

The Watlington Hoard

Case Study

Collaborative outreach activity

The Watlington Primary Project and Roadshow events



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ASHMOLEAN
MUSEUM OF ART AND ARCHAEOLOGY UNIVERSITY OF OXFORD



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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 that has 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.

Collaborative projects

The Watlington Primary School Project

The in-depth project held at the Watlington Primary school engaged children from all year groups with knowledge and activities centred on the Watlington Hoard. One of the main aims of this project was to give the children '*a sense of pride, ownership and understanding of the Watlington Hoard*' (Sue Wright, The Oxfordshire Museum) as this find, excavated from the local area, was part of their heritage.

The project was split into two different elements, one sought to develop historical knowledge and skills and the other aimed to engage children with an immersive arts project.

The historical part of the programme was contained within a week, from the 18th – 23rd of September 2017, with activities targeting classes throughout the whole school. Arts sessions were delivered by artist Francesca Shakespeare and her team of volunteers on a day to day basis over the subsequent month.

In the initial design of the primary project, it was the intention to create a big 'wow', and this certainly came to be. In total the project engaged with over 200 children at the school and the week culminated with a museum-led community Roadshow event in Watlington.

Inputs and activities

- *A3 images of the Hoard*
- *Whole school assembly – Sue Wright, James Mather and Viking*
- *Q & A sessions with James Mather*
- *The Making of the Anglo-Saxon Kingdoms taught session*
- *Hoard session*
- *Metal detecting session*
- *Unearthing the Anglo Saxons taught session*
- *Hoard based arts activities with Francesca Shakespeare*

In the run-up to the primary project, numerous A3 images were displayed around the primary school. Alongside these images were a series of questions that encouraged children to hypothesise about their significance and use.

The in-depth primary project was first introduced to the children of The Watlington Primary at their Monday morning school assembly. Sue Wright, the lead of the primary project, had organised for James Mather (the finder of the Hoard) and a Viking re-enactor to participate in a roleplay. The dramatic entry style of the re-enactor immediately caught children's attention and inspired the imagination of the group.

The subsequent discussion between James and the re-enactor allowed the children to envisage James' excitement as he discovered the Hoard and the questions that were running through his mind i.e. the age of the Hoard, why it was buried, and who might have hidden the treasure.

This initial introductory session was followed up by a question and answer session, where the children could pose questions to James Mather. At this point it was evident that the children were excited to learn more. The Year 6 class group presented well thought out questions to James, who answered in great detail.

- *'How did you feel when you found the Hoard?'*
- *'When you first dug it up, did you know whether it was Anglo-Saxon or Viking?'*
- *'Was it only coins that were found?'*
- *'Have you studied the Vikings because of this?'*

The week's programming had been designed in a way that children were to be slowly introduced to different Hoard related aspects throughout the week. This was intentional so that an element of mystery ran throughout the programme, and meant that children participated in sessions that built upon each other. Throughout the week children were asked to be 'history detectives' and piece all the information together.

The next session that the Year 6 class groups participated in was a drama session, organised by The Oxfordshire Museum. During this active session, children recreated an interpretation of Anglo-Saxon and Viking movements throughout Europe and around England. For comprehensive details of a similar session please see 'Watlington Hoard Case Study Oxfordshire Museum'.

Children were also invited to participate in a Hoard session. This session recapped on children's knowledge that they had learnt thus far and introduced the concept of 'hoards'. During this session activity packs were distributed around the class group and children guessed the purpose of a number of mysterious items printed on laminated card. Children worked in groups to try and identify pieces found in the Hoard, and hypothesise as to why a Viking might have buried these items.

- *'That's part of a helmet, cos that bit goes over their nose; 'It's a fossilised sausage!' 'A granny's stick'*
- *'They buried it to keep it all safe'; 'There were no and banks people used to steal from houses so the safest place was in the ground'.*

Using printed images for The Hoard Session made this task challenging for students as they had no information about the weight or scale of items. Replica items were used for sessions that ran later on in the week.

Children were also introduced to a session that compared the methods used during metal detecting and archaeology. This session was devised for especially for the week of in-depth programming and was included so that students could learn the specific differences between metal detecting and archaeology. The activity involved children preparing information and equipment for an 'excavation' / mini dig, using a seed tray. Children were then required to 'classify' their finds, bagging them up and labelling their items, which then needed to be located on a timeline.

