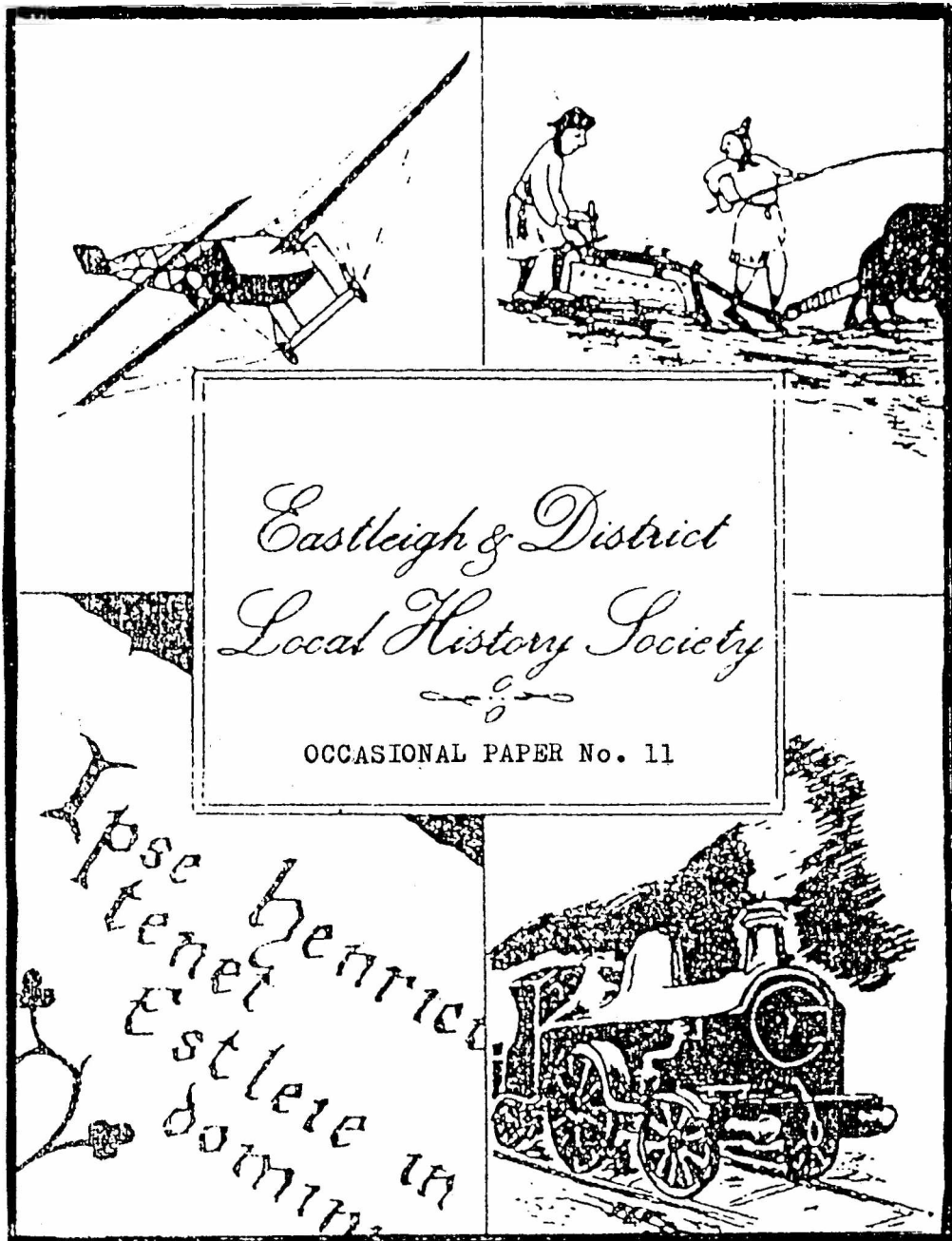


# The Otterbourne Roman Standard Head.



*Eastleigh & District  
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## THE OTTERBOURNE 'ROMAN' STANDARD HEAD

In 1744, or thereabouts, some labourers were excavating a sand-pit on the outskirts of Otterbourne, when at a depth of about twelve feet they uncovered a round metal medallion some three and a quarter inches in diameter. One side was blank, but on the other was engraved the head of an autocratic looking man, his hair reaching down to the nape of his neck and surmounted by a laurel wreath. Around the periphery a legend read 'JULIUS CAESAR'. Unaware of the apparent importance of their discovery, one of the workmen trudged home later in the day and left the find on a shelf in his humble cottage. There it languished for some fifty or sixty years - or so the story goes.

About 1800, the object was brought to the attention of a 'medical gentleman' from Winchester and, in the phraseology of a by-gone era, 'it passed into his possession'. Evidently he was proud of his acquisition and must have advertised his ownership, for shortly afterwards Milner reported

' . . . it was extremely well preserved and gave the impression that it had been deliberately buried . . . '

Some thirtyfive years later, knowledge of it came within the orbit of the well-travelled Duthy who, after inspection, made his own comments and proceeded to make his own conclusions:

' . . . it is a plate of mixed metal, bearing the head and description of Julius Caesar upon it, fresh and perfect, as if lately from the hands of the artist. It was conjectured, with much possibility, to have been one of the medallions usually placed on the standards of Roman whorts or maniples: and being found many feet under the surface, in the operation of digging a sandpit, purposely buried to prevent it falling into the hands of the Britons, on some occasion when they defeated the invaders in this neighbourhood. It is further conjectured, that some of the troops under the command of Julius Caesar must have penetrated as far west as the neighbourhood of Winchester and Southampton . . . '

