THE TREASURE OF LIMAVADY

Hoard

An Post, the Irish Post Office issued the Broighter Collar 32p and Broighter Boat 50p stamps on March 8 1990 as part of the Treasures of Ireland Definitive Series. The Broighter Boat was also issued in a blue and black 52p stamp on April 3 1991.

A TREASURE REVEALED

Early Iron Age - Broighter Hoard: The Broighter Hoard is the most impressive find of Celtic Gold from the Early Iron Age. It is thought to date back to circa 1st Century BC.

In 1896 local men Tom Nicholl & James Morrow discovered the gold while ploughing a field at Broighter near Limavady. The field owner, Joseph Gibson sold the treasure to Robert Day from Cork. The treasure was then sold to the British Museum.

LOST TREASURE or OFFERING?

There are two viewpoints about how the gold came to be buried at Broighter. The first is that the treasure was buried for safe keeping with a view of recovering it later. The second is that the collection may have been an offering possibly to the Celtic Sea God Manannan mac Lir.

A court case in 1903 ruled that the hoard had been buried with the intention of recovery. Through the ancient law of treasure trove the hoard then came to the Royal Irish Academy.

BROIGHTER HOARD TODAY

Today the treasure is on display at the National Museum of Ireland. Both Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland have chosen to represent the Broighter Hoard through coinage. The Torc is represented on the £1 coin while the boat is represented on a millennium Euro coin. The hoard is also represented in the Limavady Borough Council Logo as a gold sea shell.

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A Town Centre Management Project
One February evening in 1896 my father Tom Nicholl and another ploughman, by the name of James Morrow, were ploughing in a field at Broighter, near Limavady,” recalled Sammy Nicholl, who has fond memories of his father, who died in 1964. “In order to turn over an increased depth of soil the two ploughs followed each other along the same furrow. My father, on the second plough, struck a hard object, like a stone, at a place where the field had formerly been divided into two by a ditch. When he investigated he saw a small metal dish wedged on the sock of his plough and a number of other ornaments encased in a large clod of sticky clay.”

“Sensing that it might be something of value the two men took their find back to the farmyard of their employer Joseph Gibson. There, the clay was washed away in an open sink by a maid called Maggie McLaughlin, who later married my father. To everyone’s surprise several gold objects were revealed including a richly ornamented collar, a little boat with oars, a bowl, two bracelets and two necklaces.”

“My father handed them over to his employer who in turn sold them for £200 to a jeweller in Derry,” continued Sammy. “They were then bought by Robert Day, an active collector from Cork. After he had the boat repaired in Dublin, for it had been slightly damaged by the plough, he sold the collection to the British Museum for £600.”

“My mother once told me,” said Sammy, “that it was quite possible that some of the smaller objects could have been washed down the drain, for she did not know that they were made of gold and she took no great care in cleaning them.”

Robert Day discovered, shortly after he had acquired the collection, that part of the gold collar and one of the seats of the boat were missing. He travelled all the way to Broighter to see if he could find them but even though he had all the drains lifted the missing pieces eluded him.

“It is said that Robert Day had no chance of finding the seat,” added Jack Nicholl, a grandson of Tom. “A few days after the find James Morrow was walking over the field, where the objects were discovered, and to his surprise found the missing portion of the boat. By that time the ornaments had been sold so he gave it to his sister, who sold it to a jeweller in Limavady.”

“News of the find came to the knowledge of the public the following year, when Arthur Evans published an article on the Broighter Gold discovery,” explained Jack. “Hundreds of people swarmed to the area in the hope of finding more gold ornaments but their efforts were all in vain.”

The article also aroused the interest of members of the Royal Irish Academy, who promptly demanded that the hoard should be declared treasure trove and handed over by the British Museum.

“The law of treasure trove is a complex subject but roughly speaking if precious objects are found under circumstances, which point to their having been lost or abandoned, then it is a case of finders keeper. However if there is evidence that they were concealed or deposited with the intention of recovery at a later date, then the Crown can claim them, on behalf of the unknown next-of-kin, as treasure trove.”

“The Trustees of the British Museum refused to deliver up the objects claiming that the waters of Lough Foyle flowed over the land at Broighter at the time when the articles were deposited,” added Jack. “They further claimed that the ornaments were cast overboard from a vessel as a votive offering to a sea god, Manannan. The Trustees argued that the hoard had never been deposited with a view to recovery and could not be regarded as treasure trove.”

At this stage Robert Lloyd Praegar, one of the most gifted individuals of his day, was called in by the Academy to investigate the situation. Praegar, who had carried out a considerable amount of work on the geology of raised beaches, was adamant that the field in question, which was about 16 feet above sea level, had been uplifted in Neolithic times and was therefore dry land when the gold ornaments were deposited two thousand years previously.

The case dragged on until June 1903, when it was brought to the Royal Courts of Justice in London. “It must have been a very terrifying situation for my grandfather,” said Maureen Boyd, another grandchild of Tom Nicholl. “My grandfather, who was 28 at the time, was brought to London

“Hundreds of people swarmed to the area in the hope of finding more gold ornaments but their efforts were all in vain.”
as one of the principal witnesses for the Academy. However his north Derry accent proved too much for the Court officials.

I believe another witness, Professor Myers, an Ulster-born lecturer in Classical Archaeology at Oxford University had to act as his interpreter.

