

The Dumfriesshire Hoard

'The slightest
kiss of a
good signal'

By Derek McLennan

Base of vessel showing dozens of ingots and arm-rings and circular zoomorphic arm-rings

Due to the very nature of the discovery I am about to relate I'm limited with regards to the information I can write. Above all, the site must be protected. Obviously I cannot give the merest hint of a specific location, other than to say the discovery was in the Dumfries and Galloway region of Scotland.

Of course, this also means that I cannot specify some of the people involved from the various civil service and archaeological professions, the landowner and their representatives, the tenant farmer and the members of the public who, living nearby, are vigilantly watching the site as I write. I take this opportunity to thank everyone concerned for help, support, calmness and understanding; it is appreciated.

The saga begins

It had already been a fantastic off-season as the small informal group of which I am a member had unearthed another rather large medieval coin hoard of 362 coins, following on from our previous one earlier in the year. The group is called 'The Ayrshire Division' and consists of myself, Gus Patterson, Martin McSweeney, Sharon McKee and Alex Carslaw.

The exciting story of that particular hoard, written by Gus and Marty, will hopefully be published in a following issue of *The Searcher*. It is safe to say that as a group, we generally hoard hunt, almost on an exclusive basis. Within the last 18 months, we have hit as a group, or individually, five hoards prior to this one.

I had arranged to meet with two fellow detectorists, David and Mike, to have a scan at a field I had researched, and one that the Ayrshire Division had searched previously. We had managed some decent finds, but nothing startling. However, I was always confident that it had some secrets to divulge and was positive there was a chance of unearthing something really special.

I fired up my Minelab CTX3030 and got ready to detect, explaining to the guys where the field had produced previously and where they might like to look. When they enquired where I was going to, I said that I would be searching for Viking and so would just be digging lots of nails and such like, and they were to go where they wanted.

Off we went with the usual good wishes exchanged.

I chose my line and started to make my way back and forth in rows over the area. Nothing startling came up. The field was always reasonably quiet anyway, and I had a couple of nice finds such as a Victorian penny and a small, flat bottomed, domed piece of lead, which I hoped may perhaps be a 'Viking' gaming piece. I also had the inevitable large collection of iron nails.

After an hour, David came wandering up and asked if I had anything, to which I said, "Nothing much, but perhaps if I'm lucky, a wee 'Viking' gaming piece."

He looked at it unconvincingly and asked where else in the field might be productive, as he hadn't a lot to show for an hour's work. Mike had wandered up and he looked at my find with interest and then also enquired where might be more fruitful.

I pointed up the slope and around the corner of the small hillock and said they could try there, and off they went. Mike stopped, turned around and asked if I was coming. Spurred on by my 'Viking' gaming piece, I said, "I'll give it 30 minutes to find a Viking hoard and then join you". Mike just smiled and wished me luck, turned and moved off up the slope.

Watching the guys move off, I decided that I would change direction and detect towards a hay bale about 20 degrees to the left, and tramline the area for half an hour before setting off after the others. I breathed in the fresh air, turned towards the selected bale and took the first step towards the events that would change my life.

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Martin McSweeney

Discovering Valhalla

I lurched forward with the CTX and started 'hoovering' - a term my mum came up with that adequately describes what we do in a field. I moved towards the bale. First one signal; nail, then another; nail. When I came across my third target it seemed to be a booming iron response: I worked it 360 degrees and managed to hear the slightest kiss of a good signal.

My next thought was that as I had already dug 30 odd nails, what harm would one more do? I then centred the target as best I could and eased the spade into the earth. I cut a reasonable sized hole and levered the clod out of the ground, scanned it - nothing. But then, when I scanned the hole, the booming iron signal emanated from it.

I took my probe out of its holster, switched it on and thrust it towards the hole. The resulting high-pitched continuous squeal told me that I had probably found a massive bit of cast iron pipe at least 18" down!

By now, resigned to the fact that I had found a beautiful Victorian relic, I decided to dig it out. I eased the spade once again into the hole, and also had to insert my foot to be able to press it into the earth at the bottom. As I leveraged the spade back, I thought I spotted a glint, and immediately stopped digging.

Reaching into the hole, my hand wrapped around something large and I lifted it out of the ground. The object was edge on, looked like silver, but had a hooked end. My immediate thoughts were that it was a large silver spoon of some kind. I flipped it round to the wider surface and rubbed my thumb to clean the soil from the approximate middle of the object - a large saltire design appeared and my heart stopped. Endorphins flooded my system and my synopsis exploded like a bonfire night firework display - **VIKING!**

I recognised that the object clasped in my hand was a pristine example of a Viking broad-band arm-ring, with horizontal punched lines starting from both ends and terminating just short of the centre, where there was located a punched saltire with a vertical line running through it, almost like a Union Jack - a classic Hiberno-Scandinavian design.