A session entitled 'Unearthing the Anglo-Saxons' was included in the children's intensive week of programming. During this session children were provided with an activity box, which contained a laminated photo of their burial and a selection of accompanying items. Children were welcomed to handle objects from 'the graves' as they sought to identify who might have been buried alongside them. During this session children learnt information about the decomposition of materials, like leather, but the more typical preservation of others, like metal and bone. In a second part of the session, children learned more specifically about the rare coins that were found within the Hoard. Pictures of the original coins were circulated around the class.

Children learnt about the identifying features that were evident on these rare coins, such as the names of Ceowulf and Alfred, and the significance of the two kings sitting side by side on their thrones.

- *'It probably means they had an agreement because they share the coins'*

This session provided a very apt opportunity to promote the Roadshow, which would be taking place in the local library. Children seemed genuinely excited that they would be able to view the actual coins that were found in amongst the Hoard.

To include some of the youngest children in the school (KS1) Sue Wright, the project co-coordinator, created a story session designed to encourage group participation.

Sue introduced the story session by generally talking to students about Viking traditions, one of which was how Vikings liked to create and share stories together, and this is what the group set out to do. Three Viking style names were written on a flip chart and children were to choose from them as a group, this decision provided a basic starting point and the main character of the shared story. Throughout the session Sue was prepared with many prompts, she also probed children's responses keeping them engaged (and on-track) with the story's evolution.

The final session that children received was offered to children after half term and separate from the week of intensive week tuition. Day-long art workshops were delivered to class groups by the artist Francesca Shakespeare and her team of

volunteers who had been sourced from her 'Art Fundamentals Course'. During the workshops children were invited to complete a number of different craft-based activities. Throughout the day children:

- Made and decorated bass relief, plaster cast coins; and,
- A decorative money pouch to contain their coins
- Painted a backdrop that would make up part of a school installation piece, and drew foreground characters that would later be photo-shopped or stuck onto the backdrop.

Some pieces from the children's' collections were designed to be taken home, whereas others were to be used to create two installation pieces that would be displayed in the school's entrance hallway and in the library.

- **The site of the excavation** - The backdrop for this installation drew on children's knowledge of the local area; their drawings linked themes of landscapes, geography, flora and fauna, as well as their ideas of the past to their understandings of the present. Children were welcomed to draw anything – from their dog to a Viking. The finalised backdrop was to sit behind a display of the 'excavation' site, which contained a selection of the bass relief coins, just visible beneath a thin layer of soil.
- **A museum display** –Other coins were displayed in keeping with a museum context, bringing children's focus to the idea of curating and conservation. For this part of the task children were asked write about the history of their coins so that they could labelled in the display case.

Children were encouraged to attend the Roadshow event, which took place on the Saturday, after their project week. After their week of intensive tuition, children felt empowered to share the information they had learnt, with family and friends at the community event and many opted to wear stickers that said. 'I'm a Watlington Hoard expert – ask me a question.'



FRANCESCA SHAKESPERE: A Viking warrior overlaid onto a painted backdrop of The Ridgeway, Watlington.

Impacts

Teachers had been hoping that the week of museum led activity (and subsequent art activities) would 1) inspire the children and 2) provide Continuing Professional Development for staff (through the provision of knowledge and practical ideas). For teachers a main aim of participation was the children's enjoyment of the activities, with a hope to develop their intellectual curiosity and love of learning.

School staff gave overwhelmingly positive feedback about the museum led sessions:

- *Children really enjoyed having the visitors in assembly – they were excited to meet James Mather and were very interested in how he discovered the Hoard (Yr 5 teacher)*
- *[The Q & A session] Really interesting and children learnt lots about laws around metal detecting (Yr 3 and four teachers)*
- *The session 'Making the Anglo-Saxon Kingdoms' was Interactive and really developed children's understandings (Yr6 class teacher)*
- *[Hoard session] The children really benefitted from seeing 'actual' physical examples! The children came up some really inventive uses for each (Year 3 and four teachers)*
- *[Unearthing the Anglo-Saxons] Very practical use of resources which impacted across the board (Yr6 class teacher)*

Teachers reflected that all sessions were appropriately pitched for their class groups; they were also in agreement that they would continue to utilise this experience and the resources that had been provided. It is hoped that the Hoard project will be embedded into the school's curriculum. Teachers commented that they '*loved the whole school approach*' which immersed children in the topical learning. This approach was said to have '*created a real buzz around the school*' (Year 5 class teacher) and is a strategy that the school may repeat again in the future.

Feedback was also collected from students at the school. The Year 6 class group completed a brief written task at the beginning and end of the museum led provision, and this revealed a growth in their knowledge and understanding.

