

The Watlington Hoard

Case Study

The Ashmolean Museum

The Festival of Archaeology 'Big Weekend'



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ASHMOLEAN
MUSEUM OF ART AND ARCHAEOLOGY UNIVERSITY OF OXFORD



UNIVERSITY OF
OXFORD



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COUNTY COUNCIL

THE ACQUISITION

In October 2015, James Mather, a metal detectorist, unearthed the first large Viking Hoard to have ever been discovered in Oxfordshire. The Hoard, declared Treasure by the coroner of Oxfordshire in 2016, was valued at £1.35 million and required a substantial fundraising effort to enable the acquisition. Thanks to pivotal grants from the Heritage Lottery Fund, The Art Fund, the Ashmolean Friends and Patrons, and several individuals the Ashmolean was able to save the hoard for the nation in 2016.

Comprising about 200 coins (some fragmentary), 7 items of jewellery and 15 ingots (bars of silver), the find is not particularly large, but it is hugely significant because it contains so many coins of Alfred the Great, King of Wessex (r. 871–899) and his less well known contemporary, Ceolwulf II of Mercia (r. 874–c. 879).

The hoard contains 13 examples of the rare 'Two Emperors' penny that shows Alfred and Ceolwulf seated side by side below a winged figure of Victory or an angel. The image on the coins suggests an alliance between the kingdoms of Wessex and Mercia. This challenges the accounts found in written sources which dismiss Ceolwulf as a puppet of the Vikings. Ceolwulf II, the last king of Mercia, quietly disappeared from the historical record in uncertain circumstances and Alfred and his successors then forged a new kingdom of England by taking control of Mercia, before conquering the regions controlled by the Vikings.

The hoard can be dated by the presence of a single 'Two-Line' type penny which was not produced until the late 870s, after the Battle of Edington (May 878) between Alfred's forces and a Viking army. Viking forces moved both by water and land, and they likely used the ancient trackway known as Icknield Street which passes through Watlington, close to where the hoard was found. It is possible that the hoard was buried in the wake of this violence or during the ensuing movement of peoples.

The Hoard has become an integral part of the Ashmolean Museum's world-class collection of art and archaeology. Now residing in the care of experts, fragile items from the Hoard have been safeguarded for conservation and their long-term survival.

With the county's heritage at the forefront of project aims, coordinators sought to give communities '*a sense of pride, ownership and understanding of the Watlington Hoard*' through an extensive engagement programme of activities and outreach.

THIS CASE STUDY

This case study was researched and recorded by researchers from the University of Oxford who collected data from Museum staff and attendees. Interviews with Museum staff were used to explore the inputs and strategies developed to deliver the activities associated with the acquisition.

Interviews with participants also provided contextual information which have been used alongside data collected via sessional observations.

Using mixed method approaches data assessing the 'impact' of each of the activities were collected from a representative sample of attendees.

The Festival of Archaeology Big Weekend

A weekend of activities was hosted at the Ashmolean Museum in July 2017, as part of the yearly Festival of Archaeology – with this year's theme focusing on the Anglo Saxons and the Vikings to contextualise the Watlington Hoard.

The weekend was packed full of activities, which included performances and demonstrations, talks, handling sessions, and craft activities. The wide range of activities catered to children, their families and adult attendees. The event had been widely publicised at recent Roadshow events, during school and outreach work, and via internet publication, i.e. the Ashmolean Museum's What's On web page and social media posts.

Over the weekend, 6708 people visited the museum. Visitors were asked their reasons for attending/ how they heard about the event. Thirty three percent of museum visitors had learnt of the weekend event thanks recent publicity drives – from the museum mailing list (10%), museum postings on social media (10%), flyers distributed via local schools (7%) and word of mouth – from museum staff and event speakers (6%).

In contrast, for sixty-seven percent of visitors reasons for attending were unrelated to the weekend event i.e. they were part of a long organised visit (7%), attending because of the Raphael exhibition (10%), or they had been unaware of the event and just 'walked-in' (50%). These figures demonstrate the popularity of the Museum which routinely draws in thousands of visitors per weekend. While visitor numbers were not significantly higher than usual, it has been estimated that there was an approximate increase of 600 per day, in comparison to the same weekend in 2016.

Forty-five percent of attendees reported living in Oxfordshire; fifty-five percent were visiting from other regions in England; Twenty percent of visitors were international travellers. Most of those surveyed were attending the museum with family or friends, ten percent of visitors were visiting the museum alone. Group arrangements consisted of those visiting with children (25%), partners (22%), older family members (20%), friends (13%) or 'Other' (5%), i.e. part of a coach party; work colleagues; with an exchange student.

Sixty-two percent of visitors were familiar with the museum and had attended within the last year (44%) or over a year ago (18%). Thirty-eight per of the weekend attendees had not visited the Museum before. It was hoped that Roadshow Outreach and museum-based schools sessions would inspire visitors to attend the Big Weekend event, however, of those surveyed, only two parents reported that their child had attended one of the school's sessions and no one reported having had attended one of the Roadshow events.



