

THE HALTON MOOR TREASURE

Andrew White

I have long been fascinated by the treasure found in the new enclosures on Halton Moor in 1815. The contemporary descriptions of its finding were annoyingly vague as to the person of the finder and the location of the find. Surely there must be some way of breaking the deadlock and at least narrowing down the possibilities? The Enclosure Act for Halton, after all, includes 957 acres of land. Research for other purposes into the enclosure of the commons in this area provided some useful information and spurred me into looking further (White, 2022). Indeed there is information, though sadly not to just one possible finder and one possible location.

The Halton Moor Treasure consisted of a silver cup dating perhaps from the first half of the ninth century, which contained 860 silver coins of the early 1020s, a silver torque and six gold bracteates (thin, gold coin-shaped foils). It was found early in 1815 (Figures 1 and 2). Brief publication followed in the journal *Archaeologia* in 1817 (Combe, 1817). This lists the objects which had survived – the silver cup, four hundred of the coins, two of the bracteates and the torque which had been sent to London and exhibited at the Society of Antiquaries. The remainder of the coins had been disposed of locally, though it appears that one of the other bracteates had been acquired by the National Museum of Denmark in Copenhagen in 1858 (Edwards, 1997).

A very similar find of a silver cup containing coins was made in 2007 near Harrogate and is known as ‘the Vale of York Viking Hoard’ (Portable Antiquities Scheme website). It is suggested that both this and the Halton cup may have been made at the French monastery of St-Germain-des-Prés. Both cups may have been of religious significance and looted from churches in Normandy (Ager, 2020).

Here is the description of the Halton find in *Archaeologia* (Combe 1817):

“[The objects] were found on the 12th of February, 1815, at Halton Moor, about five miles from Lancaster, in some newly enclosed land; and were afterwards sold to a silversmith, who resides in that city.”

The local newspaper, the *Lancaster Gazette* (18 February 1815, 3) fills in a little more detail.

“A few days ago, as a person was plowing in a field, in this neighbourhood, he turned up a small pot, which proved to be of silver, the outside of which was decorated with antique devices. In the inside were 860 small silver Saxon coins, most of them of the reign of Canute the Great; a few thin pieces of gold, stamp, with two small holes in each; and coiled up in it was a silver collar, large enough to go round the neck; this was made of twisted chains, and is nearly as thick as a person’s finger - The whole were brought to this town on Thursday last and purchased by Mr Muncaster, silver-smith, at whose shop we had an opportunity of viewing them.”

Another contemporary description can be found in the *Preston Chronicle* of 25 February 1815. This also suggests that the cup was “cased in lead”. This is given a little more support by the undamaged state of the cup, which might have been distorted if it had been caught directly by the plough. If this were so, the lead container has not survived. It is of interest that the very similar Vale of York cup was also contained within a lead wrapper. Another valuable description occurs in Whitaker’s *Richmondshire* (Whitaker, 1823, 242–3).

“They were discovered in February last by a freeholder of the manor, while digging on a part of Halton Moor, allotted to him on the recent enclosure of that common, at a distance of about five or six miles from Lancaster. He soon after sold the cup, collar and coins to one Muncaster, a watchmaker in Lancaster, at the price of old silver...”



Figure 1 The Halton Cup, container of the hoard
(Source: Combe 1817 in *Archaeologia*, courtesy of the Society of Antiquaries of London)

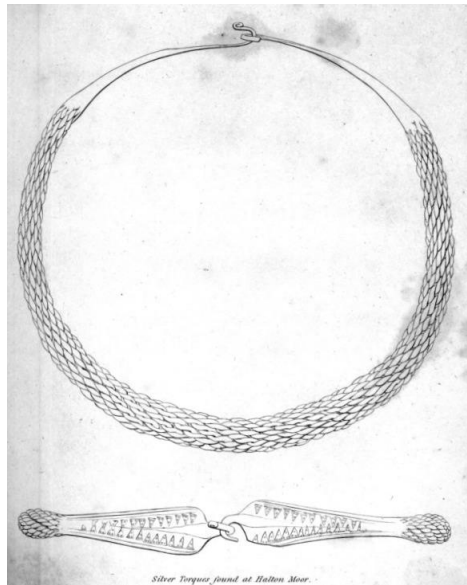


Figure 2 The Halton torque, from the Halton hoard
(Source: Combe 1817 *Archaeologia*, courtesy of the Society of Antiquaries of London)

