

Small Finds of South Shields Roman Fort Notes

No. 4: the gold and silver coin hoard

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P. A. S. hoard number IARCH-51204D.

Introduction

In 1878 a hoard of gold and silver coins was found in or near the site of the fort on the Lawe at South Shields by a dock worker called Lyal Wilson, who 'prospected' for Roman objects to sell to local collectors. The most important of these collectors was Robert Blair, who kept notes about some of the discoveries. He stuck sketches, newspaper cuttings and texts into an album which survives in the National Centre for the Written Word, South Shields (Blair 1957¹). Included in this album are some original documents written by the finder of the hoard and some notes from Blair himself, which indicate the hoard was sold off piecemeal to at least four different collectors (*ibid.*, 102A - 103).

Location

The earliest reference says the hoard was found 'near the site of the Roman station' (Anon. 1878, 100), while a handwritten note by Blair says they were found 'in [the] Roman Camp at South Shields' (Blair 1957, 102A). Blair only ever talked about the 'camp' (also called the *Castrum* or Station) and the cemetery, so any reference to the camp almost certainly includes what would now be identified as the *vicus* as well as the fort itself.

Timetable of discovery and dispersal

Wilson gave Blair two documents:

(1) Two pages from his diary of 1878 (although it is unclear if these are original or copied out). The entries are mainly about his work on the docks, but include references to selling the coins. Blair has added a handwritten notation at the top of one page: 'Contemporary notes of Mr Lyal Wilson who found hoard of 12 gold coins and a mass of silver in Roman Camp at South Shields' (Blair 1957, 102A). There are problems with Wilson's dates (such as having both a Friday 21st and Friday 22nd February, and continuing with mismatched days of week/dates until at least 12th March), and he also seems to have made a mistake with the name of a month, writing 'August' instead of 'May'.

(2) A scrap of paper listing the sale of some of the coins by date, which do not match the dates given for the same sales in the diary. It is headed 'March 1878', but again some dates do not match up (Friday 25th follows Wednesday 24th), and while none of

¹ The latest dates recorded in the scrap-book are 1900 and 1916 (Blair 1957, 103, 164). Blair died in 1923 and in 1957 the scrap-book was combined with other papers from his archive and bound into a single volume.

days of the week match these dates in March they do occur in April, and it appears he has also got the month wrong on this document.

There are two fixed dates to work from:

(1) Blair marked coins with the date 26 April 1878, presumably after he had bought them and had them in his possession.

(2) By 7 June 1878 Blair owned four *aurei* and 75 *denarii*, as they were mentioned at a meeting of the Royal Archaeological Institute on that date.

The following can therefore be reconstructed, on the assumption Wilson made some mistakes in his 'contemporary' accounts.

Suggested correct date	Description	Source
Thurs 18 April 1878	Handwritten record by Wilson: 'March 1878 Thursday 18 to day found an number of Roman coin'	Blair 1957, 103
Wed 24 April 1878	(i) Diary of Wilson: 'Wednesday 24This morning sold to Mr Bell 1 Gold Coin for £2-5 and 19 Silver ones 1-12-0. In all 3-17-0.' (ii) Handwritten record by Wilson: 'March 1878 Wednesday 24 to day sold to Mr Bell 1 Gold Roman coin of Domitian for 2-5-0 and 19 silver ones 1-12-0'	Blair 1957, 102A Blair 1957, 103
Thurs 25 April 1878	Entry in diary of L. Wilson: 'Thursday 25 Sold 1 silver coin 3s-0.'	Blair 1957, 102A
Fri 26 April 1878	(i) Friday 26 Today sold to Mr Blair 1 Gold Coin of Hadrian for £2-5-0 and one Gold Coin of Augustus for £2-7-6 and one Gold Coin of Domitian for £2-7-6 and a Group of Silver Coins upwards of 70 in number for £8-0-0. In all 14-2-6.' (ii) Handwritten record by Wilson: 'March 1878 ... Friday 25 to day sold to Mr Blair 1 Gold coin for 2-5-0 and 1 Gold Roman Coin of Augustus Nero 2-7-6 and a group of Silver Roman Coin upwards of 70 for 8-10-0' [the price for the silver coins is different in (i)]	Blair 1957, 102A Blair 1957, 103
Fri 26 April 1878	Blair labelled some of the coins that he later sold: 'L[awe].26.4.78'	Corbitt 1955, 4, and see pl. II; Blair 1957, 103
Sat 27 April 1878	Entry in diary of L. Wilson: 'Saturday 27. Today sold to Mr Blair 1 Gold Coin of	Blair 1957, 102A

