

A STONE 'CELTIC' HUMAN HEAD FROM HARBY, LEICESTERSHIRE

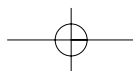
Leslie Cram, Martin Henig, Keith Ambrose

The Harby stone human head was found by Betty Holyland in 1984 in a garden in Harby, Leicestershire, on the southwest edge of the village, NGR SK 7449 3085. It was lying face down on the ground in a rockery when discovered. The previous owners of the house have no knowledge of the head. The land had been a field before the house was built in the 1930s. The head is crudely made in the local ironstone and is roughly ovoid in shape. The back is slightly rounded and, although not carved, displays chisel marks; in addition a hole has been bored diagonally into the back to a depth of 7 mm with diameter of 2.9 mm. This is weathered to the same extent as the rest of the head, contrasting with the recently cut surface on the left side of the mouth, thus suggesting that it dates back to the original manufacture of the head (illus. 1). This hole opens upwards so if it were used to hang the head on a nail or wooden peg a plug would have been needed. The sides are squared off with no features apart from rough chisel marks (illus. 2). The face on the front has ovoid, hollowed out eyes separated by a long flat nose, slightly raised above the level of the rest of the face. The mouth is likewise hollowed into the stone, and is slightly curved upward, apparently set in a grim smile. This is now rather over-emphasised by having been recently extended on its left side, as shown by the lighter colour of the stone, by a cut running to the edge of the face, which is just possibly the result of accidental damage (illus. 3). The head has pronounced eyebrows and a moustache which have been rendered in both instances by means of incised slashes. There is no beard and on the shallow forehead there is no hair. The sides of the chin are merely indicated by two chisel cuts into the front of the face. The effect resembles a face in a Halloween turnip lantern. The height of the face at its maximum from top of forehead to chin is 113 mm and the width at its maximum at the eyes 97 mm. The maximum thickness of the head is 59 mm. The width of a chisel used in making the head can be measured in places, such as to the left of the nose. In all cases this is 16 mm. It appears that the sculpting of the head was done with this one tool. The head has been retained in private ownership, but we are most grateful to the owner for making it available to us for study.

The stone head has been carved into a piece of local Marlstone Rock Formation of Jurassic age. This formation crops out at the top of the ridge about 3 km to the east and south east of Harby (Carney *et al.* 2002, 15). The formation stretches into Lincolnshire and south as far as Banbury with rock similar to the Harby head (Hains and Horton 1969, 78 and 79). The piece of stone used may

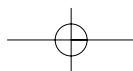


1. Celtic head from Harby, front view.
Photograph, Leslie Cram, scale in centimetres.



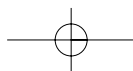


2. Celtic head from Harby, right side view.
Photograph, Leslie Cram, scale in centimetres.





3. Celtic head from Harby, back view.
Photograph, Leslie Cram, scale in centimetres.



have been taken from a field or quarry on the ridge or it could have been found on the slopes below the ridge as this is an area where landslides have been active in the past and blocks of the rock will have been carried down the slope nearer to the village. In a recent examination around the location of the find a block of the same stone of similar size to the stone head was found dredged out of the nearby ditch. The rock is a fine-grained ooidal (oolitic) ironstone that was deposited in shallow marine waters. When fresh, the rock is greenish in colour but the piece used shows the typical rusty brown weathering. Ooids or ooliths are rounded spherical grains that formed by current activity on the sea floor, building up fine layers of sediment usually around a very small nucleus grain. The Marlstone is usually fossiliferous; no large fossils are visible on the carved head but there are probably many very fine shell fragments in the rock. The Marlstone was extensively quarried for iron ore in this area from around 1880. It has also been used for building stone, being common in walls in the village including the church dating back to the thirteenth century. The same Marlstone was quarried in Roman times at Goadby Marwood raising the possibility of the head having been sculpted using this exposed source of rock (Abbot 1956). It should also be mentioned that the head might have been found at Goadby Marwood and brought to Harby by Mr Coy, the Quarry Manager in the 1950's, who lived in Harby and recorded many archaeological discoveries there.

Anne Ross (1967) argues that stone heads such as this are a Romano-British continuation of a pre-Roman cult of the human head. More recently evidence has been amassed for the dates of these heads to extend into the 17th century (Billingsley, 1998). Many of the 'Celtic' heads listed in Cunliffe and Fulford's fascicule of *CSIR* (Cunliffe and Fulford 1982, 35–8 nos. 123–8) are probably post Roman and the strong belief of one of us, working on the sandstone sculptures of Staffordshire and Shropshire is that the stone heads he encountered there (apart from the carvings from Wall (see below) were, for the most part, post-Roman (Henig 2004, 61–2 nos. 188–96), at least one of them (no. 190), being late medieval.

Nevertheless, we may date the Harby head as probably Romano-British based on the similarity of the style to dated examples. It is not inappropriate to begin with carvings of heads on stones built into the wall of the *mansio* at Wall, Staffordshire which, although not free-standing, display similarly primitive features (Henig 2004, 51–3 nos. 159–64). They must be assigned to the second century or earlier. Other Roman-period heads include a free-standing example carved in oolitic limestone, excavated from a well at Tiddington, Warwickshire, associated with a head of Jupiter (Henig 1993, 53 no. 155). This is less detailed and only half the head remains but the treatment of the eye and nose are similar. From the same region and likewise carved in limestone come two human-headed phalluses. The first, excavated at Broadway, Worcestershire (Henig 1993, no. 156), was found with pottery of first or second century date, and another from Guiting Power, Gloucestershire (Henig 1993, no. 158) likewise has a good Roman provenance. The last displays a slit-like mouth. Another, and in some way an even closer parallel, (but here only of assumed Roman date) is a chalk head, of more or

less the same style as the Harby head but only half its size, found apparently on the foreshore of the Thames at Battersea. This differs mainly in the lack of facial hair (Cotton 1996). The moustache brings to mind those of the well-known late Iron-Age bronze masks from a burial at Welwyn, Hertfordshire (Fox 1958, 65 and 72 and pl. 33b).

The place-name Harby is, of course, Danish (Cox 2002, 93) but recent archaeological excavation (Priest, 2004) and field walking (Cram, 2003) have found Iron Age and Roman pottery and structural evidence of Roman date on the north east side of the village. If Roman, or indeed Iron Age, the head would appertain to the Celtic head cult. If the Harby head is later in date it attests the continuing importance of heads in a 'folklore' context, as manifested in many parts of the country.

Harby lies near the north east corner of Leicestershire where the county meets Lincolnshire and Nottinghamshire and other stone 'Celtic' heads have been found in the three counties. They were all, like the Harby head, found in undated contexts. The one other head from Leicestershire comes from Oadby (Leicestershire County Council Heritage Services accession number L.A59.1961) published as Romano-British in Ross (1967, 90, pl. 25C). The curator at the time, David Clarke, was of the opinion (noted in correspondence) that it could be Romano-British but might be a piece of architectural sculpture of Christian Anglo-Saxon or medieval date. The only stone head from Nottinghamshire was found in imported soil in a garden in Hucknall (Nottinghamshire SMR number L10137). Stone heads from Lincolnshire, possibly 'Celtic' and found among piles of stones, are reported from Great Humby and Little Humby (Lincolnshire Historic Environment Record 33817 and 33818, White 1976, 55; 1977, 71), and Kirton Lindsey (North Lincolnshire SMR No. 700, White 1977, 71). The Nottinghamshire and Lincolnshire heads are in private ownership.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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