

The Watlington Hoard

Case Study

The Ashmolean Museum

School programming



Supported by

The National Lottery[®]
through the Heritage Lottery Fund



ASHMOLEAN
MUSEUM OF ART AND ARCHAEOLOGY UNIVERSITY OF OXFORD



UNIVERSITY OF
OXFORD



**OXFORDSHIRE
COUNTY COUNCIL**

THE ACQUISITION

In October 2015, James Mather, a metal detectorist, unearthed the first large Viking Hoard to have ever been discovered in Oxfordshire. The Hoard, declared Treasure by the coroner of Oxfordshire in 2016, was valued at £1.35 million and required a substantial fundraising effort to enable the acquisition. Thanks to pivotal grants from the Heritage Lottery Fund, The Art Fund, the Ashmolean Friends and Patrons, and several individuals the Ashmolean was able to save the hoard for the nation in 2016.

Comprising about 200 coins (some fragmentary), 7 items of jewellery and 15 ingots (bars of silver), the find is not particularly large, but it is hugely significant because it contains so many coins of Alfred the Great, King of Wessex (r. 871–899) and his less well known contemporary, Ceolwulf II of Mercia (r. 874–c. 879).

The hoard contains 13 examples of the rare 'Two Emperors' penny that shows Alfred and Ceolwulf seated side by side below a winged figure of Victory or an angel. The image on the coins suggests an alliance between the kingdoms of Wessex and Mercia. This challenges the accounts found in written sources which dismiss Ceolwulf as a puppet of the Vikings. Ceolwulf II, the last king of Mercia, quietly disappeared from the historical record in uncertain circumstances and Alfred and his successors then forged a new kingdom of England by taking control of Mercia, before conquering the regions controlled by the Vikings.

The hoard can be dated by the presence of a single 'Two-Line' type penny which was not produced until the late 870s, after the Battle of Edington (May 878) between Alfred's forces and a Viking army. Viking forces moved both by water and land, and they likely used the ancient trackway known as Icknield Street which passes through Watlington, close to where the hoard was found. It is possible that the hoard was buried in the wake of this violence or during the ensuing movement of peoples.

The Hoard has become an integral part of the Ashmolean Museum's world-class collection of art and archaeology. Now residing in the care of experts, fragile items from the Hoard have been safeguarded for conservation and their long-term survival.

With the county's heritage at the forefront of project aims, coordinators sought to give communities '*a sense of pride, ownership and understanding of the Watlington Hoard*' through an extensive engagement programme of activities and outreach.

THIS CASE STUDY

This case study was researched and recorded by researchers from the University of Oxford who collected data from Museum staff and attendees. Interviews with Museum staff were used to explore the inputs and strategies developed to deliver the activities associated with the acquisition.

Interviews with participants also provided contextual information which have been used alongside data collected via sessional observations.

Using mixed method approaches data assessing the 'impact' of each of the activities were collected from a representative sample of attendees.

The Ashmolean Museum

Core programming for primary school groups

A total of six primary school groups accessed free Key Stage 2 sessions, which were offered by the Ashmolean Museum. One primary school session was observed.

Twenty-one Year 4 students attended the observed session, along with their class teachers and one teaching assistant. A member of the Museum Education team led the session that investigated different types of treasure on their journey.

Inputs and activities

- *Discussion drawing on pupils's hypothesis and reasoning abilities*
- *In-depth knowledge of the galleries collections*
- *Dress up costume activity – 'treasure hunters'*
- *Treasure hunt and anagram task*
- *Coin printing*
- *Replica handling*
- *Jewellery making*

The first part of the session began with a discussion about the concept of treasure, the pupils's understanding of 'a hoard' and what it means to be a 'hoarder'.

- *'It's like when you have presents from nine years ago that you haven't opened!'*

The group were also asked where they would keep their own treasure, and how they would hide or protect it. The pupils were enthused by such discussions, citing the likes of treasure chests and laser beams, ideas which they openly shared amongst their class group.

For the first task, the class group was split into two. These smaller groups were tasked with deciding the best place to hide their own hoard, using a 'map' provided by the Museum. The picture offered to each of the groups depicted a number of visual clues, which could be used to locate treasure at a later date.

Group discussions revealed the groups' insight into geographical processes, i.e. erosion and decay, and also a number of other the issues which might hamper the retrieval of their hoards.

- *'We could dig a pit and put loads of soil on it and then no one would find it'// 'but then how will we find it?'// 'oh yeah'.*
- *'It can't go in the river; it will go rusty!'*

On reflection of the task, the groups were reminded to think about how the landscape might change over time, how trees might be chopped down, mountains crumble, and rivers change course. After this activity was wrapped up, the pupils were invited to the Coin Gallery, where they would view a number of different Hoards on display.

The museum educator adopted the Talk Partners strategies to encourage discussion amongst the school group; they hypothesised as to how might have collected and buried the treasure as well as why they never returned to claim their riches.