	Claudius for £2-10-0 In all 19-7-0.' [perhaps also more unmentioned coins or other types of finds, considering the final sentence?]	
Mon 6 May 1878	Entry in diary of L. Wilson: 'May 1878. Monday 6. ... Went to Newcastle and sold 7 silver Roman coins for 12s today.'	Blair 1957, 102A
Fri 7 June 1878	W. T. Watkin sent a note to Royal Archaeological Institute meeting of this date, referring to 10 <i>aurei</i> , 140 <i>denarii</i> and one or two copper alloy coins	Anon. 1878, 405
10 June[?] 1878	'within the past few weeks there have been found several gold coins of Marcus Aurelius, Hadrian and other Emperors, together with a mass of silver coins fastened together and weighing more than half-a-pound'	<i>Shields Daily News</i> , 10 June[?] 1878 (in Blair 1957, 91)
Tues 18 Feb 1879	Entry in diary of L. Wilson: 'February 1879 Tuesday 18. This afternoon sold to Mr Blair 1 Gold Roman Coin of the Emperor Antoninus 2-10 and 1 small Silver Roman Brooch ['10s' written above it] for 3 pounds and 1 copper coin for 1 shilling.' These were sold almost a year after the finding of the hoard; it is unclear if the silver brooch (now lost) and copper coin were associated with the hoard, but Blair included this page of the diary (which has no other mention of antiquities) with the other pieces dealing with the hoard	Blair 1957, between pp102-102A
Fri 26 Dec 1879	Blair took wax impression of two gold coins bought by J. Clayton, labelled 'Impressions of 2 coins found at the Lawe, South Shields in April 1878 & now in the possession of J. Clayton, Esq.'	Blair 1957, 118
1900	Handwritten comment by Blair: 'Sold the collection of Roman coins from the Lawe to the Duke of North[umberlan]d. They are now in the museum at Alnwick Castle. They included the 8 aurei I purchased from the find [sic] and the mass of silver. The late Mr John Clayton bought two of the gold coins discovered – one of Hadrian and one of Anton. Pius. Sold to him by the finder' 'Aurei discovered: Bought by R. B[lair]. 8 " Mr Clayton 2 " " Bell 1	Blair 1957, 103

	“ [Walter?] 1’ [this last name could also be Walker, Watkin or similar]	
1900	Handwritten note by Blair, written beside text from Wilson pasted into the album (see 24 March above): ‘Mr T. [J] Bell had this gold coin made into a scarf ring (!) which he wore and wears now (1900) regularly’	Blair 1957, 103

Publication of the hoard

Date	Comments	Source
1878	Information about ‘a small hoard of Roman coins consisting of ten <i>aurei</i> , and from 130-140 <i>denarii</i> ’ was given to a meeting of the Royal Archaeological Institute and published in their proceedings (see above). A couple of days later a local newspaper also recorded the find	Anon. 1878, 100
1885	A paper of the excavations and chance finds from South Shields read six years later on 2 July 1884 mentioned ‘at least twelve gold coins, and about two hundred silver ones, all in fine condition’. The coins (which have increased in number since the earlier accounts) are listed in an Appendix (consisting of those coins seen and recorded by Blair), but combined with numerous other site finds	Bruce 1885, 271
1911	Craster refers to the hoard when discussing a hoard at Corbridge, with the number of coins increasing again: ‘the South Shields find contained, in addition to the twelve <i>aurei</i> , between two and three hundred <i>denarii</i> ’. He records the year of discovery incorrectly, and although working from a list of the <i>aurei</i> supplied by Blair, thought the silver coins had not been recorded	Craster 1912, 219, 233
1955	Corbitt discusses the hoard and publishes the surviving 53 <i>denarii</i> from it in the collection at Alnwick. He assumes that the coins came from inside the fort but there is no evidence that this was so (the formal excavations inside the fort had finished by the time the hoard was discovered, and finds recovered afterwards were dug up by ‘prospectors’ and house-builders etc)	Corbitt 1955

1960	This repeats information from Corbitt 1955	Corbitt 1960
1979	Casey attempts to re-establish the hoard from the published records. However he identifies an <i>aureus</i> of Hadrian, which once belonged to T. J. Bell, as part of the hoard, but Blair says that Bell only bought one gold coin from the hoard, and this was of Domitian (see above)	Casey 1979

Container

No mention is made of the container (although the finder was unlikely to have been interested in a coarse ware vessel of no monetary value to him) and may have been held in something organic. The silver coins were found in one lump, being 'agglutinated by the oxide of copper from one or two copper coins which were discovered with the mass ... Of the [*c.* 75] *denarii* in his possession, Mr Blair has only separated and cleaned about twenty, leaving the remainder *en masse* as found' (Anon. 1878, 100). Corbitt suggests the two bronze coins were used to seal a container. He identified them as 'one illegible and one of Aelius', but does not explain where he got these identifications (Corbitt 1955, 5)

The *aurei*

The identification of the gold coins, by publication:

coin	Wilson/Blair <i>c.</i> 1900	Bruce 1885 ²	Craster 1911 ³	Casey 1979
Claudius	1 ¹	1 ¹		
Nero	1	1	1	1
Domitian	2	2	2	2
Trajan		2	3	3
Hadrian	1	3	4	3 ⁴
Antoninus P	2	2	2	2
Unnamed	5			
*totals	12	11	12	11

¹ deified Claudius, issued under Trajan, so in later lists classified under him

² this list only includes coins seen and recorded by Blair

³ information on the coins was supplied by Blair

⁴ this number excludes the coin in the Bell collection found in 1880.

