

OPENING THE TREASURE CHEST

A PERSONAL VIEW OF THE STAFFORDSHIRE HOARD

David Symons

'There has been a big find of Anglo-Saxon metalwork. Do you want to see it now?' Duncan Slarke, the Portable Antiquities Scheme's Finds Liaison Officer for Staffordshire and the West Midlands, took me aside and broke the news.



'The Mystery Object'. Nothing like this gold and garnet piece has ever been found before and no-one has yet suggested a convincing identification.

I was preoccupied with a major exhibition about Matthew Boulton, so I did not take him up on his offer until the following day. Then, standing in our conservation studio, Duncan produced piece after piece of astonishing goldwork from a small pile of plastic storage boxes. My jaw dropped. Each piece would have been a major find in its own right, but they just kept coming and coming. Like everyone else involved with the hoard, I will never forget the experience of seeing it for the first time.

The Discovery of the Hoard

The first pieces of the hoard were discovered near Hammerwich, not far from Lichfield, on 5 July 2009 by Terry Herbert, a local metal-detector. After detecting for a few more days, Terry contacted Duncan, who immediately realised the importance of Terry's find and informed the county archaeologist for Staffordshire, Ian Wykes. Ian and his colleague Steve Dean visited the site to assess whether more objects might need to be recovered. A spectacular piece of gold decorated with garnets was lying on the surface of the field. Clearly an excavation was essential.

A rapidly-organised meeting brought together Staffordshire County Council, English Heritage, Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery (BMAG) and The Potteries Museum & Art Gallery, Stoke-on-Trent (PMAG). Staffordshire County Council and English Heritage agreed to fund an excavation.

To prevent the attention of nighthawks, it was agreed that the find had to be kept secret until the excavation was complete. Birmingham Archaeology, a field research company based at the University of Birmingham, was commissioned to excavate the site. The aim was to recover the rest of the hoard and to uncover any evidence that might show why it had been buried there.

Remarkably all the objects were found in the plough soil, within inches of the surface. The hoard had originally been deeper underground, but the soil above it had gradually been eroded down the hill slope by ploughing. When Fred Johnson, the farmer, ploughed the field in autumn



Kevin Leahy, Bill Klemperer, Duncan Clarke, Fred Johnson, Terry Herbert and Deb Klemperer at the hoard site in July 2009.

2008, he went just deep enough to disturb the hoard and spread the objects through the plough soil. The excavators found no other Anglo-Saxon features where the hoard had been buried: no buildings, no burials, and no signs of a battle. All the evidence suggests that it was hidden in a wild area, far from any settlement.

The hoard was declared Treasure at a coroner's inquest held at Cannock on 24 September 2009. By then, it had been agreed that BMAG and PMAG would jointly acquire the hoard, to ensure it was kept in the West Midlands. By law the British Museum had the first option to acquire the hoard, but it waived this right and, together with the staff of the Portable Antiquities Scheme, did all it could to help Birmingham and Stoke raise the funds needed for the acquisition. We are very grateful to them for their help.

Hoard Mania

We held a press conference later on the morning of 24 September and everything went crazy: we were the top story on the BBC national news that evening. By agreement with the Portable Antiquities Scheme, we had already arranged to display a selection of pieces from the hoard at BMAG for nineteen days, before it went down to London to go through the Treasure process (the first time this had been done for any Treasure find). No fewer than 42,000 people queued for up to five hours to see the hoard in those nineteen days. I do not think that anyone working at BMAG at that time will ever forget the experience.

After the exhibition, the hoard went to the British Museum to be valued by the Treasure Valuation Committee. This independent body is charged with arriving at a fair market value for Treasure finds. They valued the hoard at £3,285,000. The Art Fund offered its help and ran the public appeal, which was launched on a cold and snowy morning in January 2010 by Dr David Starkey.

The response was astonishing. Record donations poured in from the public, eventually topping £900,000. We also obtained the support of major grant givers, including the National Heritage Memorial Fund and the Art Fund itself. The hoard was saved for the region.

Another eighty-one pieces from the hoard (mostly small fragments) were found in 2012, when the field was ploughed again for the first time since the original find. These were judged by the coroner to be part of the hoard and were valued at £57,395. A new appeal was launched to raise this sum, to keep the new finds with the rest of the hoard. It must have been one of the shortest appeals on record because within hours Wartski, the jewellers to the Queen, generously offered the full amount.



Hoard mania. Many people queued for up to five hours to see the hoard when it was first displayed at Birmingham Museum.

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Sharp, flexible and softer than gold, thorns were used by conservators to clean the hoard.

Research and Conservation

Having acquired the hoard, one of the most important archaeological finds made in Britain in the past hundred years, BMAG and PMAG were responsible for seeing it properly researched and published. English Heritage provided major financial support, and further help came from a variety of other sources. The research programme has been supported by an advisory panel of experts, chaired until summer 2014 by Professor Leslie Webster and subsequently by Dr Tania Dickinson.