- *'Maybe he had an illness which made him forget stuff.'*
- *'He could have died, perhaps fighting in a battle.'*

With each suggestion, the Museum Educator extended the pupils's vocabulary and probed further with reflective questioning. After initial discussions pupils were asked to observe the details which remained intact on many of the coins – taking note of the dates and the symbolism of period's rulers. Discussions were supported by a jigsaw activity that required pupils to use text and imagery to piece together images of old coins.

Dressing up activity was then introduced into the fast-paced session. Pupils took on roles wearing crowns and beards, as they re-enacted a story of the Crondall Hoard and learning about how the hoard had been found in a peat bog in Hampshire. Pupils proceeded to act out a number of vignettes as they were introduced to the rights of landowners and treasure finders. They were asked what they would do if they found some treasure of their own:

- *'I would give it to museums and let you take it out of the cases and touch it'*
- *'I would give it to the Ashmolean if they gave me £100'.*
- *'finders keepers, losers weepers'*

Students discovered that if they found gold, silver or something very old that they were required by law to tell someone. After having been introduced to the concept of treasure, students moved to the England Gallery, to view the Watlington Hoard and the Alfred Jewel.

In the England Gallery, students viewed the Watlington Hoard in the central display case. The class group appeared very knowledgeable; they knew that King Alfred was commonly regarded as a clever king, famous for his role in preventing the Viking's dominating England. The Museum Educator was able to tell the pupils about the significance of King Ceolwulf II of Mercia, and how he is now considered much more important (than previously assumed), due to his allegiance with King Alfred. Pupils were able to view the rare coins that show the two kings, sitting side by side.

Pupils were then given free exploration of the gallery and time to complete supporting 'treasure hunt' activity sheets. They were asked to identify whether various items in the gallery were 'treasure' or not, thus requiring reflection on learning which had been introduced throughout the session.

After having explored the gallery, pupils worked in small groups for a handling and labelling task. They were invited to hold and muse over the purpose of replica items.

Object handling was followed by craft activities that allowed pupils to recreate pieces from the Watlington Hoard. They made arm rings or necklaces as well as aluminium coins, which were embossed using a pencil. This simple creative task produced immediately effective results, and the whole class group appeared to enjoy wearing their new pieces of Watlington Hoard jewellery.

Facts from the session were then recapped, and the group were thanked for being amazing treasure seekers.



IW PHOTOGRAPHIC: Dressing up for role play at The Ashmolean Museum

Impacts

Fourteen pupils attended the observed primary school session. Their enjoyment of the fast-paced activities was evident throughout. Using 'treasure' as the theme of the session meant that pupils could be introduced to a number of sub-themes i.e. the concept of hoards, the significance of coinage, the ownership of new discoveries and the legal requirement to declare treasure.

When asked what they found most interesting about the session, pupils cited: the craft activities (16%), viewing the coins (23%) and the King Alfred Jewell (61%). They commented on the details of the coins, the age of the coins and the spectacle of viewing the Hoards as whole collections of gold and silver money.

Pupils recognised the important role in museum's collecting items like the Hoard, for insight, conservation and public engagement.

- *'I think it is important because we wouldn't be able to learn about them without them'.*
- *'It is very important because they need to look after very old things'.*
- *'Yes, so that everybody can look at them'.*

The class teacher gave feedback about the content and delivery of the session. She was thankful that the session was made freely available as finding funding for museum sessions has, at times, limited the attendance of the local school group.

The teacher was particularly passionate about the work of the Ashmolean Museum Education Team, and praised them for their 'enrichment to any history topic'; as having details about the artefacts being described to the pupils in such detail really helps to '*bring the past to life*'.

The class teacher was of the firm belief that museum visits were a fantastic life experience for the pupils and an important opportunity to become familiar with museums and their contents'. Regarding the delivery of this particular school session, the variety of activities and fast pace was noted. The Museum Educators were praised for being '*well versed in discussing pupils's ideas; she was encouraging, and there was a good level of listening and discussing*'.



IW PHOTOGRAPHIC: Primary school students participating in an Anglo-Saxon grave burial session

Core programming for secondary school groups

A total of nine secondary school sessions took place at The Ashmolean Museum, engaging approximately one hundred and thirty-five students. One secondary school session was observed.

Thirteen Year 8 students attended the observed session, along with two of their class teachers. This session was led by two Museum Educators.

During the session, students explored coins from the Ashmolean Museum's collections and students considered why such finds are important to museums.

Inputs and activities

- *Introduction to the historical period*
- *The Watlington Hoard's excavation details*
- *Object handling*
- *Exploration of the money gallery*

At the start of the session, the Museum Educators explored the experience and understanding of hoards and why they may have been left undiscovered with the class group. During this interchange, the Museum Educators was able to engage in a topical reciprocation with the students citing age appropriate and fashionable examples throughout the conversation. This gave the first part of the session a relaxed and informal tone while inadvertently encouraging group participation.

