

AYLESBURY TREASURE TROVE

Inquest on four gold coins found at Ceely House,
Church Street, Aylesbury, held at County Hall
on Monday, July 14th, 1952.

R. C. SANSOME, F.S.A., Scot.

[It will by now be well known that in the course of alterations to Ceely House for conversion as an extension to the Museum premises, the structure was revealed as basically of the late 15th century, with fine timbering and roofs, re-fronted, enlarged and altered at various dates. The roof timbers mentioned in the Royal Commission on Historical Monuments, Bucks., S. Volume p. 34, were in fact part of this structure, though it was not realised at the time. The death of Mr. E. A. L. Martyn, our Secretary and architect in charge of the work, has postponed publication of a full account of the discoveries. But it occurs to us as useful to print a full record of the procedure at the inquest on the gold coins which were found in the course of these alterations.—EDS.]

Before the inquest was opened in County Hall, the Coroner, Mr. Stanley E. Wilkins, with the seven jurors, inspected the upstairs room at Ceely House where the coins were found by the workman. Mr. Wilkins pointed out the upright beams at the foot of which the coins were discovered.

OPENING OF COURT WITH JURY.

“OYEZ, OYEZ, OYEZ.

All manner of persons who have anything to do at this Court before the Queen's Coroner for this County, concerning Treasure lately found at premises known as Ceely House, Church Street, Aylesbury, Bucks., draw near and give your attendance. If anyone can give evidence on behalf of our Sovereign Lady the Queen, when, where, how and by what means and by whom the said Treasure was found, let him come forth and he shall be heard and you good men of this County summoned to appear here this day to ENQUIRE for our Sovereign, when, where, how and by what means and by whom the said Treasure was found, answer to your names, as you shall be called, every man at the first call, upon the pains and perils that shall fall thereon.”

THE CORONER'S ADDRESS TO THE JURY.

“You have been called here today to assist me in a rather unusual enquiry relating to certain treasure which it is stated consisted of four golden coins

which were recently found on premises known as Ceely House, Church Street, Aylesbury, Bucks., and it is necessary to ascertain whether such treasure so found is 'Treasure Trove,' and I think it might be well that I should make a few observations with regard to my jurisdiction to hold such an enquiry.

"As you probably know, the judicial office of a Coroner is of great antiquity and its original origin is lost in obscurity but the office can be traced in the year 1194 when the Coroner held the title of 'The Guardian of the Pleas of the Crown' and the Coroner's duties arose under the Common Law of the Realm. The Coroner had many duties to perform which affected the King's Crown and dignity and were determined either by the King in person or by his immediate officers. Among his many various duties he had to hear and determine causes and keep records of all that went on in the County in any way connected with Criminal Justice and above all to guard what might be called 'Chance Revenues falling to the King.'

"The collection of such revenues depended to a great extent on the diligence of the Coroner in dealing with, among other things such as the forfeited chattels of felons, wrecks of the sea Royal . . . and treasure that might be found, and in the earlier days Treasure Trove was of considerable importance as a source of revenue to the Crown. In modern times, however, it is only of importance from an historical, antiquarian or archaeological point of view. Although the Coroner's duties arose under the Common Law of the Realm, his duties have since been preserved by various statutes or acts of Parliament in which it is enacted that a Coroner shall continue as hitherto to have jurisdiction to enquire of treasure that is found, who were the finders and who is suspected thereof.

"It is the Coroner's duty, therefore, as soon as the finding of any Treasure becomes known to him to summon a Jury to enquire into the facts and is not wholly confined to enquiring who were the finders and who is suspected thereof, but he has to enquire of the treasure that is found, which means concerning treasure whether it is that form of treasure trove or not, for obviously all treasure is not treasure trove.

"Treasure Trove consists of objects of gold or silver which have been hidden in the soil or in the buildings of which the original owner cannot be traced, and they become the property of the Crown, subject to any claim that may be made by any grantee of the franchise or treasure trove from the Crown. If the owner instead of hiding the treasure casually lost it or purposely parted with it in such a manner that it is evident that he intended to abandon the property altogether and did not on purpose to resume it on another occasion, as if he threw it on the ground or any other public place or in the sea, the first finder is entitled to the property against everyone but the owner and the King's prerogative does not in this respect obtain, so it is in the hiding and not the abandonment of the property that entitles the King or Queen to it.

"Copper or bronze coins or articles of base metal are not treasure trove.

"It is the duty of every person who finds any treasure to make it known to the Coroner of the County. There are penalties for concealing it consisting of fine or imprisonment.

