

JOHN FOLLOWS

# How an old logger was axed by Celtic coins

**M**E and old coins, we've always got on well. When I was a kid in Black-Country post-war Wolverhampton I used to sift through small change searching for Victorian bun pennies, and keep the odd farthing my Mum had given me to buy a sweet from the little shop on the way home from school. Almost 70 years later in sunny green-belt Sussex I still love old coins, especially those made of old-time metals—real copper, real silver, real gold. Though the hard-headed adult in me understands why Britain devalued the pound, debased the coins and decimalised the currency, the soft-hearted kid in me still mourns the loss of the big Britannia penny, the silver sixpence, the ship halfpenny, the wren farthing and the thrifty 12-sided threepence.



*Did early Gallic migrants or traders bring this Broad Flan gold stater to Britain? Struck by the Bellovaci c.175–120 BC, ABC 4, found in Essex.*

I've collected all kinds of old coins, but it wasn't until my fifties that I got hit by Celtic coins and by "Celtic" I mean ancient British coins of the late Iron Age. Yes, I was hit hard by Celtic coins—I mean, really hammered. I was bowled over by them. You could call it my numismatic mid-life crisis. You see, by my fifties I'd already been in the Royal Navy, the police, a long-distance lorry driver, a bus driver, an insurance agent and manager, and was the owner of two successful companies I had set up: an insurance brokerage and a popular coach tour company. For the first time in my life I could afford to buy the finest ancient British coins—hundreds of them, including the rarest and loveliest gold staters.

My "conversion" to Celtic coins happened suddenly and caught me unawares. With my life experiences, it takes a lot to shake me, but boy, was I all-shook-up by Celtic coins! I was visiting a guy I'd met in a nearby village, a well spoken, well educated landowner. After I'd got to know him better and knowing of my interest in old coins he showed me his collection of ancient British coins. What an amazing collection it was! Tray after tray of the most remarkable gold and silver coins I'd ever seen, all minted over 2,000 years ago by leaders of the southern tribes of Britain. I couldn't believe my eyes. The only place I'd seen so many beautiful Celtic coins was in a museum. I thought this man must have spent a fortune in London sale rooms. "Oh no", he said, "I bought most of these coins from local metal detectorists". I was amazed. From that day on I was hooked and for the next 20 years I became utterly addicted to ancient British coins. I read all I could about them and concentrated on collecting the finest and rarest specimens I could afford, particularly gold staters and quarter staters, although I acquired a quantity of nice silver coins as well.

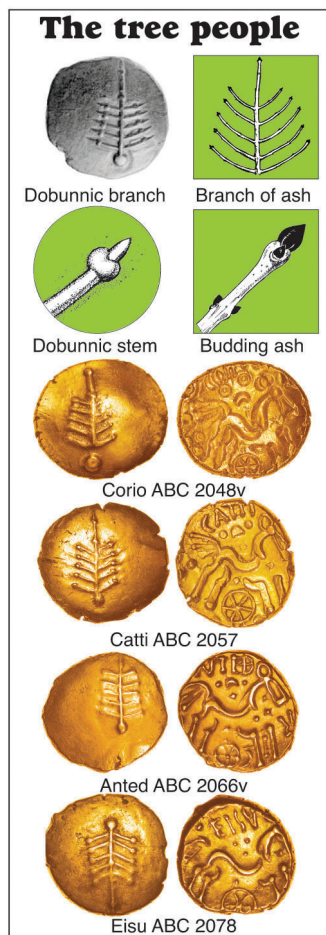
I've always been a nature-loving person, and enjoyed schooling my youngest son in the ways of the countryside. Since the 1990s I've pursued three main hobbies—one indoor, two outdoor, with energy and passion. My outdoor hobbies

are shooting and logging and I'm fortunate to have local symbiotic relationships where I fell, and also clear fallen trees, for the wood. I really enjoy being outside with a chain-saw, wedges, splitter and axe. My indoor hobby, which I'm equally passionate about, has been looking—looking at my lovely collection of Celtic coins.

