

THE DISCOVERY OF THE LIGHTCLIFFE HOARD

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IN the late 1820s a substantial hoard of Iron Age gold and Roman silver coinage was unearthed near Bradford, West Yorkshire. The hoard was dispersed very rapidly, before a full record of its contents or the precise details of its discovery could be made. Attempts to establish exactly when and where the hoard was found – let alone its contents – have exercised the minds of numismatists ever since, from Akerman and Poste, through to Evans, Allen and Robertson, along with a host of local historians. The purpose of this short note is to draw attention to what may be the earliest published reference to the find, which seems to have previously gone unnoticed, and to suggest that the location and date of the discovery – and perhaps even the name of the finder, or at least of the first ‘owner’ of the coins – can in fact be pinned down very precisely indeed.

One of the problems which bedevilled early accounts of the find was the suggestion that there had been two separate discoveries of nearly identical material made at almost the same time, one at Lightcliffe and another about 11 km south, at Castle Hill, Almondbury, then supposed to be the site of Cambodunum (Fig. 1).¹ Despite the fact that the writers of some of the earliest, mid-nineteenth century accounts of the discovery, notably Beale Poste,² clearly believed that there had been a single find, and that it had been made at Lightcliffe, the Almondbury/Lightcliffe problem persisted. As a consequence the account of the hoard by Evans,³ published in 1861, is deficient in a number of respects, not least because he evidently continued to believe in the existence of the Almondbury hoard. It was another century before a reasonably full account of this confusion appeared, in Derek Allen’s *The Coins of the Coritani*.⁴

Allen argued persuasively that there had been only a single find, near Lightcliffe. The attribution to Almondbury arose as a result of correspondence between the Revd William Lund, a member of the Council of the Yorkshire Philosophical Society, and J.D. Cuff, which was in turn used by John Yonge Akerman as the basis of the first brief numismatic account of the find:

I can now give the particulars of [the] discovery, which have been obligingly communicated to me by Mr. Cuff. The Reverend William Lund, in a letter to that gentleman, says, that these remarkable coins... were discovered at Almondbury, the Cambodunum of the Romans.⁵

It is unclear now whether Lund simply made a mistake – transforming a discovery made *near* Cambodunum into one made *at* Cambodunum – or whether he genuinely believed that the coins had been found there, perhaps because some attempts were made to disguise the true location of the find.

¹ Rivet and Smith 1979, 293, suggest that Cambodunum may be ‘an unlocated Roman fort at Leeds, Yorkshire, at the confluence of the Sheepscar Beck with the Aire’. Another suggestion is the Roman settlement at Cleckheaton, about ten kilometres north-east of Huddersfield (*Ordnance Survey Map of Roman Britain*, 3rd edn, 1956, p. 30). Note however that the fourth edition of the *Ordnance Survey Map* (1978) omits any suggestion as to where Cambodunum may have been located.

² Poste 1851, 29.

³ Evans 1861, 79–84. The division between the two hoards is maintained in *The Coins of the Ancient Britons* (Evans 1864, 406).

⁴ Allen 1963, 22–5.

⁵ Akerman 1839, 81–2.

