

Braintree Archaeology Excavations 1981-1985

Keith Cullum

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Report by Richard Todd

This lecture was a description of some of the 160 coins and other small finds from excavations undertaken by the Brain Valley Archaeological Society in central Braintree prior to the construction of a new road. The site was behind the then Fountain Public House and its two main features were a ring ditch representing the robbed out foundations of a stone built house and a deep well. Overall there was evidence that over the centuries soil had moved down the sloping site so that while on the higher ground finds were located only eighteen inches below the surface lower down they were fifteen feet deep.

Many of the coins were found in relation to the ditch and well. A group of twenty one were found between the bricks of a collapsed bread oven. The coins were mostly Roman but ranged from the reign of the Celtic king Dubnovellaunus 50-44 BC, of the Cantii tribe in Kent, to a George II halfpenny of 1734. We were shown photographs of a representative sample in chronological sequence.

The earliest so-called "Potin" coins were cast in strips and then broken into individual coins. They have been found over a wide area of south east England demonstrating the extent of communication and trade at that time. Then there were coins of Addedomarus and of Cunobelin of the Trinovantes with a variety of images and inscriptions, one later example showing Roman influence in its design. Two of the Cunobelin coins are unique.

There were many Claudian copper coins of low denomination, referred to as "Roman navy money" together with local copies and forgeries. A shortage of silver and the effects of inflation at various times led to the production of numerous forgeries many of them extremely crude, perhaps because the forgers were illiterate. It seems that any image resembling a spiky crown was adequate.

Some coins, including one of Domitian, 87 AD, and another of Marcus Aurelius, 173 AD, can be dated precisely because the inscriptions detailed the year of their consulship and tribuneship respectively.

We were told incidentally about Septimus Severus who came to Britain along with his family and an army of 50,000 men to quell the Scots. He failed and retreated south but became ill and died at York. His sons, Caracalla and Geta are notorious for having quarrelled to such an extent that Caracalla murdered Geta.

There were specimens from Probus who improved the coinage and from Carausius, a naval commander who declared himself emperor of Britain and established mints in London and possibly Colchester. The Carausius coin has an

image of a galley with oarsmen showing its prominent bow constructed to serve as a battering ram. From the fourth century there were coins of Constantine who, it has been said, condemned his second wife to death by boiling, and of his confusingly named family. Many of these are in such good condition that they can be dated either from their mint marks or, in some examples, from the number of Roman standards depicted on them.

After the Roman period the site seems to have fallen into disuse but above a covering layer of black soil a very small silver coin of Richard II, a silver penny of Elizabeth I dated 1560 from the mint mark, a low denomination coin of Charles I, who apparently would allow his portrait only on gold or silver coins, and some local tradesmen's tokens were found. A Charles II farthing of 1672 and a George II halfpenny of 1734 were found in the robbed out trench of the original Roman building, possibly lost by workmen quarrying for stone.

Other finds included a small amount of pottery of no distinction, some horse skulls in the well, what seemed to have been bags of bone together with some lost or discarded knives in what had been a pond, indicative of a nearby butchery business, other metal objects including an adze and a candlestick, bone and metal pins, nail cleaners, a pair of tweezers, several brooches, both Celtic and Roman, some silvered and one with inset enamel, bracelets and necklaces and a separate intaglio with Greek and medical inscriptions suggesting that a Greek doctor had lived on the site. Finally a bone die or dice was found and photographed but it disappeared, presumably stolen, before it could be transferred to a safe place. The finds are in the care of Braintree Museum.

The speaker brought along a number of specimens of coins and small metal objects from his own collection all beautifully restored by himself. He explained that he did this using a microscope and dental probe avoiding the use of any corrosive agents.