Blair took wax impression of the two *aurei* bought by Clayton (Blair 1957, 118). Although in 1900 he recalled these as being of Hadrian and Antoninus Pius (*ibid.*, 103) they can be identified as Trajan (RIC 142) and Hadrian (RIC 283(a)).

Current location

Fifty-three *denarii* in the collection at Alnwick Castle can be identified as from the hoard (Corbitt 1960, 114, 116). A list of coins in the collection of Arbeia South Shields Roman Fort (transferred from South Shields Museum) produced in 1957 includes 14 *denarii* said to come from the hoard, although currently there are 20 identified as

coming from it. It is unclear who identified them as part of the hoard, and how, or when, they entered the collection as the Museum did not record all donations in its early years, although two local collectors, T. Vint and T. Stephens, sold artefacts including silver and bronze coins to the museum in 1881 (*Shields Gazette*, 17 February 1881). Blair sold his hoard coins to the Duke of Northumberland, and Bell left his coins to the Society of Antiquaries of Newcastle upon Tyne, while the surviving documents in Blair 1957 do not record the name of any-one else who bought the *denarii*. The Bell coins are now in the Great North Museum: Hancock.

Other gold coins

A few other gold coins not from the hoard have also been found at the fort or its surroundings. None have been recovered from the formal excavations (1949-2016).

(1) *Aureus* of Marcus Aurelius (issued under Antoninus Pius), 157-8

Found: before 1803

(i) The site of the fort and *vicus* was on a farm rented by the Fairles family in the late eighteenth century. Nicholas Fairles possessed a few Roman artefacts recovered during work on the property, including 'a small gold [coin], in very high preservation, of Marcus Aurelius Antoninus' (Brayley and Britton 1803, 158).

(ii) 'Mr Fairles also possesses a beautiful gold coin of Marcus Aurelius' (Surtees 1820, 101).

Comments: the coin is mentioned during a discussion of Roman finds from east of the fort (near Lawe House, now demolished) in 1798, but it is unclear if it was actually found at this time or was just one of various Roman items Fairles owned.

Present location: there is a gold coin in the collection at Arbeia South Shields Roman Fort that has been identified as this coin (acc. no. TWCMS : Q10; RIC 474.a), but there is no information about who identified it as such or when or how it entered the museum collection.

(2) Gold coin of unknown type and date

Found: January or February 1875

Comments: it was found in the area of the Roman cemetery, near Baring Street, during road-building work.

Present location: unknown. It is only recorded in a single newspaper report, and is not mentioned in the early published accounts of the excavations. If a Roman gold coin was actually found it was sold before it was seen by Robert Blair, who kept lists of coins recovered.

(3) Gold coin of unknown type

Found: 25 May 1875

Location: in 'northern excavation' within the fort, which was a narrow trench leading from the headquarters building up to, and including, the north gate of the fort (*Newcastle Daily Chronicle*, 26 May 1875). It is described as 'the first gold coin' to have been found, presumably in the context of the formal excavations.

Comments: although one newspaper report describes it as an *aureus* (*British Architect*, 4 June 1875) another describes it as a 'good-sized' coin (*Newcastle Daily Chronicle*,

26 May 1875) and it is possible it is not Roman. This coin is not mentioned in the early excavation reports.

Present location: unknown

(4) *Aureus* of Hadrian (134-8)

Found: 1880 (Corbitt 1955, 13)

Location: unknown (in this year chance finds are recorded from both inside the fort and from the cemetery)

Comments: Corbitt list this amongst the coins that could be identified as coming from South Shields amongst the coin collection of the Society of Antiquities of Newcastle donated by the local antiquarian and collector T. J. Bell (Corbitt 1955, 12-3).

(5) *Solidus* of Magnus Maximus (387)

Found: 1976

Location: about 300m west of fort, 'on the site of a new council housing estate at Palatine Street' (*Newcastle Journal*, 17 June 1976), also described as being 'at a council building site in Mile End Road' (*Newcastle Journal*, 26 May 1976); the two roads meet.

Comments: the coin fell from c.0.6m down the wall of a deep drainage trench after the finder pulled out some pottery (type not mentioned) sticking out from the side; an 1853 coin of Napoleon II and an 1853 Indian half-*anna* were found at the same time, although it is unclear if they were found in close association with the Roman coin (*Newcastle Journal*, 17 June 1976). Palatine Street followed the line of an early ballast railway that went out of use by 1845, raised on a high embankment to cross Mile End Road. There were open fields, small garden plots and cottages to either side, and just to the north was St Stephen's Board School, built in 1853 (cf the date of the foreign coins). The location of ballast hills and the embankment in the area and the presence of the non-Roman coins makes it unlikely the coin came from a Roman level. Present location: Arbeia South Shields Roman Fort, acc. no. TWCMS : Q7602

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