12. Ashmolean Museum



Whenever I think of the Ashmolean I hear crepe-soled sandals squeaking on its waxed cork floors. The sandals were those of me as an eight year old boy. I first became aware of the Ashmolean because of a coin. My Mum and Dad found a George IV sovereign by a field gate in Gloucestershire when they were courting in the early 1950s. My Dad later showed it to one of his friends who promptly bit it and declared it real. After arriving in Oxford (see Button 9), my Dad took the coin to the Heberden Coin Room at the Ashmolean. He thought it might be rare and somehow he knew the Ashmolean was the place to find out. The coin curator solemnly informed my Dad that its value was greatly reduced by the tooth mark. The sovereign held a mystical value in our family and then passed out of conversation. Much later, when I was about 60 my Dad gave it to me. I

kept if for a number of years and then I thought it was just clinging to me so I sold it to an antiques dealer in DeLand, Florida for $300. And so the coin's journey continues, 4,000 miles from where it was lost.

The Ashmolean was created in 1682 by Elias Ashmole. Throughout its history it has moved around Oxford and inherited or acquired many separate collections as the institutions that held them disappeared. For example, the Indian Institute, part museum, part training ground for prospective civil servants, became redundant after Indian independence. Its collection formed the core of a new Eastern Art department at the Ashmolean.


Indian Institute late 19th century

In terms of its collection the object that I first became aware of was the Alfred Jewel. This was ploughed up in a field in Somerset in 1693. It is perhaps the finest example of Anglo-Saxon gold smithing extant. It has a piece of tear-shaped rock crystal covering a cloisonné enamel portrait of what is believed to be Alfred the Great. The reason for this belief is that around the crystal is an inscription in gold reading AELFRED MEC HEHT GEWYRCAN – 'Alfred ordered me to be made'. The object is thought to be an astral, or pointer. Indeed below the portrait is a dragon's head with an ivory ferrule in it in which a pointer probably sat. These pointers were used by readers to follow text in manuscripts.The existence of the jewel was used by Mr. Burt at my primary school (see Button 1) to make history come alive and we were encouraged to go and see it. And so I did. I can still feel the thrill and awe that washed through me when I first went there. Through his encouragement Mr. Burt lit a fire of love and enthusiasm for museums, which has stayed with me all my life.