The field was spinning and my heart was trying to claw its way out of my chest. Involuntarily, I just started to stumble towards the guys who were just over the hill, and being unable to speak, was simply waving my Viking arm-ring furiously in the air.

Neither of the guys could see me, as they were engrossed in their searching, but somehow, I managed to summon enough breath to shout out "Hoi!" At this, both men looked up and stared towards me.

As Mike approached I just said, "I found it", and passed the arm-ring over to him. He asked if I was sure and I replied, "one hundred percent mate." David then reached us and was passed the arm-ring. He knew what he was looking at, and immediately asked, "How deep was it?"

"Deep," I replied, "come and see the hole". Looking down, I saw spoil half filling the hole and said, "It was deeper than that, almost two feet down. Let me remove some of the spoil."

I stuck my hand in the hole, grabbed a handful of spoil and lifted out two more pieces of Viking treasure! I could not believe it, and just looked at the new pieces, an ingot and half an arm-ring, glanced up at Mike and David and exhaled jubilantly, "There's more!" I can't really remember what happened for the next few minutes, I was so ecstatic and walking round in circles whooping, grinning and punching the air. Mike and David were smiling at me.

"So, what now?" Mike asked. I confirmed that I would section around the immediate find hole and bring the soil down a little further to see what we had, before calling for archaeologists. They are busy professionals and I needed to be sure of what I had discovered to adequately describe it to them. I asked Mike and David to help, but they both replied that it was my find and I should do the digging.

I carefully cut out a 50cm by 80cm section of the turf down to a depth of 10" and then brought out my knife and started to slowly scrape my way down the edges and then toward the find spot. Both of the guys stayed to watch and ever so slowly my very tentative excavation started to reveal wondrous things.



Archaeologist Andrew Nicholson recording the top level hoard



Archaeologist preparing top level hoard for removal

And then there was light

As I got nearer the area where the first three pieces had been found, I came across another three that had apparently become dislodged from their original position. Removing these from the section, I saw what appeared to be the surfaces of more ingots and arm-rings lying in the soil, and more intriguingly, what appeared to be coiled silver wire.

At this point I stood up and told the guys, "That's enough, time to call the archaeologists". I ran back to the car to retrieve my mobile phone. Picking it up, I stared bleakly at the 15% remaining on the battery. I immediately understood that I had to save the battery of this, my only means of communication, and could not afford any long conversations.

I decided to call my partner Sharon to ask her to contact the archaeologists and let them know that I had found a Viking hoard with at least 15-20 items, including silver wire. I was so out of breath, excited and in shock, that when I tried to brain dump everything onto Sharon, I was almost incoherent. Afterwards she explained that her initial thought was that I had crashed the car.

She quickly agreed to call the Treasure Trove Unit in Edinburgh and ask them to send someone to the site. While I was waiting I decided to clean up, while preserving any archaeology. I carefully cleaned around the artefacts with a small camera brush, lent to me by Mike's son, David, who had arrived on the field with a Canon DSLR to take some images.

As I carefully brushed loose soil from around the small pile of ingots and arm-rings, I noticed that the silver wire appeared to be through the end of an 'arm-ring'. As I continued to clean, I realised that what I had uncovered was a solid silver cross in the insular/Celtic style. My heart missed a beat once more and I stared at perhaps one of the earliest Christian crosses found in the United Kingdom, and more interestingly, it was exceedingly large, roughly 6"x 6".

Archaeology needs patience

Another three hours passed while we waited for a local archaeologist to arrive on site. During this time Marty, Gus and Sharon arrived and were stunned by what they saw. The sunlight was reflecting off the cross and it seemed to glow within the hole. This was the first time in over a thousand years it had emerged from the darkness and into the daylight.

At approximately 3:20pm an archaeologist for the local council Andy Nicholson arrived and explained that he had been instructed to conduct an emergency recovery of the hoard. After examining the in-situ finds and the excavated hole, he immediately set to work. As luck would have it, Andy is a Viking expert and impressed us all immeasurably with his knowledge, steady hand and professionalism.

The excavated section was widened to an approximate 1m x 1m area, after covering the ingots, arm-rings and cross with material to protect them from any spoil spillages. Gus and young David had to leave at this juncture, so those that remained helped Andy where we could. Sharon recorded and bagged the finds; Marty helped Sharon and took photographs and video; David, Mike and myself all took photographs and sieved the spoil that had been removed during the excavation.

A couple of hours passed before we were at the stage to remove the cross. By this time 22 ingots and arm-rings, plus some other items had been recorded and removed.