This information came to Whitaker from a correspondent, Michael Jones Esq. He said that four hundred coins were transmitted to Mr John Walker, residing in Bedford Square, London. Eighty-five were taken by the Trustees of the British Museum and the remainder sold to a London dealer at a shilling each, except for six and one gold piece. Mr Walker himself purchased the cup and torque for £15. These later also came to the British Museum (1923) through the Franks Bequest in 1897.

Here we have a number of names involved in the finding and subsequent distribution of the pieces – the unknown freeholder of the allotment, Mr Muncaster, silversmith, Michael Jones Esq. and Mr Walker.

In the case of the freeholder we can start to apply various filters to the information, to reduce the possible number of persons and hence potential sites. In the enclosure award for Halton (Lancashire Archives Quarter Sessions AE/5/6) there are only twelve persons listed of the right sort of status who held some or all of their land by freehold. Had they held it by any other form of tenure it is

more than likely that Squire Bradshaw, Lord of the Manor, would have demanded the treasure as his property.

Some of these people were either too high in status to be dismissed as “a person” or they represented a trust or office, so are unlikely to be the anonymous farmer who ploughed up the Halton Hoard. Those entitled ‘Esq’ may be regarded as capable of making their own connections and would almost certainly have been named had they been the finder. Being a freeholder also implies ownership of other land outside the new enclosures, and so therefore already being a substantial farmer of land within Halton.