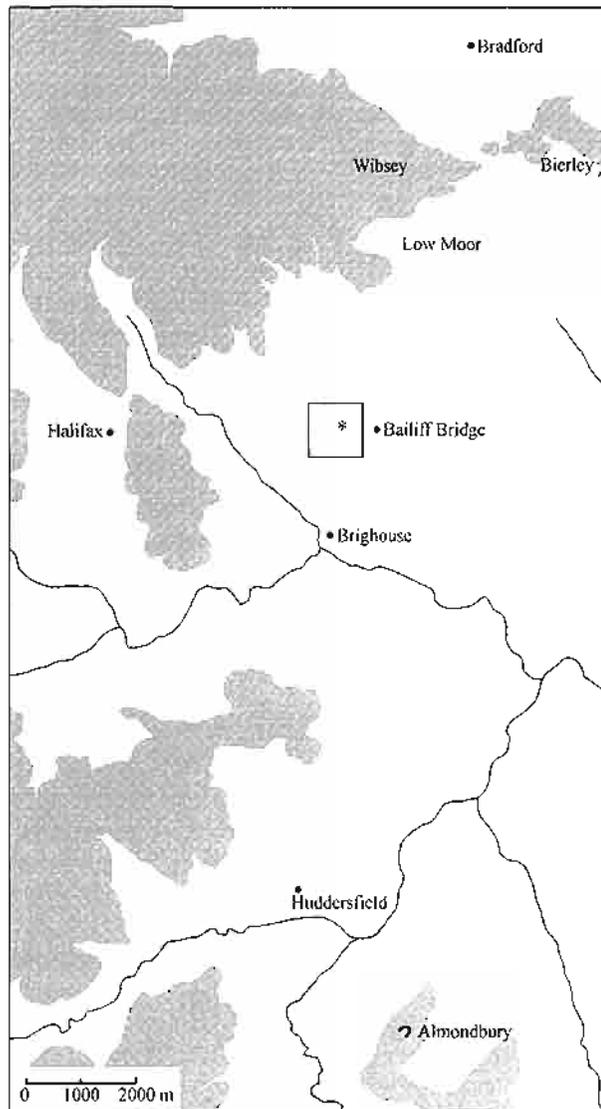


Fig. 1. The region around Lightcliffe (marked by asterisk), showing locations mentioned in the text. Shaded areas are land over 200m. The boxed area is shown in more detail in Fig. 2.

The role of the Yorkshire Philosophical Society in these events is significant, because it was in the pages of their *Annual Report. . . for 1829*, published early in 1830, that Allen found what he believed to be the earliest published reference to the hoard:

It is not irrelevant to this subject to state, that a considerable number of Roman denarii having been lately found in the vicinity of Huddersfield, near the supposed site of the ancient Cambodunum, sixteen of the most perfect were purchased for the Society, and together with them, eight very rare and interesting British coins found at the same place, belonging to the class called the coins of Cunobelin, but for preservation and curiosity exceeding any, it is probable, that have been before discovered.⁶

Because this report was read to the Yorkshire Philosophical Society on 2 February 1830, Allen suggested that the most likely date of discovery of the hoard was in 1829. But he seems to have been unaware of a reference published in the supplementary issue of the *Gentleman's*

⁶ *Annual Report of the Council of the Yorkshire Philosophical Society for 1829* (1830), 6.

Magazine in December 1828, which pushes the date of the hoard's discovery back a year and also provides an earlier attribution to Cambodunum:⁷

On the 8th of November, as a labourer was removing the soil from a stone-quarry in the neighbourhood of Huddersfield, on the supposed site of the ancient Cambodunum, he discovered upwards of 290 silver and copper Roman coins, which appear to be of the era of the latter part of the Dictatorship and the reigns of Julius and Augustus Caesar, as many of them bear effigies and inscriptions of these emperors, as well as those of many of the generals and other great men of and previous to that time. They seem to have been coined in various provinces of the empire, as some of them have Egyptian, others Grecian characters on them, mixed with the common Roman letters. Out of the whole, there are scarcely two alike.⁸

It is usually assumed that the 'Egyptian' or 'Grecian' characters are the inscriptions on the Iron Age coins in the hoard, which seem to have been chiefly of the VOLISIOS DVMNO-COVEROS type.⁹ It is not impossible that some of these coins, which are usually struck in a rosy, copper-rich gold, could be described as copper, although there may be an element of deliberate misinformation in this description. The reference was noted by Anne Robertson in her corpus of Romano-British coin hoards, and used by her to keep alive the possibility, discounted by Allen, that there had been separate finds at Almondbury and Lightcliffe.¹⁰ Unknown to either Allen or Robertson, however, there is a still earlier reference to the find:

ROMAN COINS. – On the 8th of November, a labourer, who was digging in the neighbourhood of Low Moor, turned up a large quantity of ancient silver and copper coins. They all appear to be of Roman origin, though struck in different provinces of the Empire, some of them having Greek and other Egyptian characters, mixed with the common Roman letters. They are principally of the age of Julius and Augustus Caesar, whose names and effigies many of them bear. Mr. James Dickinson, of the Leeds-road, Bradford, has them in his possession.

This notice appeared in the *Leeds Mercury* for Saturday 29 November, 1828. Its wording is so similar to the account in the *Gentleman's Magazine* that one must suspect either that it provided much of the source material for the latter, or that the same anonymous correspondent provided both notices, but it differs in several important aspects. It does not include a figure for the number of coins in the find, which suggests that the writer of the notice in the *Gentleman's Magazine* – whether or not the same person – had a relatively detailed knowledge of the hoard contents. But more significantly, it provides a different location for the find, in the neighbourhood of Low Moor; it does not mention Almondbury; and it gives us a name for the owner of the coins.