Detecting au naturel

Any firm soil was carefully cleaned from the edges of the cross and surrounding area, to allow for its removal. What appeared to be remnants of a leather bag were also recorded at this stage. The cross was then very carefully teased out of the soil. I remember saying at this point that it was probably an anti-climax and that it would be plain on the other side, only to be met by Andy exclaiming, "Oh no it's not!"

Then everyone let out gasps, whoops and cries of excitement, for on the other side was elaborate carvings, presumably inlaid with niello, and very early and highly stylised depictions of the four evangelists on each arm of the cross, inlaid into the silver with solid



Derek McLennan at initial excavation & holding first ingots and arm-rings discovered



Discovery of gold ring in-situ second level of hoard



First level hoard as discovered in-situ

gold! The cross was so beautiful, still complete with its neck chain, that it literally just took your breath away.

Andy concentrated on further recording and the protection of the cross, while Marty and I scanned the remaining hole with our Minelabs and received a MASSIVE non-ferrous signal, something similar to what a hidden cache of aluminium cans might make.

"There is more here," I blurted at Andy. He stopped what he was doing, and came back to the hole and scraped a little of the soil with his trowel and hit hard packed soil. "Highly doubtful" he exclaimed, "this is natural".

I looked in the hole, flicked on my probe, and started to trace the sounds in the soil. "There is something massive under here," showing Andy the outlines of the objects with the probe. He continued scraping and replied, "I'm not saying your machines are lying, but it is highly doubtful anything is under the soil." He (thankfully) decided to give in to our protestations!

After scraping down roughly another 4", and with our continued checking with the probe, off popped a circular piece of hard packed soil which appeared to have some textile embedded in it. We all gasped as the hole revealed a slightly domed green and golden metal object. The excitement was palpable and the air was filled with raw nervous energy being generated by the possibility of more Viking artefacts.

It was now after 5:20pm, so it was suggested that it may be better to refill the hole and leave the recently discovered second level hoard until the following day. This would have allowed its removal under less time-constrained circumstances, as there was approximately two hours of daylight left.

However, the National Museum of Scotland had indicated to Andy that it would not be able to send anyone down for several days. We also discussed the fact that an unknown person claiming to know the Ayrshire Division, but definitely not known by any of us, had tried to gain permission from the landowner to detect in the field the previous day. We were all now fully aware of the possible historic significance of the artefacts, and not one of us wanted to leave it unprotected against possible looting. So, a decision was taken by all concerned to continue with the emergency recovery in the best manner possible under the circumstances.

Golden wonders

Andy then started his recovery of the second level, and gently scraped and brushed around the various artefacts to reveal what was there. It became obvious that there was a good-sized vessel, which was inverted. A collection of circular arm-rings were also evident, and more ingots and arm-rings appeared.

The decision was taken to remove the ingots and arm-rings from the side of the vessel to ascertain how deep it went and what else may be there. As the first three decorated arm-rings were removed a small void appeared and we all realised that there was a significant number of ingots and arm-rings going down into the earth. What was more, they were all shiny and clean like the day they were buried! There were many of them: ingots, broad-band arm-rings (Hiberno-Scandinavian, Scandinavian and Hiberno-Scandinavian prototypes), an annular rod arm-ring and a few bits of hack silver.

Whilst removing these artefacts it was noticed that several of the arm-rings were plain. However, these plain rings had something even more unique and rare (so I am told). They were marked with runes, which did not appear to read as a sentence, similar to most Viking runes, but appear to only be marked with individual names.

Dozens of artefacts were removed before the bottom of the second level hole was reached and it is quite possibly one of the largest hoards of complete Viking broad-band arm-rings ever discovered. As the last rings were being removed several pieces of what appeared to be leather seams with stitching intact, perhaps from a leather sack, were removed, recorded and bagged.

Next Andy turned his attention to the circular highly decorated arm-rings to the East of the vessel. These appeared to be Scandinavian in origin and had obvious tarnishing, which would lead to the conclusion that they were not of the same silver purity as the Hiberno-Scandinavian arm-rings.



Large silver alloy Carolingian lidded vessel



Detail of Carolingian lidded vessel



Close up of first ingots and arm-rings discovered

The soil was carefully excavated from around the rings and again, voids appeared at both ends of the arm-ring group. "Gold," Sharon shouted, "I can see GOLD!" From her position at the edge of the hole, Sharon could see into the void at the far end and there was definitely a glint of gold.

Andy continued to brush and trowel the soil from around the arm-rings, and then we all saw a gleam of gold from inside the rings. Once he had removed most of the soil holding the group of arm-rings in place, he gently removed them from the hole and placed them on one of the white paper wrappers he had brought to protect the finds.

As he released his hold on the rings and carefully removed his hand a solid gold bird pin dislodged itself from some organic material located within the centre of the arm-rings, and lay staring up at us from the wrapper. We gasped and stared back! What was lying before us was a totally unique work of art; a solid gold bird pin of undetermined origin, possibly a clothes pin of a very high status person.