He attributed much of this information to Milner but then proceeds to add, quite correctly, that ' . . . this is in direct opposition to Caesar's Commentaries . . . '. Undeterred he then gives his version of what he thought could have happened:

' . . . it was the custom of the Romans to affix the effigies of deceased as well as living commanders and Emperors to their military standards, and it is more reasonable and conformable to the tenor of history to conjecture that this relic of antiquity may have been deposited in the earth during some of the obstinate contests which took place in the area between Britons and Roman troops under Aulus Plautius and Vespasian, or perhaps in that engagement when Claudius himself is said to have been forced by Arviragus to take refuge within the walls of Winchester . . . '

At this point it may be noted that another scholar, antiquarian and local historian, John Marsh, writing in 1808 specifically on the parishes of Hursley (Otterbourne was then part of the ecclesiastical parish of Hursley) and Baddesley makes no mention of the subject although it is inconceivable that he would not have been aware of it .

The medallion acquired a further air of respectability in 1845, for in the catalogue of Roman antiquities in the area produced by the Archaeological Society when they held their Proceedings in Winchester that year, it is noted as:

' . . . a bronze head on a medallion of Julius Caesar found at Otterbourne. J.N.Hughes, Esq. . . . '

(Perhaps Hughes was the 'medical gentleman' referred to earlier?)

Some time before 1851, its importance was such that plaster casts were made of it and one of these was deposited in the museum at Winchester and appears in their catalogue for that year.

Charlotte Yonge relates an abbreviated version of the above in one of her earlier historical books and adds:

' . . . it appears to be one of the medallions that were placed below the eagle on Roman standard heads and it is still in the possession of the Fitt family of Westley . . . '

This she amplified in a later publication writing, rather disconsolately:

' . . . in 1891 it was sent to the British Museum who pronounced it to be one of a cinquecento series of the twelve Caesars . . . '

That should have been the end of this particular myth but alas, Miss Yonge for all her popularity as a novelist was not read widely enough in her more serious books.

When the Hampshire section of the Victoria County History was compiled at the turn of the twentieth-century, Professor F. Haverfield, F.S.A. writing in the Romano-British chapter resurrected the medallion and referred to it as:

' . . . a bronze object, described as the head of Julius Caesar, now apparently lost . . . '

In the 1930's, the then curator of Winchester Museum, Mr. Hooley, became interested in the subject and determined to pursue it. Alongside the plaster cast of the medallion displayed in the museum he placed an appeal asking for any information as to its present whereabouts - but with no results. Then, by one of those odd quirks of fate, another plaster cast of the medallion was sent to a local jumble sale. It had been mounted in an oak frame and on the back was a faded notice headed

LOCAL RELIC OF ROME

Underneath in faded script was the following:

' The medallion was parted with by the labourers to a resident of this City, and from him it passed to Mr. Collier Bristow, and from him to the Fitts of Westley, a member of which family still possesses the valuable relic perfect as when struck in Rome over 2,000 years ago.'

Mr. Hooley then contacted Miss Priestley Fitt, then living at Bar End, Winchester, and she immediately produced the medallion for inspection. With her consent, it was sent to the Victoria and Albert museum in London, where one of its experts, Sir Eric Maclagen pronounced:

' In the opinion of the Officers of the department concerned it is probably a 17th or early 18th century copy of a late 15th or 16th century Italian medallion - in its turn a free copy of a classical cameo. Your medallion corresponds very closely in size and appearance to one in the Estene collection in Vienna, which is described in the catalogue as being a 17th century casting of one of a series of 15th - 16th century medallions in the museum at Brescia. The medallions at Brescia and Vienna are, however, oval and in both cases the inscriptions differ from yours. We have here a medallion which we attribute to the 16th century which corresponds exactly to yours'.

Miss Fitt eventually presented the medallion to the Winchester Museum and it is now in their store. It is quoted in their Accession Book for April 1937 and it can be seen on application to the curator.

According to some older O.S. maps the map reference of the site of the alleged find is S U 4 5 8 1 2 3 2 0. The pit itself has long been dis-used and is now filled in.

Such then is the story and evidences of and for the Otterbourne 'Roman' Standard Head. It still poses questions.

With hindsight, it is very easy to be critical of both Dr. Milner and John Duthy for their fanciful flights of imagination - shifting whole Roman armies across southern England and inventing battles and skirmishes that, to the best of our knowledge, never occurred. At the very earliest, the object is unlikely to pre-date the sixteenth-century. That having been said, local historians owe both authors a debt of gratitude for their work in the field.

So, where and when was it found - if at all? Was it planted - or produced by an eighteenth-century confidence trickster? Certainly the area of the 'find' has at a later date (1927-1929) produced many genuine Roman relics, although of a later century but their existence was not even

suspected at the time.

One would like to know more of the 'Winchester gentleman' and how much he paid for the medallion. Criticism could be levelled at the earlier investigators for not questioning the material more closely. 'Laying on a labourer's cottage shelf for fifty or sixty years' ? Appearing 'fresh and new' after being buried for that length of time ?

These questions are not now capable of answer but at least the actual object is now preserved and all who wish to view it - and perhaps ponder - may do so.

N.D.B.

#### ACKNOWLEDGMENTS.

To Mr. F. Cottrill, Curator of Winchester Museum in 1972 who answered my queries with unfailing patience.

To Mrs. Tye Brisbane, Assistance Curator of Local History at Winchester Museum who located the item in the store for my inspection.

To Mr. Peter Payne for photographing the medallion and also for his helpful comments.

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