What is it about British Celtic coins that can make a man weak-kneed and wobbly, that can stir such deep feelings in his middle-aged heart and that can make him devote so much time, so much effort and so much money on them? For me the answer can be summed up in four words—History, Mystery, Artistry, Scarcity.



*For 100 years two tribal dynasties north and south of the Thames competed for power. North won when Epaticcus and Caratacus crossed the Thames, forcing Verica (south) to seek the help of Rome. Claudius obliged by invading Britain in AD 43. Do we still want Europe's aid?*



For 50 years kings of the Dobunni displayed an ash-branch on their gold staters. Upside down it's a human skull and ribcage. (ash drawings by Jane Bottomley © Chris Rudd.)

## History

As a young schoolboy I used to think that Britain's first coins, like Britain's first roads, were made by the Romans. So, not being a Latin scholar, other than suffering five years trying to master the language at school, and not being a fan of the land-grabbing, empire-building, toga-wearing Romans, I was chuffed to discover later in life—I think I was on HMS *Fisgard* at the time—that Britain's first coins were actually minted in Britain, well before Caesar invaded in 55 and 54 BC, and over 150 years before the emperor Claudius clobbered south-eastern Britain in AD 43.

Every time I pick up one of my Celtic coins, I feel an incredible sense of ancient British history, of deep ancestral history. It's an almost tangible feeling, the same sort of feeling I get when I walk around the prehistoric earthworks near where I live or stand on top of a bronze age barrow. Handling Celtic coins takes me back in time faster than any Tardis could, to a time when I believe Britain was truly great, when most Britons lived a natural rural life, when we produced all our own food, made all our own clothes and weren't so dependent on foreign imports and foreign powers.

Living on the south coast, not far from the sea, I'm fascinated how coins reveal the "migrant crisis" that was caused by the Gallic War c. 58–52 BC, when it seems that thousands of political refugees from northern France flooded across the English Channel, bringing whatever valuables they could with them, to escape the Roman onslaught. Does it sound a familiar story? It does to me.

I'm intrigued by the intense rivalry that appears to have existed between the two main kingdoms in pre-Roman Britain, as attested by the coins of these competing kings. The two most potent dynasties in pre-Roman Britain were started by Commios south of the Thames and by Cassivellaunos north of the Thames. Both were famous Gallic War heroes. Commios,

king of the Atrebates in Gaul and former ally of Caesar, switched sides and settled in Britain c. 50 BC. Cassivellaunos, king of Hertfordshire, commanded the British coalition against Caesar in 54 BC. For almost 100 years their two royal houses were commercial and political rivals—a rivalry which resulted in the Roman invasion of Britain in AD 43, when King Verica sought the aid of the emperor Claudius.

## Mystery

One of the outstanding features of Celtic coins that has always bewitched me—bewildered me too—is their vast array of mysterious symbols. Some of these strange symbols occur on the coins of northern Gaul, others appear to be exclusively British. Chris Rudd and Liz Cottam believe that much of the symbolism on ancient British coins may be of a religious nature. In their essential reading for all collectors of Celtic coins, *Britain's First Coins* (Chris Rudd, 2013), they write: "We suspect that druidism, or a religion similar to the iron age remnants of it, may have originated in Britain and possibly sooner than is commonly supposed—maybe in the bronze age or perhaps even earlier. Caesar says that the druids' training system was invented in Britain and that 'at the present time (53 BC) diligent students of the matter mostly travel there to study it.' The severity with which British druidism was later suppressed by the Romans suggests that Britain could well have been the main centre and madrasa for druidism. Many symbols on British coins might be interpreted as religious, though whether specifically druidic is conjectural".