“The facts in this case are:

“That during the last month alterations have been carried out inside Ceely House, Church Street, Aylesbury, which premises have recently been acquired by the Bucks. Archæological and Architectural Society, and in one of the upstairs rooms a large cupboard, forming most of one side of a wall, was pulled out from the wall. When the boards at the back of the cupboard were removed it exposed ancient timber and plaster work and wall papers, and one of the ancient timbers consisted of an upright timber of considerable dimensions, probably of the fifteenth century, which was encased by plaster work on each side of the upright timber, against which upright portions a door frame was fixed so that there would be a space between the front or face of the upright timber and the upright door frame post. When the cupboard had been removed, certain brickwork was put into place underneath the cross timbers with a view of giving them support. While this was being done, one of the workmen, George Todd, saw something yellow on the top of a quantity of dirt and dust which was at the foot of the upright timber when the side casings of plaster and the door frame post had been removed. He picked the article up and thought it was a token piece, but immediately took it to the Museum Assistant. It was afterwards handed to Mr. Sansome, the Curator. Then Todd, on returning to the work, moved more of the dirt and dust which was at the foot of the upright post, and found two more yellow discs. These he gave to his foreman, Mr. Fleet. The next morning he found another gold coin similar to the others, and he found it near where the others were found. I understand that Todd then told the foreman, Mr. Fleet, that he had found a fourth coin and that he was going to keep it to show someone and was going to hand it in after the week-end, which he did.

“Evidence will be given that these coins were definitely gold coins dating between the years 1461 and 1483. They are known as Edward IV Rose Nobles and their value at that time was about 6s. 8d., and it was a form of currency in those days. A coin valued at 6s. 8d. in those days was considered to be of some value and would probably be owned or possessed by people of means and their antiquity value is considered to be now about £7 each, or £28.

“A further point is to whether the treasure was intentionally hidden or concealed. I should mention that at the same spot where the coins were found a bone consisting of a seal what might be called a marker, of considerable antiquity, was also found which perhaps is rather significant and you may think points also to the fact that it may have been deposited at the same time as the coins.

“Now were the coins intentionally hidden—?”

“Evidence will be given that the coins and seal when found were in splendid preservation. One of the coins was found on the top of the dust at the foot of the upright timber—that the upright timber has a crack in it, the top portion of which is bent forward—that the top portion of the upright is so made that the cross timber rests on it behind the top of the upright timber—that part of the cross beam on the left of the upright timber, as shown in the photograph, has been cut away with a view to testing and seeing whether dry rot was present, and, of course, it is conjecture, but it may have been that

in removing the cupboard from the wall or the cutting away of part of the crossbeam, the coins then concealed may have fallen from behind the top of the upright timber down the casing in front of the upright timber in the dust and dirt that had fallen there—or during the period when the bricks were being placed in position under the crossbeam.

“The point as to whether they may have been deposited under the floorboards of the floor of that room is perhaps negated as I understand the floor has been reconstituted since the erection of the upright wall and also the fact that one of the gold coins was found exposed on the dust at the foot of the upright timber.

“It probably would have been possible to have placed the coins and seal behind the top of the upright and possibly resting on the top of the cross timber behind it. One other point with regard to that position is that the slanting timber of the roof came down to the cross timbers and only a space of a few inches would be open to the space above the room and timbers, and having regard to the fact that the coins were found in the same place, and the seal was also found with them, and all in good preservation, it rather points to the fact that the coins and seal were originally hidden or placed in a crevice or crack in the beam or behind the upright, and they were not lost.

“Enquiries have been made, but I understand that the owner is unknown.

“With regard to the finder, it is quite clear that the man Todd was the finder. He apparently did not conceal his find but reported the first one immediately and handed it in. He then reported the finding of two others and handed them to the foreman. The next morning he found the fourth and told the foreman he had, but no doubt his curiosity was then raised and he said he would take it home for the week-end and show certain friends of his—that he handed this in on the following Monday and no doubt you will consider that he did report the matter and that he did not conceal his find.

“After you have heard the evidence I shall put to you the following questions.

“1. Of what did such find consist?

“2. Where was the find deposited?

“3. Was it intentionally hidden or concealed or accidentally lost or purposely abandoned?

“4. Is the owner unknown?

“5. Who was the finder?

“6. Did the finder conceal his find, and

“7. Do you find the treasure found is treasure trove?”

First witness to be called was the finder, 51-years-old Mr. George Todd, of 9 St. John Street, Aylesbury, a labourer employed by Messrs. Webster & Cannon.

His statement to the police said:

“On Thursday, 26th of June 1952 I was working in Ceely House carrying bricks and mortar upstairs and bringing down rubbish. Just after dinner I was upstairs in one of the rooms and I saw something yellow on top of some dirt and dust. I picked it up and at first thought it was a token piece. I took it downstairs and gave it to the Museum Assistant and asked him what it was.

He kept it and said he would give it to Mr. Sansome, the Curator. I went back to work, and when I was clearing up I picked up two more yellow discs. I took these to Mr. Fleet, our foreman. During the morning of Friday the 27th June I found another gold coin. I was near where the others were found, and this one was under a piece of wood. I put it in my pocket as I thought I would keep it over the week-end to show to my sister and her husband. Later I gave it to Mr. Sansome. In the room where I found the coin my firm have been taking away the boards and then bricking up under a beam. It was at the foot of this upright beam where I found these coins. I thought they must have fallen out somewhere up the beam, but just where I do not know. I have watched the rubbish I have been taking away from this room and have examined it in case there were any more."

