

A Greek helmet from Baldock? A forgotten controversy at The Society of Antiquaries of London



The Greek helmet supposedly found at Baldock about 1880

On 23 November 1911, the prominent antiquary William Page (1861-1934) reported the discovery of what was described as a “Hellenistic bronze helmet” to a meeting of the Society of Antiquaries of London. A brief summary appeared in the Society’s [Proceedings volume 24, page 5](#). According to Page, it had been found in a pit in Baldock (Hertfordshire) in 1880, but he provided no further details about its provenance. He did show a photograph of the object but did not reveal its current whereabouts. The announcement was soon forgotten, although the [Hertfordshire Historic Environment Record lists the discovery](#), commenting that “[u]nless more information, or the object itself, comes to light it still appears more likely that the helmet was ‘brought to England by a modern collector’”.

William Page

[William Page](#) originally trained as an engineer and emigrated to Australia in 1881 to join an older brother. On returning to England in 1884, he became a record agent for his brother-in-law, W J Hardy, whose interest in antiquarian pursuits encouraged his change of career. He was elected to the Society of Antiquaries of London in 1887. In 1896, he moved to St Albans and soon became involved with the St Albans Architectural and Archaeological Society, being elected its secretary in 1897. In 1902, he became co-editor of the Hertfordshire volumes of the Victoria History of the Counties of England (more popularly known as the Victoria County History). Two years later, he was promoted to general editor of the series, a post he held until his death in 1934.

Page was clearly neither naïve nor a fraudster; he did not claim credit for the discovery, and the published report did not state who had found it. Nor does he name the helmet’s owner, which was later to become a focus of dispute. His presentation of the discovery to the Society of Antiquaries of London was clearly done in good faith and intended to excite the interest of his peers. What more can be learnt about it?

Displaying the helmet

On 2 April 1912, the helmet was put on display at Hertford County Museum in St Albans. Perhaps this was done with the encouragement of Page, who was at this time a prominent member of the [St Albans and Hertfordshire Architectural and Archaeological Society](#). Unfortunately, it is not clear who was responsible for depositing it with the museum. This

A Greek helmet from Baldock? A forgotten controversy at The Society of Antiquaries of London was to become significant twenty years later and underlines why museums are so keen to record all the details about who leaves an object, whether or not they are the owner and what rights they have to it.

The well-known collector William Charles Wells (1870-1949), who was the helmet's owner, provided a detailed account of its provenance. He claimed to have purchased it from a Mr Buller of Hitchin. This was probably George John Buller (1850-1931), who was the landlord of the Half Moon on Queen Street from before 1894 to after 1901, a keen apiarist, naturalist and antiquary who donated numerous objects to Letchworth Museum, founded in 1914. Wells said that Mr Buller had acquired it from a friend, although he did not say whether or not Buller had told him the name of this friend. The friend, though, got it from the son of a publican – perhaps like Buller, the friend was also involved in the pub trade – who had swapped it with two labourers for half a gallon of beer. It was this pair who had discovered the helmet in Baldock. This is a detailed, not to say convoluted, story. Nevertheless, it provides a chain of ownership that purports to stretch back to the original finders.



Tracing the findspot

If the helmet had been found in Baldock, as the account given by William Page suggests, then where might it have been buried? According to Page, it was found in a pit and it is not too much of a leap of the imagination to suggest that the workmen who had exchanged it for beer were working as quarrymen. This is perhaps more likely than assuming that Page intended his audience to understand that the provenance was an ancient pit, found during unspecified digging. The only quarries that appear to have been operating in 1880 were chalk pits to the south of the town, in the Weston Hills, where limekilns existed on Limekiln Lane and Hatch Lane.

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Evaluation of the chalk quarry at the former Stationmaster's house in Baldock, 1992

A note in the North Hertfordshire Museum's card Sites and Monuments Record (Record 89) suggests that it came from the site of the old Stationmaster's House, in the angle between Icknield Way East and the station approach. However, no authority is cited for this precise findspot and it is unclear what the source of information was. According to a note by the late Kit Westaway, whose copy of a photograph of the helmet is in the Museum's collection (reproduced at the start of this blog post), it was "*found in Baldock 1880 by Mr Parry's*". Although no-one with the surname Parry or Perry (or any obvious variant of these) is recorded as living in Baldock in the 1881 census, labourers Peter, Thomas and William Perry were recorded as residents in 1871, while Thomas was the landlord of The Cock on Baldock High Street in 1886.

This returns us to the pub trade once again. Could Thomas Perry have been the publican whose son sold the helmet to George Buller? Perhaps it had been Perry who deposited it in the museum in St Albans. Unfortunately, although the scenario is plausible, it is also entirely conjectural. We also do not know how Kit Westaway attributed its discovery to 'Mr Parry'; she had good local connections, was an inveterate collector of gossip and was well-placed to have heard stories about the alleged discovery. She was convinced that it was genuine, as she told me more than once during conversations in the 1980s.