Making their understandings on a 1-10 scale, children rated their knowledge of Vikings, Anglo-Saxons and the Watlington Hoard. At the start of the week the mean average of the Year 6 class group's self-reported understanding was 4.3, this figure increased by an average of 3.4 over the course of the week.

Yr 6 Understandings of the Vikings, Anglo-Saxons and Watlington Hoard



This activity demonstrated that children believed themselves to have become more knowledgeable in these subjects since having participated in the project week.

When asked what contributed to this growth in knowledge children cited a range of facts relating to the Hoard (39%), metal detecting and archaeology (22%); content related to the Anglo Saxons (20%); Vikings (12%); and James Mather (7%).

- *Until Hoard Week, I didn't even know that there was a Watlington Hoard and it was found almost three years ago!*
- *Before I thought it was boring and now I know it is very important*
- *I now know the difference between archaeologists and metal detectorists*

The year 6 class group was also asked whether they felt that project had made them feel more connected to their local history. Seventy-eight percent of children agreed, some gave informing examples of why:

- *It has because it has shown that Watlington has some famous artefacts*
- *I love that 1000 years ago there were Viking hoards in Watlington*
- *Yes, it is amazing to know that there was a hoard buried really close to us. I now know more about the area.*

Those who had attended the Roadshow event which took place over the weekend reported their enjoyment of seeing the coins and interacting with re-enactors.

Recommendations for the Ashmolean Museum and The Oxfordshire Museum in relation to the Watlington Primary Project

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

- **Managing responsibilities** –The intensive primary school project involved the organisation of staff from The Oxfordshire Museum, the Ashmolean Museum, and the employment of an independent artist. This project highlighted the strength of the collaborative links that have been formed between both Museums staff, who provided a diverse and original sequence of events for children at the Watlington Primary School.
- **Facilitate the school's 'buy-in' to an intensive project** – strong support from the school helped to raise the profile of the Hoard to new heights. School staff were thankful to have been selected to participate in the project, which was made freely available to their school. Prior to the week of intensive museum led activity the school had been studying the Anglo-Saxon and Viking period thus children's existing knowledge had made them confident and inquisitive to learn more.
- **Consider the use of high-traffic spaces** – the session 'Making the Anglo-Saxon Kingdoms' used the school hall for children to re-enact 'movements and invasions' around England. Regrettably one session was interrupted by the lunch break of KS1 pupils. Despite the interruption the class teacher did comment that children still '*took on board a lot of information*' (Year 5 teacher). It is acknowledged that the school's project lead should have prompted this circumstance.
- **Check provision is suitable for the task** – As part of the day-long art workshops, it was the intention that older class groups would use scissors to cut eyelets into their money pouches. Many students were unable independently complete this part of the task, as the school's scissors were not sufficiently sharp. During the observed session it was also apparent that no left-handed scissors available so one child required the help of an adult throughout. Pre-cut pouches were used for subsequent sessions.

Bicester, Faringdon and Watlington Roadshows

Throughout 2017, The Ashmolean Museum and The Oxfordshire Museum worked collaboratively to offer three 'Roadshow' events to local communities throughout Oxfordshire. Thanks to The Oxfordshire Museum's links with County Council, local libraries were used to host the Roadshow events in Bicester, Faringdon and Watlington.

The Roadshow events provided members of the public with opportunity to view items from The Watlington Hoard as a curated display in their local library, with input from Julian Baker (the Keeper of the Ashmolean Museum's Heberden Coin Room), John Naylor (the National Finds Advisor of the Portable Antiques Scheme) and Eleanor Standley (the Ashmolean Museum's Assistant Keeper of Medieval Archaeology).

Supplementary engagement activities were planned by members of The Ashmolean Museum and The Oxfordshire Museum's Education and Learning and Access teams.

Alongside the events taking place in the local libraries various ticketed lectures were offered to members of the public.



IW PHOTOGRAPHIC: Bicester Roadshow

Inputs and activities

- *The availability of a ticketed lecture series*
- *Replica handling*
- *Badge making*
- *Jewellery making*
- *Engraving activity*

Different lectures were available at each one of the locations:

- **The Watlington Hoard in context: Hoards and history in Viking England** (Bicester) given by Dr Gareth Williams, Curator of Early and Medieval Coinage and Viking Collections at the British Museum.
- **The discovery and excavation of the Hoard** (Faringdon) a joint lecture by James Mather, the detectorist who discovered the Hoard, and David Williams, Finds Liaison Officer for Surrey and East Berkshire, who excavated it.
- **Two lectures were offered at Watlington** – The first was presented by James Mather and John Naylor, the National Finds Advisor of the Portable Antiques Scheme. Later in the afternoon James Mather gave a second lecture drawing on similar content.