Low Moor is about 3.5 km north-east of Lightcliffe, and 15 km north of Almondbury (Fig. 1). The name would have meant little to most readers of the *Gentleman's Magazine*, hence its replacement in the latter with 'the neighbourhood of Huddersfield'. In the neighbourhood of Bradford would have been more accurate, but less appropriate for making the association with Almondbury. Although the report to the Yorkshire Philosophical Society, made just over one year later, reintroduces an element of uncertainty to the location of the find, described as 'near. . . Cambodunum', the association with Almondbury was cemented by Akerman's more accessible account in the first volume of the *Numismatic Chronicle*.

Purely on the basis that Low Moor is closer to Lightcliffe, we might argue that it lends further weight to the true provenance being there, rather than Almondbury. As Allen pointed out in 1963, the true location of the find had in fact scarcely been forgotten, even as Akerman and others were placing it at Almondbury. In 1851 Beale Poste noted, reasonably accurately (Fig. 1), that 'The place of finding was three-quarters of a mile N.E. of Brighouse'.¹¹ His

⁷ It is worth noting that the *Annual Report* of the Yorkshire Philosophical Society for 1828 – which was presented to the Society on 2 February 1829, and includes information on lectures, donations and suchlike up to and including January 1829 – makes no mention of the hoard, which had perhaps not yet come to the attention of members. Nor are there any references later in the 1830s, although there are records of several donations of Roman silver coins to the Yorkshire Museum which could conceivably have originated in the hoard (see p. 268).

⁸ *Gentleman's Magazine* 1828, II, 631.

⁹ de Jersey, forthcoming.

¹⁰ Robertson 2000, I no. 2, 4 no. 16.

¹¹ Poste 1851, 29. Brighouse is also mentioned in a passing reference to what must have been the Lightcliffe hoard by J.K. Walker, who wrote to the *Gentleman's Magazine* (1843 II, 360) about the discovery of 'celts and coins' in the region: 'Most of these coins were found near Brighouse, but a few miles from this place [Huddersfield].'

source of information was Charles Wellbeloved, Curator of Antiquities at the Yorkshire Museum – another member of the Council of the Yorkshire Philosophical Society – who had briefly mentioned the hoard in his own work on *Eburacum*, although simply as ‘found not far from Bradford’.¹²

Allen¹³ first drew attention to two significant historical references to the hoard from the mid- and later nineteenth century, both of which place the discovery at Lightcliffe, although as we shall see they differ in the detail. The first of these was written on 7 October 1848 by the Revd W.H. Bull, entitled ‘An account of some gold British coins and Roman silver consular and imperial coins found in a field, opposite Lightcliffe Chapel, within a few yards of the present road, in a Roman vessel, between the years MDCCCXXVIII and MDCCCXXXI’. This was reprinted some twenty-five years later by F.A. Leyland, in his ‘additions and corrections’ to Watson’s *History and Antiquities of the parish of Halifax*.¹⁴ A slightly different version of the Revd Bull’s account was published in two parts in the *Halifax Guardian* for 9 and 16 February 1861.¹⁵ Both book and newspaper carry extensive and useful details of the Roman silver coinage in the hoard, but the newspaper account provides a little more background detail – and another reference to the findspot:

We are indebted to the Rev. W.H. Bull, formerly incumbent of Sowerby, for the record of this valuable discovery, which was made in 1827 [sic], whilst commencing operations for a quarry just below Lightcliffe church. A man there digging struck upon a Roman urn near the surface, which on examination he found filled with gold and silver coins. Unluckily for antiquarian purposes he sold them to different people at the rate of 5s. 6d. per ounce, and they were soon scattered over the country. . . Happily the Rev. Mr. Bull, reading a brief account of the discovery in the *Leeds Mercury*, went in search of the coins.¹⁶

In 1893 another historian, J. Horsfall Turner, provided his own recollection of where the hoard had been found. He commented on the report in the Watson volume, agreeing with the substance but not the detail of Bull’s description:

This discovery took place in a field that was being quarried opposite the old house in Lower Lightcliffe. It has been pointed out to me many times, thirty years ago, and is not opposite Lightcliffe Church and could not have been, but on the right hand side of the road from the Old Church to Bailiffe Bridge, viz. the field behind Upper Smith House.¹⁷

