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A Gold Coin and a Forgery: Iron Age and Roman Discoveries from a field walk in Littlebury Parish

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Littlebury parish is one of many connected with the Icknield Way, probably the oldest road in Britain. Running between Knettishall Heath in Norfolk and Ivinghoe Beacon in Buckinghamshire, it has been associated with the Iron Age hill forts that lie along or close to it and keeps the western parish boundary company for a short distance.

Within the parish and close by at Catmere End, flints, prehistoric pottery, Iron Age remains and artefacts of the Roman period have come to light. Littlebury lies two miles south of Great Chesterford, famous for the Roman remains discovered by Richard Cornwallis Neville (later the fourth Lord Braybrooke) whose scholarly work, *Antiqua Explorata* described his excavations there in the 1840s.

More than one source considers the centre of Littlebury village to be of importance in the Roman period and in 1970 many Roman artefacts were found in what was then garden land of South House, once part of the vicarage. In the south of the parish is the important Iron Age hill fort at Ring Hill, where a Gothic cottage, previously an aviary, stands close to Sir John Griffin Griffin's Temple of Victory. The temple itself replaced an ancient hunting tower and probable rabbit warren in 1774. Ring Hill's importance derived from its height, displaying strength and enabling views over great distances, to Strethall Church, Great Chesterford and maybe on a clear day, even Wandlebury in Cambridgeshire. It is possible that it supported farming at its base and beacons at its apex for communications, and also acted as a ceremonial and community centre. Together with

many other known areas of interest in the parish, it too has given up various Roman finds. This now wooded site is to the south east of the area where, in the autumn of 2004, Dean Holdaway of the Littlebury History Group, one of the field walkers led by Dr. Tom Williamson found a coin struck in the time of the ancient Britons and James Watson unearthed a Roman forged coin from the fourth century AD.

The gold Iron Age coin

The earliest known British coins are most likely to be imitations of the gold stater (piece of money) of Philip II of Macedonia (380-336 BC) and can be traced back to 150 BC. Gradually an extremely high standard of die cutting was achieved as this Catuvellaunian gold Iron Age coin of 50 BC shows.



Left: Reverse of rare gold Iron Age coin of Atrebatic type, most likely Catuvellaunian in origin, c. 50 BC. 13mm across the diagonal, weight 1.35 grams. Right: Obverse showing a degraded head of Apollo. Photographs ©Lizzie Sanders.

Dr. Philip de Jersey, who collates the Celtic Coin Index, has identified it as being closest to one of Van Arsdell's Atrebatic types, VA 234 (Van Arsdell is one of the standard references for Iron Age coins). The Atrebates were one of the most powerful of the Iron Age tribes; they occupied areas to the south of the Thames now known as Hampshire, Berkshire and Sussex and were originally from northern Gaul, which had been conquered by Julius Caesar in 57 BC. Their leader, Commius, had acted as a go-between for Caesar and the Britons prior to the first, unsuccessful, Roman invasion of 55 BC, and subsequently had dealings with Mark Anthony, then a legionary legate.

The variant of the coin that was found in the autumn of 2004 is different from the way that Atrebatic coins are generally laid out. There are a number of differences in the pattern of the obverse, the main side of the coin, which shows a degraded head of Apollo.

Whilst it is hard to see this design as a head, Philip de Jersey explains:

There have been some 250 years or more of "degradation" between the first Celtic copies - which had a very good copy of Apollo's head - and this sort of coin. By this time they really do not look anything like a head at all, but focus instead on the laurel wreath and tend to lose any of the bits that look like a profile, for example. The claw-like motifs above the laurel wreath are all that is left of Apollo's hair. The other motifs below the wreath are still further removed from the prototype and it is not really practicable to try and link them back to the Greek model, although the two crescents are arguably derived from the ear and the cheek.

Differences also occur in the form of the horse (particularly the rings on the rump and the chest) on the reverse, possibly they represented both power and kingship and the connection between man and nature. Three of the rings surrounding the horse bear what appear to be cogs and it is interesting to note that an alternative name for Ring Hill is 'The Rings' - one might speculate that there is a connection.

