

# THE BITTERLEY HOARD – PART ONE – DISCOVERY AND EXCAVATION

[June 29, 2012](#) [Peter Reavill](#) [Day of Archaeology](#), [Day of Archaeology 2012](#), [Excavation Archaeology](#), [Bitterley](#), [British Museum](#), [Conservation and Research Department](#), [experienced and keen metal detector user](#), [farmer](#), [Hoard](#), [Howard Murphy](#), [London](#), [Ludlow](#), [Ludlow Museum Resource Centre](#), [Peter Reavill](#), [Tom Brindle](#)



The work of the Portable Antiquities Scheme sometimes throws up moments of pure joy and excitement, when all the pieces fall into place and the hard work of many years pays off. An example of this can be seen in the discovery of the Bitterley hoard declared treasure today (28<sup>th</sup> June 2012) at an inquest in Bridgnorth, Shropshire.

The hoard was discovered by Howard Murphy, an experienced and keen metal detector user who regularly reports his finds to me at Ludlow Museum Resource Centre. Howard and I met a number of years ago when he came on a course run through Shropshire Museums. This course looked at practical ways archaeological sites could be interrogated, culminating in a season of fieldwalking on a Romano-British site in North Herefordshire. This course relied on two key concepts, provenance and context.



*The Bitterley hoard*



*Fieldwalking a Romano-British site on the Shropshire / Herefordshire border. Howard Murphy - Middle of group*

## **The Discovery**

The first I heard about this find was a phone call late one evening in February – it was from Howard – he said ‘I’ve found a hoard – a pot full of silver coins – and I’ve left it in the ground for you’. Howard is from Yorkshire and it takes a bit to ruffle his feathers – but there was a quiver in his voice –he was worried – had he done the right thing? We arranged for me to go out to the site over the weekend and have a look. We were both concerned that if we left it someone else would come and take it away, but the findspot was (thankfully) well off the beaten track and out of sight of prying eyes.



*Howard and his hole*

On the visit we had a good look at the surrounding area, Howard pointed to the area he had found the coins and we quickly took the soil back out of his hole. At the bottom were a group of silver Elizabethan coins glinting in the light and we could just make out an area of the rim of a thin walled pot. I knew that we couldn't do anything then so we back filled the hole and made the site look as undisturbed as possible – this included moving a large number of mole hills to blend the findspot with the surrounding field.



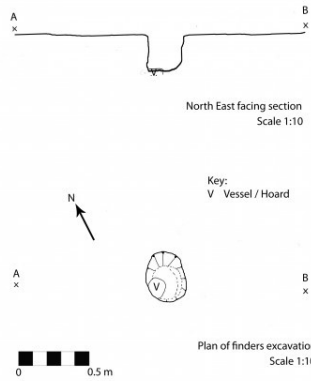
The find was made on land under semi-permanent pasture. It had a series of interesting low earthworks and the remains of a hollow-way nearby. From what we had seen we had no idea what the underlying archaeology might be. The hoard could be inside a house or a ditch and there could be other things associated with it. We also had no idea of the size of the hoard – whether there were just 20 coins or many more. The only way to find this out was to dig it up – and so we arranged a full rescue excavation for the following week.

### **The Excavation:**



We decided that a small number of people were needed and so we kept things very local, Howard with his detector and spade, Tom Brindle (FLO for Staffordshire and the West Mids) came along to help with the digging and recording and the farmer also lent a hand. The weather was typical for February, although the day stayed relatively dry. When we got to the site; it was clear that no-one else had found it and the hoard was still safely in place – the first stage was to record the hole that Howard had dug.

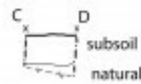
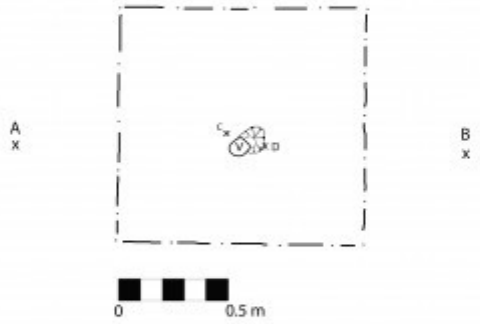
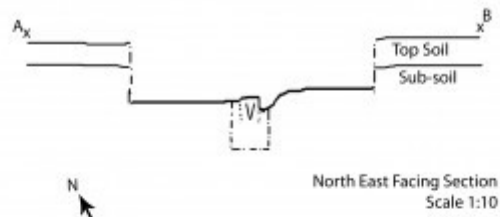
*Tom Brindle*



*Section and plan of the finders excavation*

Once this had been done we cut a larger trench with the hoard at the centre. We cleared the turf and topsoil cleaning the soil back at a layer just above the hoard. We were looking for any traces of a pit or other archaeology present, especially changes in colour and texture in the soil. This was tricky given the conditions but everything seems to be very uniform and most importantly the soil had little evidence of other material such as brick, tile or pottery. These factors led us to believe that the site was not directly associated with a building (with walls or floors) or other feature such as a ditches and pits.





With no archaeology showing in plan – a small sondage (section) was cut close to the vessel to see if anything could be seen in section – like the profile of a pit. Unfortunately nothing could be seen and the section was all uniform until the natural undisturbed clay was reached. Again – this was drawn planned and described.



With no other buried archaeology present we decided to lift the hoard in a single block – this is always a worrying operation as we knew the size at the top – but not the base – so the soil was removed to leave a single column of soil and excavated to a depth well below the natural. It was then supported with cling film and bandages – and then slowly undermined. Luckily the soil was wet and solid and the block stayed in one piece, coming from the ground after more than 300 years. It was packed up in a box and taken to the museum in Ludlow.



*The undermining and lift*

The hoard itself was kept refrigerated (in an old fridge from the staff room) to inhibit the growth of mould and to stop the surrounding soil drying and cracking – we had no idea what was inside (and museum colleagues had to find somewhere else to store their milk and packed lunches).

We had to wait several months before the hoard could be taken to London and the staff at Conservation and Research Department, at the British Museum could work on it – but the wait was well worth it.



*Tom Brindle Finishing up the recording*



*Cleaning up and going home*



See next post: The Bitterley Hoard – Part Two – Conservation

For more images see:

PAS Flickr Account

<http://www.flickr.com/photos/finds/>

and

<http://www.flickr.com/photos/finds/sets/72157630327419608/>

Peter Reavill

29th June 2012