We turned our attention to the organic material in which the bird was previously located. It looked very much like the remnants of a wooden box, and what's more what appeared to be a large solid gold ingot lay inside.

None of us could quite believe what we were looking at; Viking gold is very rare, especially ingots, and there we were staring at one, never mind the solid gold bird that accompanied it!

Once the excitement had calmed down to a mere tremble, attention was turned back to the arm-rings, and it was noticed that the two largest of them appeared to have zoomorphic end fastenings, again apparently rare. Just as we thought the golden moment had passed Sharon whispered, "There's a golden ring in the hole". Incredulously, there it was sticking out of the soil looking as though it had been in a jeweller's window for the past thousand years.

Andy removed it and placed it beside the arm-rings. It was obvious that it too had been dislodged from within the wooden box around which the arm-rings were placed, but at the opposite end from where the bird had originally been located.

The lidded vessel

Our attention then turned to the vessel, which remained in situ and appeared to be mainly wrapped in textile. Andy started the long process of excavating the precious artefact. The gravel natural, although hard packed, quickly broke down when disturbed and a great amount of kudos was bestowed on Andy, for his patience, steady hands and nerve.

During this process we all helped bag any loose textile remnants spotted in the soil. Once Andy had scraped and brushed around the vessel, so that it was essentially free from its thousand-year-old resting place, he got ready to extract it. He had also noticed that the vessel appeared to be intact including its lid. This is extremely rare as there are apparently only two known examples of lids, on this style of vessel, in the Western world, and to my knowledge a vessel such as this example has never before been seen.

Andy then cleared enough gravel from the lid of the vessel to allow his hand to lift and remove it. As the vessel was righted and while still in Andy's hands there was a great deal of jubilation and excited chatter, which was only broken by Andy exclaiming "GUYS, GUYS, GUYS...THERE'S MORE!" We all hushed and turned to face Andy, "It's full," he whispered, and gently placed it down on pre-prepared plastic sheeting. The resulting cheers and joyous celebration was an experience that those lucky enough to be present will never forget.

Conclusion

In future issues *The Searcher* will reveal more details of the fantastically unique and rare artefacts contained within this fabulous hoard, but for now I will leave you with some thoughts.

This hoard, before being accurately weighed, would appear to be the largest Viking hoard found in Scotland since the discovery of the Skaill Hoard on Orkney in 1858, and it may even become the largest. There are artefacts within the hoard possibly covering a wide range of early civilisations, including; early Christian, Norse, Pictish, Celtic, Carolingian, Anglo Saxon and more.

The style of the Hiberno-Scandinavian broad-band arm-rings



Early medieval cross showing four Evangelists



Gold bird pin



Gold ring



Scandinavian Zoomorphic Arm-Rings showing organic remains and gold ingot



Second level ingots and arm-rings being recorded and bagged

could indicate a late 9th, or early 10th century deposit date, perhaps related to the Viking expulsion from Dublin in 902AD and subsequent Hiberno-Norse settlements in Northwest England. However, the deposit date will hopefully be narrowed down and eventually revealed through further academic study.

The hoard would appear to have been deliberately deposited in two distinct levels, with the second level being cut into the natural gravel and a layer of the natural spread on top, and then the first level placed on top of this as a possible diversion. It must be stated, and I think all present at the initial excavation are in agreement, had metal detectors not been present, then the second level of the hoard could possibly have been overlooked.

Indeed had the Minelab CTX 3030 not detected a signal at over two feet down within the pasture, then these historical artefacts could conceivably have never been found. Or worse still, they may have deteriorated to a much greater extent or even been dragged up and severely damaged through future farm work within the field.

The fact that they were discovered and recovered in pristine condition is in no small part down to the machines and the individual skills of detectorists and archaeologists. However, for me, the most important aspect was the undisputed fact that like-minded amateur detectorists and professional archaeologists were able to work with mutual respect, and in harmony with each other, to produce a result of outstanding historical importance.

I will hopefully reveal in future articles exactly what lies within the vessel, as its dimensions are approximately 10-12cm in diameter and 16-20cm in height including the lid, but for now the story must pause. I leave you with the mental picture that will remain with me for the rest of my days. It was just before sunset; a group of detectorists and an archaeologist are standing over a hole in fading light and everyone within this proud band of brothers was exhausted. Together, they have just finished the first fully documented excavation of a Viking hoard within modern British history – and it felt wonderful!

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Hiberno-Scandinavian broad-band arm-ring marked with Viking runes



Hiberno-Scandinavian broad-band arm-ring marked with Viking runes



Derek McLennan with Andrew Nicholson the first archaeologist in modern British history to fully excavate and record a Viking hoard found in the UK