

UNEARTHING THE STAFFORDSHIRE HOARD

Malcolm Dick

In 2009, a cache of precious Anglo-Saxon objects was exposed in a field close to the A5 near Hammerwich, Staffordshire. Not since the discovery in 1939 of the rich East Anglian burials at Sutton Hoo has both popular and academic interest in the so-called Dark Ages been so stimulated. Unlike the Sutton Hoo treasures, which are housed in the British Museum, the Staffordshire Hoard will be kept and displayed in the West Midlands.



The Staffordshire Hoard is the largest collection of Anglo-Saxon gold and silver items ever found, anywhere in the world. Objects before the start of painstaking conservation work.

© Birmingham Museums Trust


**STAFFORDSHIRE
HOARD**

This issue of *History West Midlands* includes three separate features, which explore different aspects of this wonderful collection of gold, silver and garnets, for understanding the history and culture of the Anglo-Saxons and the kingdom of Mercia. The first, a personal letter from Ellen McAdam of Birmingham Museums Trust and Keith Bloor of The Potteries Museum & Art Gallery, underlines the importance of the regional heritage partnership which manages the considerable investment in research and conservation to preserve the artefacts, ensure their accessibility and interpret what they mean. The second, 'Beowulf's Mirror', by three members of the project team, Deb Klemperer, Jenni Butterworth and Pieta Greaves, focuses on the objects and how they add to our understanding of the elusive Mercians. Finally, in 'Opening the Treasure Chest', David Symons, a museum curator and specialist in Anglo-Saxon archaeology, conveys the excitement of an expert who has been studying the hoard since its discovery. ●

DIGGING DEEPER

UNLOCKING THE SECRETS OF THE STAFFORDSHIRE HOARD

This edition of *History West Midlands* takes an in-depth look at Anglo-Saxon heritage in the West Midlands. This is the heartland of one of the most powerful forces in early medieval England. The discovery of the Staffordshire Hoard in a farmer's field in Staffordshire in 2009 has opened up opportunities for people living in and visiting the region to explore and learn about this formative period in English history.

Given the dominance of Mercia, it is probably no accident that the largest-ever find of Anglo-Saxon gold was discovered in the West Midlands. The Staffordshire Hoard is unique in Europe. It consists of over 4,000 pieces of gold, silver and garnet seventh-century Anglo-Saxon decorative objects including sword, knife and helmet fittings, and a few Christian items. There are no objects associated with women.

The hoard first went on display at Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery, attracting huge public interest which has not subsided since. The public and other funders generously supported the successful fundraising campaign that enabled Birmingham City Council and Stoke City Council to jointly acquire the hoard. This means that the hoard stays in the region, cared for by Birmingham Museums Trust and The Potteries Museum & Art Gallery, Stoke-on-Trent.

Today the hoard is a focus of regional pride and identity, displayed at four venues throughout the West Midlands – The Potteries Museum & Art Gallery, Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery, Lichfield Cathedral and Tamworth Castle. Staffordshire County Council also hosts a 'pop-up' touring exhibition of replicas and educational activities. Together with Lichfield District Council and Tamworth Borough Council these organisations form the Mercian Trail, a partnership committed to telling the story of the Staffordshire Hoard and the Anglo-Saxon history of the region.

The Staffordshire Hoard displays show hundreds of carefully cleaned and conserved objects with information on their significance in Anglo-Saxon and wider European culture. To date over a million people have visited these exhibitions. Mercian Trail partners also provide a range of learning activities focusing on the hoard and local Anglo-Saxon history for schoolchildren, adult groups and visitors, and family visitors. The Staffordshire Hoard website at www.staffordshirehoard.org.uk is an excellent source of information and news.

Alongside the public-facing side of the hoard, Birmingham Museums Trust and The Potteries Museum & Art Gallery, in partnership with finds specialists and the British Museum, have been managing a project to document, conserve and research the



The delicate task of conservation is undertaken with the help of powerful microscopes.

objects. The conservation team has cleaned the objects, removing the mud that coated them using natural thorns, which do not scratch like metal tools. Specialists have examined the objects, cataloguing all the fragments and identifying joins. The team has produced a comprehensive research archive on the collection, including high-quality images and the results of initial scientific analysis of the objects' metals and materials. This work has been funded to date by a

range of supportive partners including English Heritage, the Art Fund, public support and private donations.

However, as this first phase of conservation and research work comes to a close this year, many questions still remain about the hoard. Why was it deposited? Where did the materials come from? Who made it? Who owned these objects? Answering these questions will help us to realise the potential of the hoard to tell us more about life in early medieval England. We will continue to involve and inspire people with the conservation and research work via Staffordshire Hoard online blogs and videos, and in the conservation studios. By sharing the new findings in the Staffordshire Hoard displays and learning activities throughout the region we can capture the imagination of generations to come.

We are launching a new fundraising campaign to fund this new conservation and research work. If you would like to help to keep the story of the Staffordshire Hoard alive then please do consider making a donation to our dedicated hoard appeal. You can donate online at justgiving.com/staffordshire-hoard or by texting STAF09 £3 to 70070. Please visit the Hoard website at www.staffordshirehoard.org.uk/donate for more ways to donate.

We hope you enjoy exploring the fascinating world of our Anglo-Saxon heritage. ●

Dr Ellen McAdam, Director, Birmingham Museums Trust.

Keith Bloor, Museums Manager, The Potteries Museum & Art Gallery.

Help to keep the story of the Staffordshire Hoard alive by supporting new conservation and research work. Consider donating online at justgiving.com/staffordshire-hoard or by texting STAF09 £3 to 70070. Or visit the Hoard website at www.staffordshirehoard.org.uk/donate for more ways to donate.