Pictures of the excavation site were shown to the group, and the story of the Watlington Hoard's excavation was explained so that students could understand the process of protecting and conserving the fragile items. After hearing the full story of the acquisition, the class group split into two smaller groups.

One group moved to the Money Gallery, while the other group remained in the England Gallery. Those who moved to the Money Gallery were allocated iPads and introduced to a task that required them to document three others Hoards, using an application called Pic Collage. Students were not familiar with this app, but quickly understood how to use the app to create their own record of different Hoards in the collection. The six students using iPads appeared immersed in this design based task.

During this time the Museum Educators moved between students engaging them in conversations about the various items on display, their Pic Collage creations. Object cards that provided further information and discussion points were distributed to support the activity. Upon completion of the activity, the class group emailed their collages from the museum iPads to their class teacher had a record of their work. The class groups then switched to complete the remaining activities.

Once back in the England Gallery, the observed group were asked about their understandings of the Vikings and Anglo Saxons. Pre-prepared with a map the Museum Educators were able to demonstrate the geographical locations of the kingdoms of Wessex and Mercia, and briefly, introduce the movements of Viking invaders.

After these introduced the possible alliance between King Ceowulf II and King Alfred the Great was posed, alongside the evidence that the Watlington Hoard was thought to provide. After the introduction to the Hoard, replica items were handed out amongst the class group. Being able to hold these items brought excitement to the group as they bustled to touch the objects.

The Museum Educators demonstrated to the group how archaeologists handle such objects, using their palms to feel the shape and their fingers to feel details; this was followed by a discussion of the objects and their possible uses. Other items from the Anglo Saxon period were then introduced to the group, developing understandings of the Anglo Saxons in a much broader context. The group were able to view a number of other items from the museum's collections, including frying pans and watering cans from the period. At this point, the other group returned to the gallery, and the session was wrapped up.



IW PHOTOGRAPHIC: Primary school students viewing the Watlington Hoard

Impacts

The pupils who attended the observed secondary school's session reported their enjoyment of the session; they valued many different elements of the session and its delivery. Overall, handling replica items was the groups favourite activity (24%), while others prioritised seeing the Hoard (19%), session discussions (19%), learning about history (and local history) (13%), viewing coins/ currency (13%) and using the iPads (6%).

- *'I enjoyed using the iPads because it's a fun and different way to learn.'*
- *'Seeing all the coins and all the discoveries'*
- *'I enjoyed being able to feel replicas of the items. It was also very interesting because Watlington is nearby.'*

Pupils said that they would remember a number of key aspects related to their museum visit. These included: The discovery, importance and value of the hoards (38%); The Anglo Saxon tools and burial items that were shown to the group (31%); The discussions relating to treasure – why treasure is important, hypothesise as to why some treasure is abandoned (15%); the broad content of the museum collections (8%) and the replicas (8%).

The class teacher thanked the Museum Educators for a 'brilliant experience' which she felt was great in helping the pupils see how our understandings of the past can change, in light of new information.

The class teacher commented it was a fantastic experience for the students to be able to handle objects. Museum sessions were highly regarded as they 1) build knowledge and wonder; 2) cover aspects of history which do not appear on the curriculum, and 3) have a greater focus on material history than the curriculum.

In amongst the teacher's praise for the session, two suggestions were made to make the creative iPad activity more focused. The first related to the sequencing of session activities with particular reference to the group who moved straight to the Money Gallery, during the secondary session. For these students, while they had received the initial introduction they had learnt relatively little about the Hoard (at this point) and so had little point of reference for their gallery explorations. The class teacher felt that more, formal, information could have been offered to students before this period of independent working. The second critique was that students could have also been offered more direction, or have been tasked with a specific question to answer during the Pic Collage activity. The Prompt cards were designed to do just this, but this may have been overlooked or misunderstood.



IW PHOTOGRAPHIC: Primary school students on a treasure hunt throughout the Ashmolean Museum

Recommendations for the Ashmolean Museum

These recommendations are made by the researchers from the University of Oxford:

- **Continue to offer targeted schools sessions-** Class teachers were thankful for free museum visits as this has previously been a barrier to visiting the Museum.
- **Consider the sequencing of activities** – Splitting groups has benefits regarding staff to student ratios and immersion in activities. However, the sequence of the session as experienced by pupils must also be considered.
- **Provide time to study replicas in detail** – Replica handling activities were a consistent favourite amongst groups and plenty of time should be allowed for all pupils to have this opportunity.
- **Consider the timing of offers to school** – Difficulties in recruiting schools to attend free taught sessions were reported. It was hypothesised this was largely due to school programming that means Anglo-Saxon and Viking topics are often covered during the autumn term.