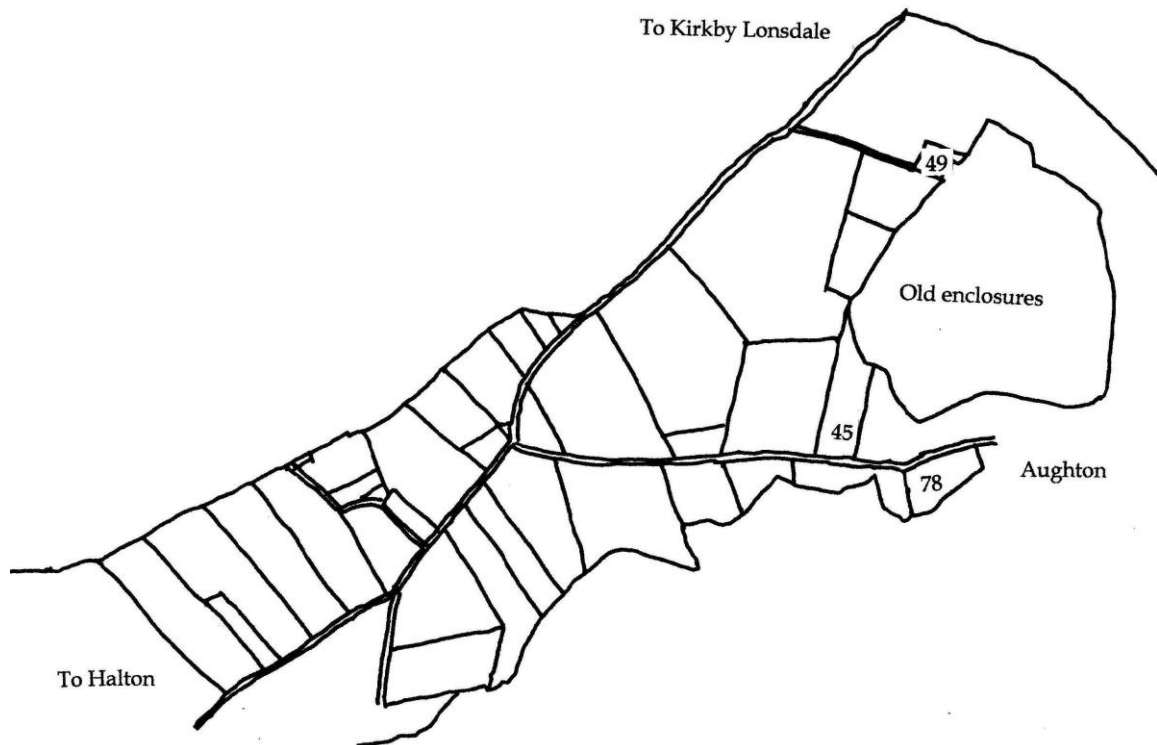


Figure 3 Enclosures between Halton and Aughton
(Source: Lancashire Archives AE5/6, showing possible location of the Halton hoard)

Of the fields acquired by freeholders, those numbered 51–66 (except 54) are all small and lie near Aughton. The other fields which were both freehold and not held by gentry are 5, 41, 45, 49, 59, 61, 67, 68, 78 and 81. These were held respectively by Robert Bell, Elizabeth Wilson, William Smith, Richard Cock, John Fell, John Cock, John Lamb, Henry Kirkham, Robert Whittington and Mary & Jane Lawson. Unless the three women had a farming man who took an independent line, given the customs of the time, then they can perhaps also be excluded, since they would probably have been named as ‘respectable’ landowning ladies. This leaves fields 5, 45, 49, 59, 61, 67, 68 and 78, eight in total, where the coins may have been found. Only field 5 lies in the western part of the parish, and is very small, all the other seven lying in the eastern side, mostly around Aughton. If the site lay very near Aughton, would not the sources have mentioned this? Hence fields 45, 49 and 78 look the best bets, also given their size, which might have made them more suitable for ploughing (Figure 3). They belonged to William Smith, Richard Cock and Robert Whittington respectively, all of whom owned land nearby in the old enclosures. So, it is highly likely that the find was made on the land of one of these three.

“Mr Muncaster, silver-smith” was John Muncaster, a native of West Cumberland who is described as “of Manchester, watchmaker and silver-smith, late of Whitehaven” when he married Frances

Gibson of Walney at Dalton-in-Furness on 8 July 1809 (*Lancaster Gazette* 29 July 1809 3). He seems to have moved to Lancaster soon afterwards. Various children were born here but he became bankrupt in 1816 (*Lancaster Gazette* 25 January 1817, 4; *York Herald* 13 July 1816). Nonetheless he is still recorded as a silversmith in Pudding Lane [now Cheapside] in Lancaster in the Commercial Directory of 1818–9. He may have moved to Ulverston as a watch and clockmaker by 1825 (Baines Directory, 1825). As a watchmaker and silversmith he would have had legitimate access to silver and also the means of testing it for quality. He would be the obvious person to whom a farmer might have gone with his bag of coins.

Michael Jones Esq. appears to be the barrister-at-law of that name based in Lincoln's Inn, London, whose family home was in Caton. He was born in 1781 and was living in Hanover Square, London, in the 1851 census. He was a Fellow of the Society of Antiquaries.

John Walker, 1759–1830, a relation of Mr Ford of Lancaster, according to Whitaker's informant, resided at 49 Bedford Square in London, very close to the British Museum. He was a member of most of the learned societies, a Fellow of the Royal Society and of the Society of Antiquaries, for example.

The likelihood of any further coins or finds remaining seems very small. The cup with its contents may have been enclosed in a lead outer covering. If the cup had spilled its contents on contact with the plough there might have been a trail in the soil, but it seems unlikely that this happened or that coins were missed. The Vale of York Viking Hoard, too, was a single find in a field with no obvious landmark to rediscover it, although of course there may have been a tree there at the time of its deposit. The potential rediscovery of the findspot is therefore more an intellectual puzzle than a practical guide.

Author profile

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