The research is being carried out in two phases. Phase 1, involving the production of a full draft catalogue of the hoard and the cleaning of all the pieces, was completed in the spring of this year. The catalogue has been compiled by Chris Fern, a specialist in Anglo-Saxon metalwork of this period. Phase 2 will cover the detailed archaeological study of the find and the preparation of the final publication. An application to English Heritage for a second grant to cover this work is being prepared.

Since spring 2010 the conservation team based at BMAG have recorded, photographed, assessed, cleaned and packed into new storage boxes, no fewer than 4,000 objects and fragments, many of which are very tiny indeed. As it was important to clean the objects very carefully and extract as much information



'Everything together at last.' The grouping exercise at Birmingham allowed many joins and associations between objects to be made.

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from them as possible, all the conservation work has been done under a microscope and a full record has been made at every stage.

There is one quirky element to the conservation work. Normally conservators use steel points to clean finds, but gold is soft and there was a risk that steel tools might mark the surfaces. We will be studying the tool marks left on the objects as they were being made, so it is important that these are clearly preserved. After some discussion our conservators decided to try using thorns, since they are sharp, flexible and softer than gold. They were a great success and the entire hoard has been cleaned in this way.

Publicity and a Papal Blessing

A feature of the Staffordshire Hoard has been our decision to keep it in the public eye throughout the research and publication process. Previous archaeological finds have vanished behind the scenes and only re-emerged after the final publication appeared. However, we felt that the public interest in the hoard was so strong that we simply should not do this, so items from the hoard have been on display at BMAG and PMAG throughout. At times the demands of the research programme have meant that only limited material was available for display, but most visitors have understood that the research has had to come first.

The hoard team has also been actively blogging about the progress of work, reporting on new discoveries as they were made. The results have been an eye-opener: our hoard gallery invigilators at BMAG tell me that visitors regularly arrive from all corners of world already aware of the latest news on the hoard.

As part of our commitment to wider exposure, we made an agreement with the National Geographic Society, which saw the Society make a very substantial donation towards the conservation of the hoard. National Geographic TV also produced two documentary programmes about the hoard, which have been shown all around the world. Also as a result of the agreement, about 120 key pieces from the hoard crossed the Atlantic and went on show at the National Geographic Society headquarters in Washington DC in November 2011. A total of 55,000 visitors saw the exhibition, making it the second most popular show ever staged there and second only to the Chinese Terracotta Army.

BMAG and PMAG have formed a long-term partnership with Staffordshire County Council, Lichfield District Council, Lichfield Cathedral and Tamworth Borough

Council. Together we are busy developing the Mercian Trail, which aims to use the hoard to position the West Midlands as the heart of Anglo-Saxon England, in the same way that York is the place people think of when they think of the Vikings. As a result of this partnership small groups of material from the hoard are now displayed in Lichfield Cathedral and Tamworth Castle Museum.

In September 2010 my colleague Deborah Cane and I took the Christian pieces from the hoard to St Mary's College, Oscott, to show them to Pope Benedict XVI after the mass at which he beatified Cardinal Newman. Before the mass, Birmingham City Council had presented him with a silver gilt cross based on the hoard's folded cross, to mark his visit. That afternoon His Holiness blessed the actual folded cross, making it (we think) the only papally-blessed archaeological find in the country.

Garnets, Gold and Glass

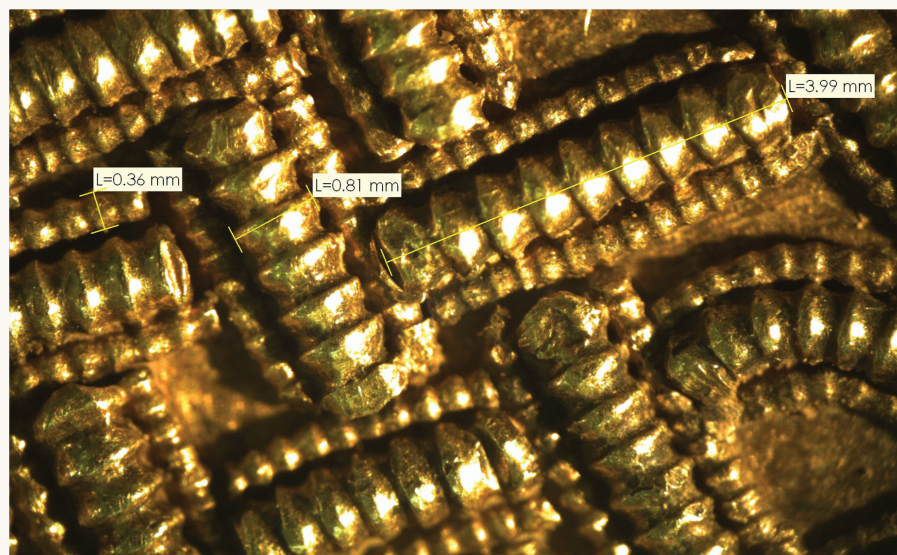
Thanks to European funding we took about sixty hoard objects to Paris in November 2011 to be analysed at the C2RME, a research laboratory at the Louvre Museum. The researchers there had already analysed hundreds of garnets on sixth-century objects from France, Germany and Belgium and identified likely sources for them. We hoped to get similar results for the Staffordshire Hoard garnets and indeed the analyses suggested they were all from North India or the Czech Republic. We hope to carry out further research on this subject.

