

THE HALLATON HELMET RETURNS TO LEICESTERSHIRE AND IS PLACED IN HARBOROUGH MUSEUM

by Vicki Score



More than ten years after it was first dug up in a field, the Hallaton Helmet has returned to Leicestershire to go on permanent display in the Harborough Museum. When it was first uncovered in a pit on the 1st century AD shrine by archaeologists from University of Leicester Archaeological Services, it appeared to be little more than a pile of rusty iron. Only the discovery of a silver ear found near the top of the pit gave any clue to the real nature of the find. As it was so fragmented the whole pit was lifted as a single block to be excavated in a lab, and the helmet has spent the last ten years at the British Museum where a team of conservators have spent hours excavating the metal pieces and coins from the block, conserving the fragments and finally piecing them all together to reconstruct the helmet for display. Over the years the block has yielded many surprises. Initially it was thought that the pit contained a single Roman helmet, however it soon became apparent that there was much more to the deposit. As well as over a thousand coins dating the burial of the helmet to around the time of the Roman Invasion in AD 43, there turned out to be a total of 7 cheekpieces found with the helmet, as well as packets of folded silver foil (stripped from a helmet or cheekpiece) and animal bone.

The highly decorated cavalry parade helmet with neck and browguard is made from iron covered with silver foil and at least one of the 7 cheekpieces was originally attached. The bowl has a laurel wreath, the symbol of martial victory and the best preserved cheekpiece shows a triumphant rider (the Emperor?), armoured but bare-headed, his right arm outstretched, palm raised. Behind him flies a winged Victory bearing a victor's palm-leaf. Below the horse sits a defeated figure with a hand to their head next to an abandoned shield and helmet. There is some debate as to whether this figure is female and could represent a defeated province – it has even been suggested that this could be the first visual representation of Britannia.

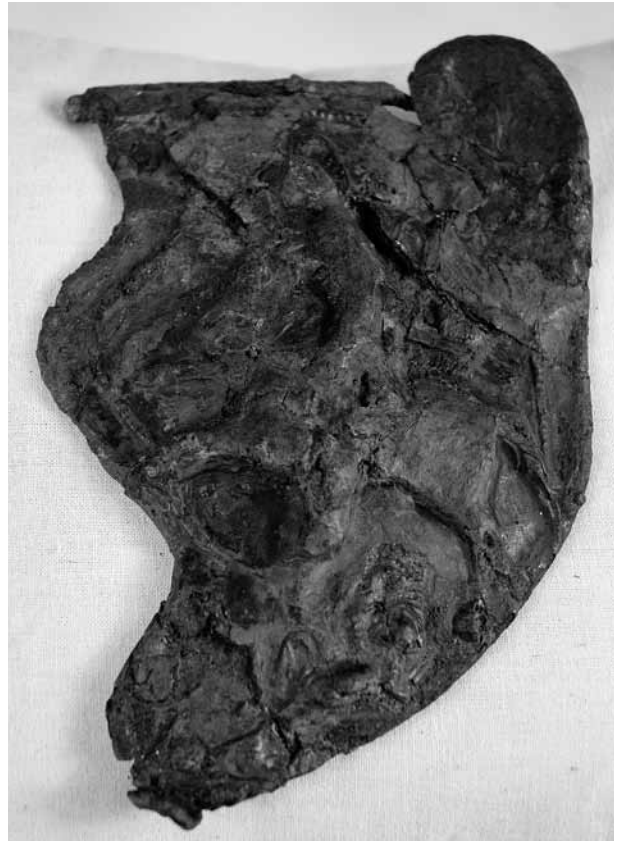


THE RECONSTRUCTED HELMET BOWL SHOWING THE BROWGUARD WITH A CENTRAL FEMALE BUST.

The second cheekpiece on display shows a similar scene with a triumphant rider again with a Victory, this time holding a laurel crown. The other cheekpieces are still being reconstructed at the British Museum but one appears to show a bearded man in profile with a large cornucopia, Roman helmet and shield.

One of the most impressive aspects of the helmet is the scalloped browguard. This is dominated by a female bust flanked by two lions and may represent Cybele, the great mother goddess, known in Rome as Magna Mater (Great Mother). Her association with victory would have made her a perfect choice for a Roman helmet.

The most intriguing aspect of the helmet and components however, is the reason behind its arrival in Leicestershire. The Hallaton shrine is clearly a native British site and most of the coins are from the local Iron Age Tribe known as the Corieltavi. JD Hill at the British Museum has suggested that the helmet could have belonged to a British mercenary who fought in the Roman army overseas. Ritual deposition of helmets and armour (particularly in rivers), is a common feature on the continent and this idea could have been brought back to Leicestershire along with the helmet. It doesn't however explain the presence of seven cheekpieces and the stripped foil. If the helmet was buried



THE TWO RECONSTRUCTED CHEEKPIECES.

after the Roman invasion then it could represent booty following a skirmish or battle. The various pieces might have been carried along with the Roman army as 'spares' to mend and repair other helmets. This would explain the odd fragments and the silver foil. Alternatively the pieces could have been given as a gift from the Romans to the local tribe to smooth relations and allow them to pass through the local territory without having to fight. Such diplomatic gifts were a common feature of the Roman conquest of foreign lands. However the native Iron Age tribe acquired the helmet, it was clearly buried as a ritual deposit with the cheekpieces carefully stacked and interleaved with coins and animal bone – the pit containing the helmet was dug into an existing pit full of pig bones and several of these bones were carefully reincorporated alongside the other objects.

The Hallaton helmet is one of the most splendid Roman helmets found anywhere in the Roman Empire and made international news when it was launched to the press on the 10 January. The helmet went on display in the museum on Saturday 28 January. It was opened by Jackie Dickinson, Chairman of the County Council along with Ken Wallace who found the first coins on the site, members of ULAS who excavated the helmet and Marilyn Hockey who has spent the last decade conserving the pieces. The helmet's return to Leicestershire was also celebrated with Roman re-enactors from the Ermine Street Guard including two Roman cavalry officers on horseback mingling with shoppers in the town centre. The display proved to be very popular with over 700 people visiting the museum on that first Saturday to see it and in its first month on display more than 4500 people have visited Harborough Museum.

The helmet is on permanent display in Harborough museum and an exhibition, 'Revealing the Hallaton Helmet' runs until 7 July.



RECONSTRUCTION OF HOW THE HELMET MAY HAVE LOOKED.