This and the more usual VA 234 type, of which 12 are recorded on the Celtic Coin Index, were almost certainly produced north of the Thames, since none of them were found in Atrebatia, but in Catuvellaunian territories here. Provenances for the regular VA234 coins include one each at Tring in Hertfordshire, St Neots in Cambridgeshire, Evenly in Northamptonshire, and three from Harlow Temple, the remainder being unprovenanced. There are just three variants of the extremely rare type found in Littlebury on record, one from Harlow Temple the others also unprovenanced. This would suggest that both VA 234 and the Littlebury variant are most likely to be Catuvellaunian in origin and date back to 50 BC, the property of someone living in their heartlands, one of which we know as Littlebury parish with its river, fertile lowlands and clay uplands making available ponds for livestock and farming. This ancient coin is the second known to be found in the area; a silver unit of the Iceni, VA 730, was discovered in the year 2000.

The contemporary 4th century Roman forgery

Not only ancient Britons but the Romans also appreciated the agricultural potential of our parish. Together with the various Romano British finds which give evidence for Roman occupation, this period is also covered in Dr Tom Williamson's unpublished thesis: *Roman and Medieval Settlement in N.W. Essex* and S.R. Bassett's *Saffron Walden Excavations and Research 1972-1980*, as well as Brian Sanders' chapter 'Roman Littlebury' in the recently published *Littlebury, a Parish History*. Somewhere between c.318-324 AD, in the time that Christianity was being brought to this

country, a contemporary Roman forgery of a House of Constantine coin was struck or hammered from copper alloy at one of the Roman Empire's many, not always official, Continental mints. It was subsequently lost at that time by someone in the place that was to become Littlebury. It was found about 1,680 years later by James Watson, only 20 minutes after the discovery of the gold Iron Age coin. These two coins span between them a period of nearly 400 years. Roman coins of this period are relatively common, as are their forgeries. The coin is easily identifiable as a fake due to the inscription VOTIS XX on the altar being back to front. It is an imitation of a *Beata Tranquilitas nummus* (low denomination coin).



Left: Obverse. Roman period forgery of a nummus coin of the reign of either Constantine I or II, c.318-324 AD. Diameter 19.5mm along the diagonal. It weighs 2.5 grams. Right: Reverse. The letters on the altar are reversed. Photographs ©Lizzie Sanders.

Our field-walking exercise was held to throw some light on these periods as part of general research into our proposed community history book. On that bright September day, finding these coins was additional encouragement for the 37 walkers - after anticipating that the field, which was one of second choice, would not yield much of importance. The coins were two of many other interesting artefacts that it gave up, including prehistoric, Roman and medieval pottery.

In conclusion, the discovery of these two coins supports the belief that this part of N.W. Essex has been inhabited and cultivated by man since prehistory, and certainly from the late Iron Age into Christianized late Roman Britain, and on until the present day. As a rural community it is not lost on us that those who farm the land now are tied by their work to those who farmed it thousands of years before them. In field-walking, we covered the footprints of our forbears and the very people who lost these coins all those years ago. As we slowly made our way across the field, we traversed a period of time that saw growing native contact with the Roman world, the time of Caesar, the upheaval of the Roman

invasion and all that that would bring to the future of Britain. Then, as now, the seasons dictated what we were doing at the time that we did it. Farming schedules moved us from one field to another shortly before we started, and with the grace of chance this amazing treasure was revealed.

Catuvellaunian coin

Celtic Coin Index No CC1 04.2121.

Portable Antiquities Scheme No.ESS-7DAF64

Roman coin

Portable Antiquities Scheme No. ESS-7E0205

Note: The Littlebury coins found on Audley End Estate land are kept at Saffron Walden Museum, thanks to the generosity of Lord Braybrooke. The history group at Littlebury are grateful to Tom White of Audley End Estate, Carl Juhl, Dr. Tom Williamson, Carolyn Wingfield and her staff at Saffron Walden Museum and Caroline McDonald, Essex County Finds Liaison Officer. The author is indebted to Caroline McDonald and Dr Philip de Jersey for their assistance with this article.

Notes

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