

## Iron Age Treasure Trove 1927



The finding in peculiar circumstances at Chute recently of coins certified by the British Museum to be 2,000 years old, was the subject of a treasure trove enquiry, to determine their ownership, conducted by the Coroner for the district (Mr H E Vincent), at Amesbury Police station on Wednesday afternoon.

A party of men were out shooting at Chute recently, and a schoolboy, named Victor Smith, who was acting as a beater, happened to pick up in a ploughed field, owned by the Lord of the Manor, Lord Joicey-Cecil, what is known as a flint sponge, which he threw at another stone.

The impact broke the flint into three or four pieces, and from the hollow interior there poured out 65 coins, most of which he at once picked up, retrieving the others later.

The coins have been identified by British Museum experts to be British coins of the Early Iron Age. The coins, practically all of which are in what is known as "mint" condition, are about the size of a shilling piece, but are thicker.

These flint sponges are often hollow, and when the stems are broken the cavity of the ball is exposed. It was through this hole that the prehistoric owner of the coins passed them to the interior, and then stopped up the hole with clay.

The duty of the Coroner to hold an inquest on such finds, to decide whether they are treasure trove, dates from very ancient times. A jury was empanelled in the ordinary way, of which Mr Rayner was the foreman.

### Ancient Law

The Coroner, addressing the jury, said this inquest was of a more pleasant nature than those for which he had usually to empanel a jury. It would be their duty to enquire into certain treasure which had been found in the county, to ascertain whether it was or was not treasure trove. To lay down what treasure trove was they had to refer to very ancient law indeed. In medieval times, treasure trove was of very considerable importance in England, as it was then a source of considerable wealth to the Crown. Adam Smith, in his "Wealth of Nations" (1771), said "Treasure trove was in ancient times considered as no contemptible part of the revenue of the great Sovereigns of Europe but in modern times is only of importance from an archaeological or antiquarian point of view."

The treasure in question, continued Mr Vincent, consisted of 65 coins, the date of which was fixed at about 2,000 years ago, which had been found in the parish of Chute, in that county. The reason he was holding the enquiry at Amesbury was that it was more convenient for witnesses and jury. At a place like Chute it was difficult to get a jury.

They had got expert opinion from the British Museum, and he himself had made other enquiries to get information to enable the jury to come to a decision. As the result of these enquiries he was told the coins were of Early Iron Age, approximately between 50 B.C. and 50 A.D. Their constituents were gold and silver, rather of a debased nature. Experts suggested to him that the coins were copies of the gold coins of Philip the Second, and the father of Alexander the Great, and, although it could not be said authoritatively, it is believed they were manufactured in the Channel Islands and brought across to England.

He was told there were at least three other cases on record where similar finds had been reported. While it was for the jury to find whether the coins were treasure trove or not, their findings would be only *prima facie* evidence, and if anyone hereafter considered he had a claim to the coins he could go to the court in the usual way. If the jury did find the coins were treasure trove he should send them to the Treasury on behalf of the King, and once they were found to be treasure trove they rested in the Treasury until such time as they were claimed to be private property. A person making such a claim would have to prove incontestably that they were his own coins. The Lord of the Manor could do this if he could prove that the Crown did at some date give him the right to the treasure trove. Unless he could do that he would fail.

### Questions for the Jury

That these coins were treasure trove there was no doubt. The jury's first question, therefore, was whether it was deposited. He thought they would have no difficulty in finding that this treasure was deposited in the flint, and placed in a spot which they could not now ascertain. The next question was whether the treasure was intentionally hidden, because to be treasure trove it must be hidden property, of which there was no owner available. Needless to say, in reply to that, he should ask the jury to say if they found it was treasure trove that the owner was unknown. If not, they would have to identify the owner. Today, if treasure trove was kept by the Treasury, the finder received the acknowledgment value of it, less a certain discount, and he believed they paid pretty handsomely.

### The Evidence

The Coroner then proceeded to call the evidence.

Victor Smith, living at The Forge, Chute, 13 years of age, stated that on September 10<sup>th</sup> he was taking part in a beat for a shooting party, and was passing over ploughed land in the parish of Chute, in the occupation of Lady Joicey-Cecil. No one was very near him. On the ground he saw the flint produced. He picked it up, and threw it down at another stone. It broke, and went "pop," and a lot of coins flew out. He picked up 25 then, and came back in the evening and found several more, and on the following Sunday morning he went to the spot and picked up two more, making 65 in all.

He took the coins home, and told his father about it. His father told him he had better take them to the Police station. He did so, and Inspector Crouch told him he would make enquiries as to their date. The Inspector took charge of the coins, and gave witness a receipt for them. The lad added that he never before picked up any similar coins.

Inspector Crouch said the lad brought the coins to him on Saturday, September 24<sup>th</sup>, and witness handed them to Superintendent Jones on the following Monday.

Superintendent Jones (Amesbury) stated that the flint and 64 coins were brought to him on September 26<sup>th</sup>. He took steps to have certain of them examined at the British Museum, and the following letter was received:

"The date and size of the coins are Early British, of gold of a southern type. The police are quite right in thinking they are treasure trove. I trust they have been kept together, as a hoard of this sort should throw some light on their classification. The coins are about 2,000 years old."  
Department of Coins, British Museum

The Coroner asked if there were any claimants to the coins, and Lord Joicey-Cecil indicated that he made no claim.

The Coroner said that was all the evidence he was in a position to give them. It was very slender, and they had to decide whether it was strong enough for them to return an inference that the coins were originally hidden. If they found they were treasure trove, the Treasury had a scale of compensation, and the boy who found them would receive a reward for his find.

Superintendent Jones: Do I understand that any coins handed over to the British Museum are paid for at their market value?  
The Coroner replied that that was so, with a certain discount.

The jury returned a verdict that the treasure was found in a field, concealed in a flint receptacle, by Victor Smith, and, further, that the treasure found was in ancient times deposited, hidden, and concealed, and that, through the fact that the owner could not be found, it was therefore treasure trove, to be handed back to the Treasury.

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