Most recently, in February to March this year, the whole hoard, including the 2012 finds, was brought together for the first time ever at BMAG. The main purpose was to allow Chris Fern to see everything together at last and to compare and physically join pieces that he had previously seen at different venues. The exercise was a great success: 600 joins or other associations were identified.

Every member of the hoard team has been absolutely astonished by the skill of the Anglo-Saxon goldsmiths. I am particularly impressed by the filigree work.



A gold pommel decorated with filigree work.



A magnified image of the pommel reveals the goldsmith's skill: each piece of the pattern is made of three tiny pieces of gold wire.

Look closely at enlarged pictures of the filigree and you will see that the pattern is made up of many short lengths of wire. In fact each piece of the pattern normally consists of three pieces of wire, a thicker one in the middle with a thinner one to each side. The thicker wire is usually about three-quarters of a millimetre thick, the thinner ones about one-third of a millimetre. If nothing else gives the lie to the popular image of the 'Dark Ages', then the Staffordshire Hoard metalwork does.

We have also found some Anglo-Saxon repairs. A nice example of this occurs on a pommel cap with *cloisonné* garnet decoration. Two cells on one side no longer contain garnets, but pieces of red glass. Presumably the original garnets fell out and the person carrying out the repair either had no access to new garnets or did not have the skill to cut them to shape. Although the pieces of glass have now weathered and become dull, so that they can easily be distinguished from the garnets, they would have been red and shiny when originally inserted and much less obvious to the casual viewer.

What the Hoard Reveals

Another pommel cap is a particular favourite of mine. This one is made of silver and was originally gilded, but it has seen so much use that the gilding has virtually all worn off. It was made in Germany or Scandinavia in the second half of the sixth century and is one of the oldest pieces in the hoard.

The standard interpretation of the design is that it portrays a 'beast-man', with a human head and forelegs ending in animal paws. However, I think the head may also represent Woden, the chief god of the pagan Germans, and that the objects beside his head may be stylised ravens. Woden had two ravens which he sent out into the world to spy for him. When they returned, they sat on his shoulders and whispered their news into his ears. For me this pommel cap typifies the Germanic Anglo-Saxon love of riddles and multiple meanings, the complex histories some of the objects must have had, and also the far-flung connections that the hoard reveals.

Questions and Answers

What about the big questions about the hoard? What is the hoard? When was it buried? Who buried it? Why did they bury it? Why was it buried there? We can answer one of these questions: a comparison of pieces in the hoard with others found at more closely-dated sites suggests the hoard could have been buried as early as c.650–670 AD. At present we simply do not have answers to the other questions, and it is quite possible that we never will.

Personally, I think the hoard was someone's treasure chest, hidden for safety and for some reason never recovered. Hiding it to protect it from raiding Northumbrians or Welsh is a credible scenario. The site is on the edge of a hill overlooking Watling Street (now the A5), an old Roman road which was still used as an important route in the seventh century.

I imagine the person who hid it travelling along the road, seeing something distinctive on the hill (perhaps a particular clump of vegetation) and thinking: 'That's where I'll hide it; I know I can find this spot again.' Except luckily for us they did not. Of course, I could be wrong about everything I have just



Anglo-Saxon repairs. Two inlays on the lower right are red glass replacements for lost garnets.



The design on this silver pommel cap may represent the god Woden, with two stylised ravens either side of his head.

suggested. But this is all part of the fun of the hoard at this stage.

Where do we go from here? For those of us at BMAG the priority is to finish our new Staffordshire Hoard gallery, due to open in October this year (check the BMAG website for further information). In the longer term we hope to see the final research report published in four or five years' time. This will include a full catalogue of the hoard, together with essays by leading experts discussing various aspects of the find.

However, we intend to place online all of the research notes, conservation records, photographs, drawings, and so on, so that everyone will have access to the evidence, allowing them to reassess any aspect of the hoard. ●

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Further Reading

Go to the Staffordshire Hoard website at www.staffordshirehoard.org.uk and follow the links for the latest blogs and news items.

To find out more about the Mercian Trail go to www.staffordshirehoard.org.uk and follow the link.

Visit Birmingham Museum & Art Gallery website at www.bmag.org.uk for news on the Staffordshire Hoard Gallery.

For news on The Staffordshire Hoard: The Anglo-Saxon Kingdom of Mercia at The Potteries Museum & Art Gallery visit www.stokemuseums.org.uk.

See History West Midlands at www.historywm.com for a series of short films about the Staffordshire Hoard.