## Artistry

As a countryman who values the diversity of Britain's wildlife, I'm greatly attracted to the vast variety of creatures that are depicted on ancient British coins: bears, boars, bulls, butterflies, cocks, crabs, dogs, dolphins, ducks, eagles, hares, all kinds of horses—some with wings, some with three tails, some breathing flames—goats, lions, owls, rams, rats, ravens, shrimps, snakes, stags, starfish, worms and wolves. Yes, if you look closely, you can see them all on British Celtic coins. I've also spotted centaurs, dragons, griffins, horse-dogs, sea-horses, sphinxes and ram-horned serpents, not to mention a couple of long-legged marsh birds on the back of a Norfolk Wolf gold stater. Most importantly, it's the surrealist manner in which some of these animals are shown that really excites me. Whereas a Greek or Roman engraver presents a horse in a realistic lifelike manner, the Celtic die cutter often deliberately distorts the horse to capture the characteristic spirit of it. Robert Van Arsdell, the American numismatist, explains this well in his book *Celtic Coinage of Britain*: "The horse's back and rear legs lean forward giving the entire image a motion to the right. The motion is balanced, but not stopped, by the left-leaning front legs. The tail has been made triple to increase its mass and thus balance the head, nose and ears. We enter the design at the tail, because the repetition of the strands immediately commands attention. The tail picks up the observer's view and casts it up to the arms of the rider, which in turn sends it to the nose. The end of the nose brings the eye down to the curves of the wheel and the belly of the horse. These, in turn, send the eye back to the tail, where the entire process is repeated. Thus, the viewer's eye is carried round and round in a clockwise direction, enhancing the impression of vivid motion. The artist has created the impression of an animal in motion, and has done it with great skill. This is the process of abstraction and the Celts were masters of it."

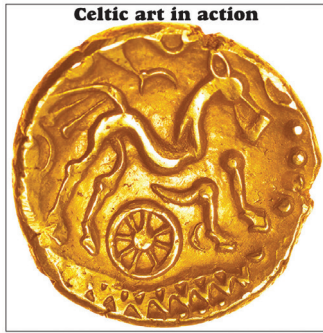


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As an axe-wielding woodsman, I've been enthralled by the coins of "the tree people"—the Dobunni of the West Midlands whose tribal territory included the

British kings weren't too shy to shout their names or those of close associates or claimed ancestors.





**Celtic art in action**

*Selsey gold stater, ABC 485v, found near Winchester, c.1998.*

forests of Dean, Arden and Wyre. Most of their gold staters display a branched tree emblem. Like Chris Rudd and Keith Allsworth, a collector who farms in the Cotswolds, I think this tribal emblem resembles the budding branch of a coppiced ash-tree.

### Scarcity

I've collected Celtic coins because I'm passionately fond of them and endlessly fascinated by them. I love the turbulent history of late Iron Age Britain—all the tribal rivalry—that they reveal to me. I love the unique artistry of Celtic coins. I love their mysterious imagery and symbolism. The businessman in me also values the incredible scarcity of Ancient British coins, which are generally much rarer than Greek, Roman and Gaulish coins. I'm told this is because comparatively few ancient Britons used coins and because far fewer were minted over a much shorter timespan. Greek coins were minted for about 600 years, Roman for about 800 years and Gaulish for about 250 years, whereas British coins were produced for little more than 150 years, according to numismatic scholars. *"Indeed the bulk of inscribed British types were issued during the brief life of Jesus"* (Britain's First

*Coins*, p. 21). Whilst the reason for my collecting has always been the enjoyment of the coins, I'm sure the day is not too far in the future when their great rarity will be recognised, as will how undervalued the series is, and these works of art will take their rightful place of value amongst the rare aurei of Rome, recently reaching six figures with more known examples than many Celtic staters.

Now the time has come for me to part with my beloved Celtic collection. "You can't take it with you," as they say. Moreover, my wife and my sons have other interests. I'm very grateful to Liz Cottam and Chris Rudd for helping me to express my appreciation of Celtic coins. All the coins you see here are mine, the images are Liz's.



*You see lots of different horses on Ancient British coins. With the rarest Greek and Roman coins now fetching astronomical prices, they are looking increasingly good value. Better than a safe bet, I'd say.*

**For information on the sale of the John Follows Collection please contact [liz@celticcoins.com](mailto:liz@celticcoins.com)**