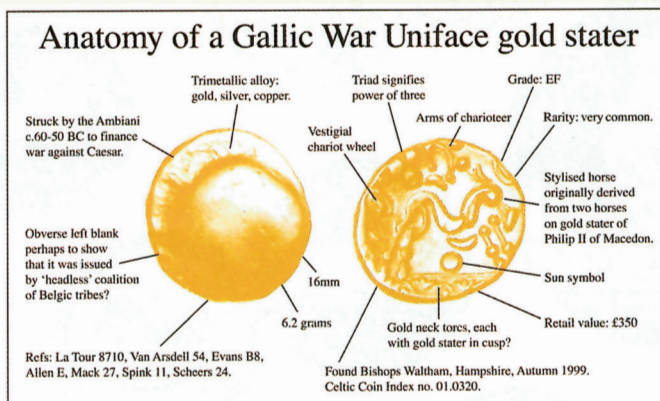
X-ray by Sandringham Hospital of 20 gold staters in leg-bone of cow. Photo: EDP.



Why were the coins hidden in the leg-bone of a cow? Gallic War gold stater, La Tour 8710. Holstein cow, 18th cent. woodcut by Thomas Bewick.



Silver half unit of Volisios Cartivellaunos, VA 994, BMC 3347 (this coin), ex Honley hoard. Photo: Celtic Coin Index, Oxford.



Main features of a typical Gallo-Belgic E gold stater.