Turner is being a little harsh on Bull here: although the latter had identified the site of the discovery as ‘opposite Lightcliffe Chapel’ in the title of his account, the newspaper version clearly gives the findspot as ‘just below Lightcliffe church’, which accords perfectly well with Turner’s own recollection. Although Turner evidently knew that Bull’s account had been published in the *Halifax Guardian*, he probably relied only on the version in Watson’s *History and Antiquities*. . . when compiling his own work.¹⁸

Examination of nineteenth century Ordnance Survey maps reveals the Lightcliffe area very much as Turner – and Bull – describe it (Fig. 2).¹⁹ Indeed there is a quarry in one of the fields behind Smith House (presumably the Upper Smith House mentioned by Turner) which – if these accounts are accurate – seems very likely to have been the site of the discovery, on the right hand side of the road (now the A649 or Wakefield Road) to Bailiff Bridge. The Chapel to which Bull refers must be the earlier St Matthew’s Church, described by Turner as the Old Church, which was demolished save for its tower in 1973; as Turner indicated, it is not precisely opposite the presumed site of the hoard, but lies about two hundred metres further

¹² Wellbeloved 1842, 136–7.

¹³ Allen 1963, 22–4. See also Allen 1960 for an earlier stage in his attempts to unravel Almondbury and Lightcliffe, and Teasdill 1961, who assisted Allen in his research.

¹⁴ Watson (ed. Leyland), n.d. [1869–80], 147–50.

¹⁵ Turner 1893, 24 noted that Bull ‘printed an account of this matter in October, 1848, which was reprinted in the *Halifax Guardian* and elsewhere’. Allen 1963, 24 took this to mean that Bull’s account was published in the *Halifax Guardian* in October 1848, but in fact it did not appear in the newspaper until February 1861.

¹⁶ *Halifax Guardian*, 9 February 1861.

¹⁷ Turner 1893, 24.

¹⁸ See n.15.

¹⁹ Fig. 2 is based on information recorded on the 1:2500 map of 1893 and the 1:10560 map of 1852–4, accessed online at <http://digimap.edina.ac.uk>, December 2006.

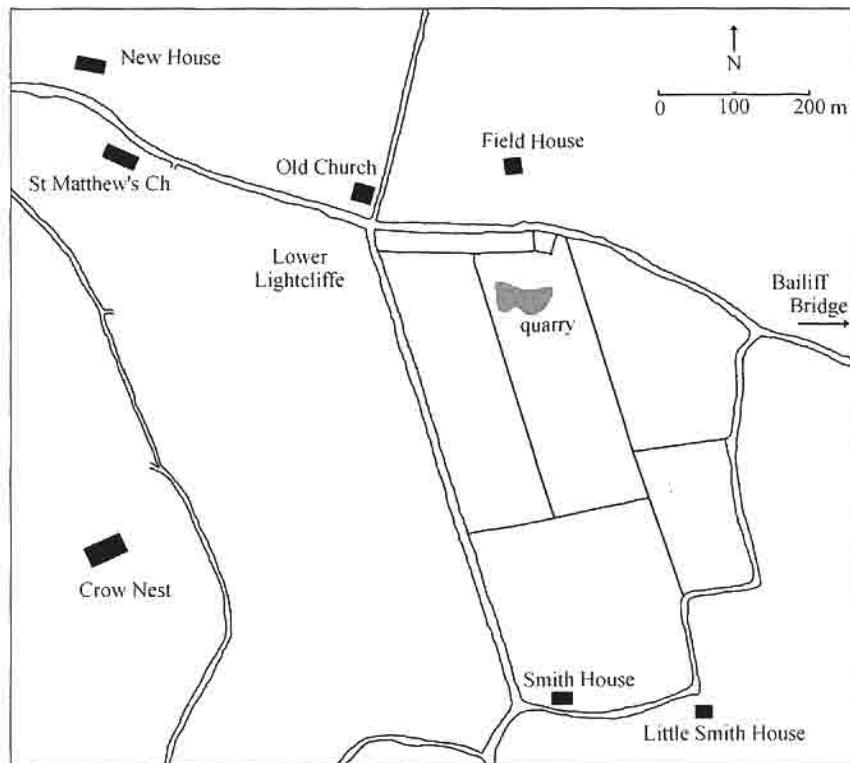


Fig. 2. The Lightcliffe area in the late nineteenth century, showing the quarry where the hoard was almost certainly discovered.

west.²⁰ The entire area of the fields behind Smith House is now a housing estate; the quarry at its 1893 extent lies approximately beneath the houses and gardens on the south side of West Avenue, towards the junction with Greenfield Avenue.