IW PHOTOGRAPHIC: Designing an aestel at the Ashmolean Museum Big Weekend

Inputs and activities

During the weekend, guests were offered a range of timetabled activities. Knowledgeable guides were on hand to offer information about the event's schedule and the activity stations which were located throughout the museum. The demonstrations, performances, talks, handling sessions, and activities ran from 11 am – 4 pm on Saturday 15th and 16th July 2017. Detail about each of the activities on offer is listed below, alongside illustrative visitor feedback.

Performances:

Wulfheodenas – the troop of living re-enactors dominated the Ashmolean Museum's atrium space, equipped with market style tables and a fantastic array of resources, the group engaged in lengthy discussions with the public about their wares. The group introduced audiences to the traditions of the 6-7th Century, involving medicinal practices, military routines and crafts such as pottery and weaving. When asked what would be most memorable about their museum visit, members of the public frequently commented on the spectacle of the living history troop.

- *'Guys in the costumes and how it all looks, and their knowledge'* (Adult survey response)
- *'The interaction was done very well. The quality of the event displays is impressive'* (Adult survey response)



IW PHOTOGRAPHIC: The Wulfheodnas living-history group discussing their wares at The Big Weekend

Saxon Tales and Music – Of Gods, Myths and Monsters – ‘Ta Bard’, a performing duo, presented a unique combination of historical storytelling and music in the Museum's atrium space. Staging the duo in this area worked brilliantly, as their hourly performances could be viewed from the upper balconies.

- *'Friendly, helpful and informative. The storytelling was captivating'* (Adult comment card feedback)
- *'I was sad because the dragon died'* (comment card)



IW PHOTOGRAPHIC: Performances by Ta-Bard at The Big Weekend

Demonstrations:

Grunal Moneta, the Moneyer - an expert on ancient coins, was stationed at the entrance of the museum. On approach to the museum doors visitor interested was piqued at the sight of the moneyer, who demonstrated coinage techniques, which were used in Anglo Saxons and Viking times.

- *'I think that it was very educational and great fun! The coin making was very interesting! Thank you!'* (Parent feedback)
- *Talking to the 'money minter' was very good. Very high-quality work too!* (Adult comment card feedback)



IW PHOTOGRAPHIC: Coin-striking with Grunal, the Moneyer at the Big Weekend

Talks (suitable for ages 12+):

Anglo-Saxon Riddles and the Man-Made World – presented by Andy Orchard, a Rawlinson and Bosworth Professor of the University of Oxford.

The Watlington Hoard: King Alfred's Coins and Treasures – presented by James Mather, finder of the Watlington Hoard and John Naylor of the Portable Antiquities Scheme, National Finds Advisor for Medieval & post-Medieval Coinage.

King Alfred, England's first original thinker – presented by Professor M.J. Toswell of the University of Western Ontario.

Money in the Age of Alfred the Great – presented by Dr Rory Naismith, a Lecturer in Medieval British history from King's College London.

- *'Excellent talks. Would love to attend another Anglo-Saxon/Viking weekend at the Ashmolean in the future. Great format and idea!' (Adult comment card feedback)*
- *'Rory Naismiths talk was very informative and provided enough background material to be accessible yet still highly detailed and innovative' (Adult comment card feedback)*
- *'Greatly enjoyed and profited from Professor Toswell's Alfred talk' (Adult comment card feedback)*



IW PHOTOGRAPHIC: A talk with James Mather, at the Big Weekend.

Handling sessions:

Hands-On Coins – a volunteer-led opportunity to handle coins from different times and places.

Anglo Saxon and Viking tools, crafts and everyday utensils – with Tanya Bentham, a historian, silversmith and embroiderer.

The Watlington Viking Hoard – chance to handle replica items from the Hoard, led by the Museum Volunteer team.

- *'I enjoyed holding the objects and listening to the experts explain how they were made. They made history come alive. I would love to come again'* (Adult comment card feedback).



Craft activities:

Make your own Alfred Jewel - led by the Museum Volunteer team.

Make an Anglo-Saxon style finger ring - with Tanya Bentham – a historian, silversmith and embroiderer.

Bass-relief coin production – with artist Francesca Shakespeare supported by the Families Education Officer and the Museum volunteers team the Ashmolean Museum's Education Centre was transformed into a craft 'wet room'. People were invited to pour plaster coins, which they could emboss and decorate with metallic paints. Pupils's pieces formed part of an in-house exhibition at the Museum, which represented the Watlington excavation site.

- *'I made a coin which was really fun and I also did a drawing of a Viking'* (comment card).
- *'I made an Anglo-Saxon bookmark like the one King Alfred did, I really enjoyed it, and my little brother did too'* (comment card).
- *'Fun and interesting activities. Busy but no queues. Very good'* (Parent feedback).