The case was heard by one of the most eminent judges of the day, Mr Justice Farwell, and there was an imposing array of counsel including Sir Edward Carson, who acted on behalf of the Royal Irish Academy. During the lengthy trial much of the argument centred on whether the field at Broighter had been under the sea, when the hoard was deposited. Some of the witnesses argued that the area was covered by the waters of Lough Foyle, when it was deposited between 300BC and 100AD whereas others, such as Praegar, declared that the area, where the ornaments were ploughed up, was dry land.

After four days of legal submission Mr Justice Farwell pronounced that the hoard had been concealed with a view to recovery. He therefore, declared that the hoard was treasure trove and belonged to the Crown. To the delight of the Royal Irish Academy he ruled that it should be handed over the National Museum in Dublin.

After all the media attention he received during his appearance at the Royal Courts of Justice, Tom Nicholl returned to Broighter to carry on, where he had left off, as a ploughman. “His court expenses, said to have been £10, helped to defray the cost of his wedding,” laughed Maureen.

Alfie Nicholl, a great nephew of Tom, took me to the field where the objects were found. “The field is usually referred to as the Church Field,” he added. “The adjoining field is known as the Graveyard Field and bones have been frequently ploughed up there. By all accounts a monastery once stood there and the gold ornaments would have been part of its treasury.”

Local tradition suggests that the gold ornaments may have been presented to the monastery in 575AD after the Convention at Drumceatt, which is only a short distance from Broighter. Margaret Cowan, a local historian, told me that St. Colmcille travelled by curragh from Iona to attend the Convention and he was accompanied by several monks and King Aidan of Dalriada.

“Their boat was nearly shipwrecked at the mouth of the Foyle,” explained Margaret, “and by a miracle they were brought up the River Roe to Drumceatt. Aidan is said to have shown his gratitude by presenting his gold chain to the nearby monastery at Broighter. Here it was fashioned into a boat by one of the monks, who had accompanied Colmcille from Iona. By all accounts the monk fell in love with the Roe Valley and decided to remain at Broighter, when his colleagues returned home. The boat he created was rich in symbolism: the sixteen oars represented the crew of the curragh, the mast the cross, and the main support Colmcille’s staff.

During one of the 10th century raids by the Vikings the boat and other church treasures were buried for protection in the grounds of the monastery. The monks were slaughtered during the raid but their treasures remained undetected and lay undisturbed, until they were uncovered by Tom Nicholl.”

Over forty years after the discovery a story began to circulate which cast doubts about the integrity of the hoard. A young man by the name of Joseph Hamill and a close friend of the Gibson family, upon whose land the discovery was made, claimed that the ornaments were of recent origin and were found inside an old umbrella lying in a ditch. Mrs Gibson, his informant, was of the opinion they were part of a consignment of goods stolen by two robbers from a family, who lived at a nearby house called Oatlands. She believed that the ornaments had been inherited from an earlier generation of the family, who had acquired them during their travels in India. After the robbery the spoils were divided between the robbers.
one of whom, perhaps because he was being followed, dropped his portion into the ditch at Broighter intending to recover it at a later date.

However there is no factual basis for the umbrella story and in recent years the debate has changed from doubts about the authenticity of the hoard to questions concerning its origins. Latest research would tend to suggest that the hoard was indeed a votive offering rather than treasure trove.

Although the Royal Courts of Justice had accepted Praegar’s evidence, that Broighter had been dry land for over 4,000 years, the whole area is only 16 feet above sea level or one foot about the normal high water spring tide. The area would, therefore, have been liable to flooding from Lough Foyle and there was also a threat of flooding from the River Roe.

It is difficult to believe that someone would have wished to bury a gold hoard for future recovery in a salt marsh threatened by the claims of Lough Foyle and subjected to frequent flooding from the River Roe. It seems more likely that the ornaments were indeed a votive offering intentionally buried there in a bag or carried to the area in a wooden container or boat during flooding from Lough Foyle or the River Roe. Tom Nicholl always maintained that there was a greasy material around the ornaments and this might have been caused by the decomposition of the bag or the container in which they were placed.

The presence of a sea god in Lough Foyle and the widespread practice of making votive offerings to deities in Celtic times were not fully recognised some 100 years ago. Had the Courts of Justice known that Lough Foyle was the abode of Manannan mac Lir, who was regarded as the Irish Neptune, then the case might have had a different outcome.

Local people believe that his spirit is released during fierce storms. Some elderly folk in the area are still heard to remark: “Manannan is angry today,” when the Foyle is rough. They also refer to the angry waves as “Manannan’s seahorses.” The eminent archaeologist RB Warner states that, according to mythology, “Manannan was the possessor of a horse that could travel over land and sea.” More interestingly he indicates that “Manannan was also the owner of a metal boat, which obeyed the thoughts of its sailors.”

The very nature of the Broighter hoard – a gold collar decorated with seahorses and a gold boat complete with oars – gives strong support for the argument, that it was a votive offering to a sea god and was either buried at Broighter or washed there during a flood.

There appears to be little doubt, given present day knowledge about votive offerings, that Mr Justice Farwall would have looked more sympathetically on the British Museum’s case and the Broighter gold hoard would still be in London rather than in Dublin.

According to his granddaughter, Maureen, “It was one of Tom Nicholl’s great regrets in life that he never saw the Broighter hoard displayed in the National Museum. Right up to his death in 1964 he was still keen to talk about that evening in February 1896, when he unearthed Ireland’s greatest collection of gold ornaments.”