In total, approximately two hundred and sixty people are thought to have engaged with the various lectures which were all targeted at adult audiences.

After each of the lectures, groups were located at the local library spaces which were organised so that the public could view pieces from the Hoard, and pose their questions to the experts. Within the library spaces, the Education and Outreach teams had also provided a range of craft activities for children and families.

At the events children and their families were invited to weave tapestries, use badge makers to create replica coins and manipulate aluminium foil and pipe cleaners to create jewellery, which could be taken home as a souvenir of the day's event. Dress up activities and replica handling were also offered.

When individuals were asked how they had heard about the Roadshow event 'word of mouth' was the most popular option (33%), followed by school mail (21%) and flyer-ing (13%). In the run-up to the Roadshow events Sue Wright, one of the project coordinators, spoke at school assemblies in the local areas – having school support proved to be valuable in the promotion of this style of event. 10% of visitors had also learnt about the events thanks to social media posts.

Those surveyed reported attending with their children (42%), partners (38%), friends (8%), alone (6%), grandchildren (3%), or older parents (3%).



IW PHOTOGRAPHIC: Object handling at Bicester Roadshow



IW PHOTOGRAPHIC: Creating arm rings as part of a craft activity at the Bicester Roadshow

Impact

While this style of Roadshow event required a new level of planning and organisation on the part of the museum's service, the community support for this style of event quickly became clear and was reflected in the number of attendees.

- Bicester – 13th May – 285 people
- Faringdon – 24th June – 168 people
- Watlington – 23rd September – 559 people

Additional information was collected to investigate attendees existing engagement with the Ashmolean and The Oxfordshire Museums. Of those surveyed, twenty percent of roadshow attendees had never visited the Ashmolean Museum and seventy-three had never visited The Oxfordshire Museum. Seventeen percent of those surveyed had never visited either museum. As such, a pertinent strength of the Roadshow events has been the engagement with members of the public who are not visiting museums which are freely accessible and available within their county.

Attendees commented on the remarkable provisioning that had been made available and the quality of the event. They were thankful for the opportunities to listen to and talk with the experts, to handle the replica items, and to participate in craft activities.

- *'beautiful display and friendly experts – brilliant and fascinating lecture*
- *'especially enjoyed handling (replicas) and having objects explained.'*
- *'Good event - better than good!'*

Groups were asked whether the event had helped them to understand why the Watlington Hoard was an important find, to which 86% either agreed or strongly agreed. Seventy-seven percent of attendees strongly agreed or agreed that the event had given them a better understanding of the archaeology / the work of museums. Those who were less sure cited that they already had a strong interest in the topic, or that they had known someone who had worked closely on the project.

Attendees commented that they had been impressed with the turnout, and how they had found it refreshing to see busy library spaces. Older members also commented on their enjoyment of witnessing the children's keen interest in their local heritage.

- *It was a pleasure to see how busy the library was'*
- *'Wonderful to see the coins on display, what a great use of the local library'*
- *'I was encourage to see the number of children at the event - very impressed'*

- *'Really good for the children who have really enjoyed preparing and learning over the previous week. Fun for them to be 'the experts' (Watlington)*

Communities were particularly thankful that their library venues had been chosen to host the Roadshow events. In Watlington, there was also a distinct sense of the Hoard 'coming home'.

- *'It is a great privilege that this collection has come to Faringdon. Really enjoyed the enthusiasm and knowledge of the team accompanying the hoard. More please!'*
- *'Thank you – it was lovely to bring this back to Watlington'*
- *Thanks so much for organising this event – the hoard in its original location and a talk from the finder. Fantastic!*

For some communities, the Roadshow events provided an experience of event organisation on a bigger scale and in Watlington the historical society are now already booking speakers for an independently managed lecture series. The Ashmolean curators have also offered the local library and historical society members a collections knowledge training session.



Participants and re-enactors at the Watlington Hoard Roadshow

Having the Watlington Roadshow planned as the finale for the Watlington Primary School Project not only generated great publicity within the town but created a special role for the children at the event. Since having experienced a week of in-depth tuition, the knowledgeable children were empowered to become 'Watlington Hoard Guides', who were enthused to share the information that they had learned with family and friends at the weekend event.

This style of event was new to Ashmolean Museum staff; while their learning teams were au fait with outreach and community engagement work. Participation of the curatorial team is not something that had been done before. The role of the curatorial team, across the Roadshow events, saw their involvement in logistical aspects (transportation and security), staff training, and engagement with members of the public.

