

COINS OF THE ICENI

COURTNEY NIMURA and CHRIS HOWGEGO

Across northern East Anglia in the Late Iron Age (c.100 BC–AD 50) lived a community who minted ornately designed coins in gold and silver.

They are best known for their famous ‘queen’ Boadicea, who led an uprising against the Romans in AD 61–60. This community may be that called the Cenimagi by Julius Caesar in his account of his expeditions to Britain. Tacitus later referred to them as the Iceni, a name which we continue to use today. We do not know if they identified themselves in this way in the pre-Roman period, as this was a time before written history. Their coins preserve the earliest writing by the Iceni themselves, under Roman influence. Combined with detailed imagery, Icenian coins contain a wealth of information that lead us into some of the most intriguing aspects of Late Iron Age life – from economic structures to political changes to broader worldviews.

We are thrilled to announce the arrival of an important collection of 1085 Icenian coins accepted under the Cultural Gifts Scheme by HM Government from John Talbot, and recently allocated to the Ashmolean Museum. This donation will have a major impact on the Iron Age coin collection in the Ashmolean, nearly doubling the number of so-called ‘Celtic’ coins. The Heberden Coin Room’s European Iron Age collection previously consisted of c.1200 coins primarily from Britain and France, many originally from the collections of Sir John Evans (via his son Arthur) and Derek Allen. Both figures were founding

scholars of Iron Age numismatics: John Evans organised the first systematic classification of British Iron Age coins, and Derek Allen co-founded the Celtic Coin Index, the world’s largest archive of British Iron Age coin data, now housed in the Institute of Archaeology.

John Talbot is himself a leading figure in British Iron Age numismatics, having completed his doctoral study at the University’s School of Archaeology. His thesis, later published as a monograph titled *Made for Trade: A new view of Icenian Coinage*, was based on no fewer than 10,000 specimens. John assembled his own collection over some 20 years, particularly selecting coins which were key to classification. His collection includes every known type of Icenian coin, and in many cases the finest known example. It has now found its natural home with the coins of his academic predecessors. It is benefactions such as this which enable the Heberden Coin Room to continue to grow its collection. Happily, this key acquisition also serves to mark the Centenary of the Coin Room itself.

Dr Talbot’s generosity stems from his desire to ensure that the collection is made available for future research, as there is still much information contained within it to be extracted by future study. The donation comes at a propitious moment, when there



🕒 **A gold stater from c.55–15 BC.** Brooches or fibulae are depicted alongside an abstracted head on the obverse (convex) side, and an image of a wolf is depicted on the reverse (concave) side. (© Ian R. Cartwright, Institute of Archaeology, University of Oxford, [School of Archaeology](#)).



🕒 **A silver unit from c.30 BC.** The head on the obverse has locks of hair and ornate bands across the forehead. When the coin is turned, the front lock of hair becomes a second eye, revealing a hidden face. On the reverse, a prancing horse is shown with 'sun' motifs. (© Ian R. Cartwright, Institute of Archaeology, University of Oxford, [School of Archaeology](#)).



🕒 **A silver unit from c. AD 25.** The obverse portrays a torc and ring above a boar, and the letters ALI below. On the reverse we see another prancing horse with the letters SCA. We do not always know what these letters mean. They could have been names of traders, moneyers, places, or specific communities (© Ian R. Cartwright, Institute of Archaeology, University of Oxford, [School of Archaeology](#)).

is renewed impetus behind the study of Iron Age numismatics across the University. Researchers at the Institute of Archaeology and the Heberden Coin Room have been working on digitising the Celtic Coin Index to publish the entire archive online. The team has also recently launched the first online typology of British Iron Age coins. This website, *Iron Age Coins in Britain*, takes advantage of recent advances in Linked Open Data – a set of principles that allow data to be shared across the internet – to connect the Ashmolean’s collection to other coin collections across the globe. Research on the coins has also been disseminated through an Oxford grant to engage with the public, enabling the creation of several popular

online resources on Iron Age coins, as well as a new Iron Age Object Trail for families.

Coins from the Talbot collection provided the inspiration for the current Special Display in the Money Gallery ‘From Julius Caesar to Boadicea – a century of Iceni coins’, which leads viewers into the visual world of Iron Age East Anglia. The coins bear intricate imagery, depicting a wide range of motifs from boars to horses and human heads. Some contain hidden faces, a visual trope used in other Iron Age art found in Britain. Visitors can learn more about the history of the Iceni through their coins, and the contemporary material culture on display, and marvel at these tiny objects and the big ideas they carry. ■