Royal jewels

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The Heritage Lottery Fund has today awarded £274,400 to help Redcar and Cleveland Council showcase the life and death of a royal Saxon princess, whose grave was uncovered in an East Cleveland farmer's field. A collection of rare Anglo-Saxon jewellery that was found at the grave in Streethouse, Loftus will now be kept and displayed at the Kirkleatham Museum.

Some of the pieces from the collection are associated with a rare Anglo-Saxon ‘bed burial’ in which a female body is laid out on a decorated wooden bed accompanied by fine gold jewellery. Due to its rarity, this find is of huge national importance, and these finds are unparalleled across the Anglo-Saxon world.

As well as the acquisition, the project will also create a new Anglo-Saxon gallery in the Kirkleatham Museum. This will be home to an interpretation of Anglo-Saxon life in the area and of the Streethouse finds; a reconstruction of the burial bed and the newly acquired objects will take pride of place on display. Other elements of the project will include a touring exhibition, learning and outreach activity and volunteering opportunities, these will enable the collection to be seen and appreciated by local residents and visitors alike.

Head of the Heritage Lottery Fund in the North East, Ivor Crowther, said: “These rare finds are a spectacular insight into the lives of the people who lived in the region long ago. This is the only discovery of this kind and of this calibre in the North East and it is really important that we keep the pieces here for local residents and visitors to come and admire. The jewellery will provide an excellent learning tool and thrilling museum exhibition. By providing volunteering and work placement opportunities, the project provides tangible historical and archaeological skills that can be used for future job and learning possibilities.We are delighted to have been able to largely support this project and are excited to witness the development of the plans.”

These sorts of burials are extremely unusual with only 12 recorded in the country and none recorded in the North East making it hugely important for the heritage of the region and the country. The jewellery was discovered by archaeologist Steve Sherlock with the help of the Teesside Archaeological Society.

The pieces are of such high quality that it is widely believed to be a royal burial ground which adds to the wonderful story behind the jewels. The cemetery at Street House has five high status female graves and one sword burial, with the stunning finds thought to date from the second half of the seventh century (after AD 650). During this time the Northumbrian royal family was being established in and around the smaller areas of Bernicia, north of the Tees and Deira across Yorkshire.

Alan Pearce, Museums Curator for Kirkleatham Museum at Redcar, said: "I am absolutely delighted with this award which recognises the quality of the objects and the unique story of a princess and her royal bed burial in East Cleveland. We can now conserve and research the jewels and create a stunning exhibition to enable everyone to appreciate and get close to them. The exhibition will open before Easter 2011 and will include state of the art virtual touch technology and an exciting community outreach programme. I am enormously grateful to everyone who has contributed to this project to enable us to secure these very rare and precious finds for Kirkleatham museum."

The Council's Cabinet Member for Culture, Leisure and Tourism, Councillor Sheelagh Clarke, said: "We are absolutely delighted to have the Heritage Lottery funding which will ensure we can create a really exhilarating attraction. I know they are as excited as we are about these finds. It just shows what a rich and varied cultural heritage we have in East Cleveland."

Notes to editors

The Acquisition

Items from graves 42 and 43 - £38,985. Consists of the following:

- A large gold pendant, shield shaped and mounted with a larger central red gemstone.
- A gold-alloy bead formed from a fine circular-sectioned gold alloy wire with rilled decoration on the exterior.
- A gold-alloy pendant, oval in shape with a suspension loop to the top.
- A central oval gemstone is a dark red colour.
- A gold-alloy pendant, round in shape with a suspension loop to the top. The central stone is dark red glass containing small bubbles.
- An unusual triangular gold-alloy pendant, with a suspension loop to the top. It holds a stone made from a cut-down Iron Age bead comprising a dark translucent blue glass with white opaque spirals.
- A gold-alloy bead formed from fine circular-sectioned gold alloy wire.
- Two beads, one definitely gold, similar in form and construction to the gold bead above.

Associated finds:

- A fragment of the spherical top of a jet or shale pin with a disk neck. Similar to Roman examples dateable to the 3rd and 4th centuries AD and so, with its position at the head of the grave, possibly an heirloom item worn in the hair.

Items from grave 70 - £14,682.50. Consists of the following:

- A fine gold pendant. The pendant has four circular garnet settings radiating from the centre.

Items from graves 10 & 21 - £2,760. Consists of the following:

- A gold pendant with a filigree design in two concentric circles. The central setting is empty. It may originally have contained a garnet or organic setting such as bone or shell.
- Three monochrome glass beads, two smaller, annular and translucent, and one larger, opaque and barrel shaped.
- A number of corroded iron fragments may come from a chatelaine or an iron key.
- A very small, hexagonal garnet with a now separate gold backing-foil.
- Two coins belonging to the North Eastern style coinage associated with a late Iron Age people traditionally known as the ‘Corieltavi’, likely to have been produced within a decade either side of the Roman invasion of AD 43.
- Eight beads: 1 pale green barrel; 1 green biconical; 1 turquoise miniature ‘melon’; 1 white barrel; 1 dark blue bun; 1 translucent blue biconical; 1 dark blue biconical; and 1 orange-red biconical.
  Silver wire rod: broken in two parts. The shorter part is thickened and ends in a small loop.

Further information

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