There are at least a couple more pieces of circumstantial evidence which may add a little more weight to the case for Lightcliffe. In 1835 William Priestley presented a number of 'Roman denarii, ar.' to the Yorkshire Philosophical Society.²¹ At that time Priestley lived at New House, Lightcliffe (Fig. 2), less than half a mile from the supposed site of the hoard, and it is by no means impossible that he had obtained some coins from the find. There were other donations of Roman silver coinage to the Society around this time – five from a Mrs Knapton in the same year, for example, and four consular coins from the Revd Markham in 1834 – which may also have originated in the hoard.²² It is also worth noting the discovery of a Republican denarius (L. Scipio Asiagenus, 106 BC), 'found in the Chapel Yard at Lightcliffe in 1833', which was perhaps a stray from the hoard; that type was also recorded in the hoard proper.²³

Although we still lack some absolutely unequivocal, contemporary account which fixes the hoard to Lightcliffe, the weight of the circumstantial evidence presented here is such that it is

²⁰ Saunders 2001. The Old Church fell into disuse c.1875 and was replaced by a new St Matthew's Church a little further west along the Wakefield Road (see Fig. 2).

²¹ *Annual Report of the Council of the Yorkshire Philosophical Society for 1835* (1836), 16. William Priestley (1779–1861) was a wealthy Halifax wool clothier, remembered primarily as a co-founder of the Halifax Choral Society (Cowgill 2000; 2002). Before living at New House he had resided with his bachelor uncle and several aunts at Crow Nest, Lightcliffe (Fig. 2). Priestley had made a larger donation of coins around the time of his election to the Society in October 1831, but these are listed as '115 silver modern coins; 159 copper' in the *Annual Report... for 1831* (1832), 32, and presumably did not include coins potentially from the Lightcliffe hoard.

²² *Annual Report of the Council of the Yorkshire Philosophical Society for 1835* (1836), 16 (for Mrs Knapton); *Annual Report of the Council of the Yorkshire Philosophical Society for 1834* (1835), 17 (for Revd Markham).

²³ Teasdill 1961, 16, 25.

very difficult to make a case for its discovery anywhere else. There seems to be no particular reason to doubt the words either of Turner or of Bull, and the newly discovered report in the *Leeds Mercury* can arguably be taken as further support for a provenance in the Lightcliffe area; certainly it does nothing to advance the cause of Almondbury. One could argue that it raises a claim for Low Moor, but at only two miles distant from Lightcliffe the latter is perhaps acceptably 'in the neighbourhood of Low Moor.'

Finally, what of Mr James Dickinson, of Leeds Road, Bradford, reported by the *Leeds Mercury* to be in possession of the coins? Was he the man who actually found the hoard, or is he more likely to have been the landowner? When the Revd Bull hurried off in search of the coins, he found that 'they had all been dispersed, nor could he find the man who had discovered them'; by chance he encountered a grocer at Bradford who sold him thirty-four, and he came across another ten at a watchmaker's shop in the town.²⁴ Unfortunately nowhere in his account does he mention their names, but since he had been alerted to the find by the report in the *Leeds Mercury*, we can reasonably assume that he had tried (and failed) to find Mr Dickinson. The census of 1841 – the nearest useful in date to the hoard's discovery – records three men of this name in the Bradford region.²⁵ Two of them are described as woolcombers, and one of these – aged twenty – is too young to be our man. But there is a Mr James Dickinson, fifty years of age, with wife, mother and four children, resident in Wibsey, North Bierley, Bradford; his profession is 'iron miner'. Might it have been he who struck gold and silver on 8 November 1828? At present we simply cannot be sure, but it is worth placing his name on record, since it may turn up in relation to the hoard in some other archival source as yet untapped.²⁶

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²⁴ *Halifax Guardian*, 9 February 1861.

²⁵ Accessed via www.findmypast.com, December 2006.

²⁶ It may be worth noting that no James Dickinson appears in the lists of members of the Yorkshire Philosophical Society published between 1825 and 1839. There were many other James Dickinsons in other areas of the country in 1841, of course, and I am not suggesting that this identification is definitive; he may have died in the period between the discovery of the hoard and the census, or moved away from Yorkshire. Inconsistency in mid-nineteenth century spelling (Dickinson or Dickenson?) also complicates the matter.