IW PHOTOGRAPHIC: Hand crafting an aestival at the Big Weekend

Impact

Feedback regarding the event was overwhelmingly positive. Children and their families revelled in the immersive activities. Eighty-eight percent of children reported feeling happy during the activities, with the crafts being particularly popular. Only one boy reported feeling sad during one of the activities because a dragon had died in one of the storytelling sessions. Parents were appreciative that the activities had been so well thought out and with obvious links made to the broader collections. Parents also commented that volunteers and staff teams had been very engaging – meaning that they could have five minutes peace while their children were happily entertained.

- *Brilliant craft activities which both children and adults enjoyed. Very enthusiastic facilitator (Parent feedback).*
- *An excellent range of activities for the children. They enjoyed all of them. Great way of getting them learning. All volunteers were helpful and great with the kids (Parent feedback)*
- *Wide range of activities, for all ages, so very pleased we popped in today. Hours of fun had with the children age 4 and 6 (Parent feedback).*
- *'Everything is lovely; my children love it. It's been a great day' (Parent feedback).*
- *'Very helpful in bringing history alive for children. Keep them coming' (Parent feedback).*

Adults were asked which activities they had participated in throughout the day. The most popular activity was 'Talking and listening to experts' (71%), followed by 'Seeing items from the Hoard' (65%); 'Object handling activities' (63%); 'Taking part in arts and craft activities' (61%); 'Living history re-enactors, storytellers and musicians' (55%).

- *Attended both lectures on Saturday as well. This has been an excellently planned weekend with a high standard of well-received lectures. I appreciated a chance to handle replica of the Hoard. Congratulations on a first-class achievement (Adult comment card feedback).*
- *All very thoroughly prepared and presented in a very solid, professional way - bravo! I come from the continent; this is my first British Archaeology day (Adult comment card feedback).*
- *Informative, accessible and engaging and it was exciting to hear from some of the foremost experts in their fields (Adult comment card feedback).*

Seventy- eight percent of people thought that the Big Weekend 'brought Anglo-Saxon and Viking feedback to life' (31% strongly agree, 46% agree), others who disagreed or were unsure detailed that they were still to engage with many aspects of the event.

When asked if the event had developed understandings as to why the Viking Hoard is an important find forty-six percent were in agreement - either agreeing (27%) or strongly agreeing (19%). Some of the attendees who were reportedly unsure or in disagreement commented that this was because they were yet to engage in numerous activities and that they already a keen interest in the area - and were therefore familiar with much of the encountered content.

Sixty-six percent of visitors reported that the Big Weekend had given them a better understanding of archaeology and the work of museums.

In return for their comments, museum visitors were offered a chance to win two free tickets to the Raphael Exhibition. The prize winner thanked the museum for her prize and commented that *'It was a great day, one we'll all remember'*.



IW PHOTOGRAPHIC: Trying on Anglo Saxon Armour at the Big Weekend event



IW PHOTOGRAPHIC: A medicine lady from the Wulheadonas living-history group

Seven learning and public engagement staff were involved in the planning and delivery of the Big Weekend. Volunteers were also recruited through the Joint Museums Volunteer Service to ensure the interactive experience for museum guests. Volunteers delivered coin handling sessions, and supported the various craft activities which took place throughout the Museum. Over the course of the weekend volunteers filled a total of 41 positions throughout the Museum.

One volunteer, who had helped with the coin making workshop commented that the activity had been:

- *'Very well organised regarding the steps to follow and how the space was arranged for that. But, above all, in my view it was a very adaptable activity for both, older smaller children - all of them managed to make really beautiful coins no matter the age- I was really impressed!! I am aware it is not easy to arrange a craft which works out for different ages'* (Volunteer feedback).



IW PHOTOGRAPHIC: Coin handling with museum volunteers at The Big Weekend event

Staff were pleased with the overall curation of the event and involvement of all relevant teams. Facilitation and management of an event on this scale is very labour intensive and involved many logistical decisions to be managed on the day. The Museum's Education Team has subsequently reviewed the event and made recommendations for future Big Weekend events.

Recommendations for the Ashmolean Museum

These recommendations are made by the researchers from the University of Oxford:

- **Maximise use of the Atrium space** – This physical area was perfect for the theatrical performances of 'Ta Bard' as it was not only suitable for a seated and standing audience but was also within the sightline of the Ashmolean Museum's upper balconies.
- **Using dedicated 'living history' groups** – The Wulfheodenas group were a much-referenced spectacle of the Big Weekend. The groups' passion for accurate re-enactment (based on the Sutton Hoo burials) was evident in their knowledge and presentation. The variety of wares that troop brought to the Big weekend inspired many discussions regarding warriors, weaponry, metalwork, class systems, medicine, and diet.
- **Consider the timing of Big Weekend events** – Internal recommendations have been made that these events may be better placed outside of the summer holiday period so that there is more scope to attract local audiences. (During the Summer more people are away or more likely to choose outdoor leisure activities) There is also greater opportunity to engage University volunteers during term time.