John Naylor (the National Finds Advisor of the Portable Antiques Scheme) and Eleanor Standley (Ashmolean Museum Assistant Keeper of Medieval Archaeology) offered their comments regarding the style of event.

- *'The experience was a good one – the ability to speak with local people about the find was very welcome and enjoyable – many were very interested, including children'* (Eleanor Standley, Assistant Keeper of Medieval Archaeology).
- *'People visiting were genuinely interested, and it was nice to just chat in a relaxed manner with them. Generally my public engagement is either through our identification service which is a reasonably similar experience (albeit looking at object brought in by the public) or the occasional public talk which is more formal, so this was a nice change'* (John Naylor, National Finds Advisor of the Portable Antiques Scheme).

Curators felt that libraries worked well as the venues for this style of activity. Security was regarded as suitable at each venue, although there was a comment that having access via backdoors might have been better suited when transporting valuable pieces.

- *'It was also encouraging to know that we were attracting people who may never have been to the library and hopefully engaging them to make a return visit (even without us being there!).'* (Eleanor Standley, Assistant Keeper of Medieval Archaeology).
- *'I'm sure we had many visitors come who wouldn't have gone to Oxford to see the Hoard but who were nevertheless interested.'* (John Naylor, National Finds Advisor of the Portable Antiques Scheme).

- *It was a pleasure knowing that some of the people we were speaking with may not be able to come to the Ashmolean very easily (or wish to) (Eleanor Standley, Assistant Keeper of Medieval Archaeology).*

While the events felt relaxed and conversational in style, curators agreed that two members of staff were required to give appropriate attention to the number of people attending each of Roadshow events.

Both curators suggested the strength of printed information and its use in supporting this style of activity. Enlarged images of each of the small coins proved to be a useful resource and very popular with members of the public. Labels were printed for each of the display items, but due to the large numbers wanting to view the Hoard, this information was sometimes overlooked. John Naylor suggested that it may be useful to have printed copies of display case information, the availability of supporting literature or perhaps a poster presentation so that members of the public would be able to digest broader information without having to rely on those curating the display. It was noted this would help manage enquires during, particularly busy periods.

Both curators suggested that with the appropriate resources, planning and staffing they would like to see more of events of this kind. However, it was acknowledged that the weekend working is not easy or desirable and that preparation work often encroached upon already busy work schedules. For this reason, it was considered unpractical to offer Roadshows as a regular style of event, unless staff are specifically employed to prepare, manage and attend, on behalf of the Museum.



IW PHOTOGRAPHIC: Bicester Roadshow, held in the local library

Recommendations for the Ashmolean Museum and The Oxfordshire Museum in relation to the Roadshow events

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

- **Continue to utilise reliable methods of advertising** – Thirty-three percent of those surveyed suggested that they had heard about events via word-of-mouth. In the run-up to the events, course co-coordinators had liaised with local history societies and had also spoken at school assemblies; these techniques appear to have been very successful in publicising local events.
- **Continue to utilise social media** - Ten percent of those surveyed had viewed advertisements on social media. This freely accessible method of advertising can reach broad audiences with little staff input.
- **Utilise school connections** - Where possible museums should engage local schools in the publicity of community events. Schools and teachers will often happily publicise extracurricular activities to their students; this was found to be the second most popular form of advertising.
- **Pairing school projects positively impact community events** - Having the Watlington Roadshow planned as the finale for the Watlington Primary School Project not only generated great publicity within the town but created a special role for the children at the event, as knowledgeable guides.
- **Community style events extend the reach of museums** – A pertinent impact of the Roadshow events has been engagement with members of the public who are not readily accessing museum services. Likewise, using local libraries as venues for this style of event brings new people into the shared community spaces. Members of the public appreciated seeing people using and enjoying their local libraries, with thanks given to the museums involved.
- **Consider a breadth of supplementary resources** – Curatorial staff positively reflected upon their experiences at the Roadshow outreach events. In hindsight, and in light of the numbers attending. Curatorial staff suggested that printed information strongly supported this style of activity. While some images and descriptions were provided, these were not always easily accessible due to the prevalence of the crowds and their priority to view pieces from the Hoard. Printed copies of supporting information or a poster presentation would be desirable at future events.
- **Consider demands on staff time** – Museum staff were in agreement that with appropriate resources, planning and staff time, Roadshow events provide a novel and engaging style of the event which the public were particularly appreciate of. However, this style of the event adds an additional level of work (planning, preparation and delivery) into already busy work schedules. For this reason, the Museums should consider the employment of staff who can be dedicated to the management of this style of event.