Cross-examined by the Coroner, Mr. Todd said he also found a piece of bone on the floor at about the same place as he found the coins. He also said he did not see who took down the cupboard and did not see any of it being taken away. He said that the dirt and dust at the bottom of the beam was likely to have fallen from the top of it.

Mr. Arthur Lockwood Benson, of 119 High Street, Berkhamsted, a 25-years-old voluntary museum assistant, said that a workman handed him a gold coin, saying he found it upstairs, and asked if it was any use. Later witness gave it to Mr. Sansome. Since then he had looked round the premises but had not found any more gold coins.

Mr. Bernard Fleet, 46, the foreman, of 201 Aylesbury Road, Bierton, was in charge of the job. Mr. Todd told him he had found a coin which he had handed to Mr. Sansome. Later he handed witness (Fleet) two more coins which he took to the Curator. On Friday, Mr. Todd told him about the fourth coin, which he handed to him on the following Monday.

Answering questions put by the Coroner, Mr. Fleet said there was a door frame in front of the upright timber and a plaster casing on either side of the beam. There was a space between the face of the upright beam and the door frame. He thought they had taken the casing down first, but he was not sure. He saw no sign of coins. He also said there had been an "L"-shaped portion cut out of the upright beam, and the cross-beam rested on the lower portion of the "L." During the operation a considerable amount of dirt and dust had fallen from the top of the beam, which he thought was about nine or ten inches square.

Mr. Ronald Cortney Sansome, the Curator, of 85 Green End Street, Aston Clinton, said that the Bucks. Archæological Society had acquired Ceely House about six years before to extend the Museum. Miss Cicely Baker's family had bought the house in about 1901.

Webster & Cannon had been working there for about a month, and the top rooms were being converted to hold period furniture. Certain timbers were being taken away.

"I recognised the coin as an Edward IV Rose Noble," said Mr. Sansome. "Two others were brought to me later. Mr. Benson and I searched the premises that day but found no others. After lunch on Monday Mr. Todd gave me the fourth coin."

"It is quite clear these four are gold. The face value is 6s. 8d. and they were probably struck between 1461 and 1483. It was a form of currency in those days and it is apparent from the type of coins that the owner was a person of some note. I think it is likely they were hidden for safety. The possibility of tracing the owner seems very remote. It seems unlikely that the coins were placed there during recent centuries as there have been plaster walls encasing the timbers."

The antiquity value of the coins, said Mr. Sansome, was about £28 altogether, for a total weight of 475.73 grains.

Mr. Sansome said that Mr. Todd also handed him a piece of bone, which he thought was a game marker or seal. He pointed out that the floorboards of the room had been partially removed about 1901 when electric light was put in, and some other parts were put in about six weeks before when the timbers were inspected. Nothing was seen then.

"It seems more likely that the coins were at the top of the beam prior to the addition of the timber casing and that they were at the base of the 'L' of the upright," he said. "We know that in 1720 the re-covered wall was placed in position. They might have fallen down during the taking away of the cupboards or the bricking-up of the wall."

Reply to Mr. Wilkins' questions, Mr. Sansome said he thought the coins could have rolled into the bottom of the "L," and pointed out that the upright beam was one of the main structures of the early building and went down to ground floor level.

"It is quite conceivable," he said, "that the coins and marker were in a leather bag which was placed on top of the beam."

There was a space between the ceiling and the top of the rafters, he added. The staircase had been erected about 1720.

Reply to the jury foreman, Mr. Sansome said that it would be extremely difficult to say what game the marker might have been used for, and suggested that the seal or marker could have been kept in the bag with money.

Returning their "verdict," the jury said that the discovery was of four Edward IV gold rose nobles, found in Ceely House, Church Street, Aylesbury, were intentionally hidden, the owner was unknown, Mr. Todd was the finder, who did not conceal his find, and that the coins were treasure trove.

The official declaration on the "inquisition" stated—"and the jurors further say that the said treasure was found in former times deposited, hidden and concealed and that the owner or owners thereto cannot now be known and is therefore treasure trove and the property of our Lady the Queen, which said treasure trov, I, the said Coroner have taken and seised into her Majesty's treasury on behalf of our Lady the Queen."

CLOSING OF COURT WITH JURY.

All manner of persons who have had anything to do at this Court before the Queen's Coroner for this County concerning certain Treasure lately found on premises known as Ceely House, Church Street, Aylesbury, Bucks., having

discharged your duty and you good Men of the Jury having returned your Verdict may depart hence and take your ease.

NOTES ON THE COINS

- (a) Blunt and Whitton Type VII, 117.92 grains, mint mark crown (reverse only).
- (b) Blunt and Whitton Type VIII, 119.03 grains, mint mark crown (reverse only).
- (c) Blunt and Whitton Type IX, 119.01 grains, mint mark long-cross fitchee (reverse only).
- (d) Blunt and Whitton Type IX, 119.77 grains, mint mark long-cross fitchee (reverse only).

All the coins were in very good condition and were struck 1469-70. This suggests that they were concealed at the time of Henry VI's abortive restoration—possibly concerned with the Battle of Barnet.