The story unravels

When W C Wells attempted to take it from the museum in 1933, the original depositor claimed that Wells had no right to remove it. Wells disputed this, apparently backed up with threats of litigation, and, when he collected the helmet on 28 June 1933, he signed a document confirming that he was its true owner. There does not appear to be a record of the original depositor's name, unfortunately.

After W C Wells collected the helmet from the museum, no more was ever heard of it. This is not unusual for an object loaned to a museum by a private collector. However, Wells was not an ordinary collector: he was well known both for collecting and as an authority on numismatics. His views on numismatics could be uncompromising and, after his death, it was discovered that he was not above creating forgeries as 'evidence' for his views.

Particularly troubling in view of the Baldock helmet is his *modus operandi* for passing off forgeries on numismatists. He would claim that the forged coins had been purchased from an antique dealer or found at a relatively specific location. This is similar to his attribution of the helmet to Baldock, with a purported chain of transfers of ownership; Wells claimed that he had made enquiries locally to confirm the story and that this was how he learned the date of discovery.

Nevertheless, George Buller, the alleged vendor of the helmet to Wells, was still alive at the time of Page's announcement of the discovery. As a locally prominent antiquary, it is unlikely that he would have consented to have his name attached to a blatant hoax.

Ownership dispute

The helmet later became the subject of an ownership row, when a third party who had deposited the object in the museum claimed to staff that he was the owner, not W C Wells. There then appears to have been a legal dispute, with Wells threatening this third party and the museum insisting that he sign to confirm his ownership when he asked for it back from loan on 28 June 1933. With its return to W C Wells, the trail goes cold and nothing seems to be known about its subsequent history.

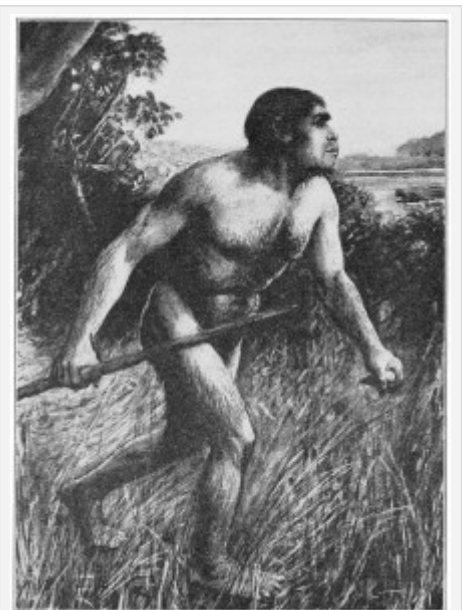
It is unclear how the note in North Herts Museum's records attributed the discovery to the site of the Stationmaster's House. There is certainly no evidence for activity on the site before the later first century AD, when a series of ditched enclosures were laid out on the site, apparently in the angle between the Icknield Way to the south and the road to Sandy to the west. There was also no evidence found during evaluation for activity between the end of the Roman period and the construction of the Stationmaster's House in the 1850s, making deposition from the discard of a Grand Tour collection unlikely.

Hoaxing in archaeology

The 'Baldock helmet' is an extremely problematical find, as the story of its acquisition is so complex as to raise considerable suspicion about its exact provenance. If the story does involve a hoax, it may have been one played by W C Wells on William Page to detract from the Welwyn discovery. It may have been perpetrated by someone else on Wells, Page or the Society of Antiquaries in general. The context of its announcement does suggest that someone was playing a game of one-upmanship.

Intriguingly, this 'discovery' was announced at the time that Charles Dawson, [a known serial forger](#), was operating. His most famous fraud, the remains that became known as '[Piltown man](#)' was announced the following year. Might this have been in part inspired by the 'Baldock helmet' in an attempt to provide the ultimate archaeological discovery, the 'missing link'?

The discipline of archaeology is not immune to hoaxing. So much emphasis is placed on making groundbreaking discoveries that will 'rewrite history' that many professionals are encouraged to make claims about significance that are not always borne out by the evidence. I published [a paper last year on claims made about Offa's and Wat's Dykes](#) in Wales and the marches. I began by looking into claims that the earthworks are older than usually believed. I entered a rabbit-hole of overblown



Reconstruction of *Eoanthropus dawsoni*, 'Piltown man' (*Popular Science Monthly*)

claims about the significance of scientifically-obtained dates, press-releases that don't match the original data and an understandable desire for those working in the field to say something new. Such claims from archaeological professionals are rarely fraudulent, but I do worry that they mislead the public by over-egging the pudding. Archaeology is an exciting enough pursuit without the need to over-state claims about the significance of each discovery. The rare frauds and hoaxes like the 'Baldock helmet' only serve to undermine public confidence in the discipline and allow [bizarre conspiracy theories](#) to proliferate.

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