

The Ravenhoe Cauldron: How It Came About

Arguably, England is one of the most ancient-artifact-rich countries on earth. From Iron Age, to Celtic, Roman, and on to Saxon, Norman, Tudor, and Stuart, one would be hard-pressed to find a more history-dense environment than England.

I can think of no city in the country that exemplifies this more than Colchester, located approximately three hours northeast of London. Set on the River Colne, which empties into the North Sea, Colchester historically was a much sought after prize for England's invaders. With its rich Essex soil, abundant fresh water, convenient location to the sea, and blond, blue-eyed native women, it proved to be an irresistible paradise for interlopers.

Several years ago my husband and I enjoyed a lengthy home exchange on the Island of West Mersea, a few miles due south of Colchester, and we got to know the area quite well. Colchester, or Camulodunum, was the ancient capital of the local Trinovante and Icenic Celtic tribes. In fact, Camulodunum means "the fortress of Camulos," a common god worshiped by those very tribes. From 40 to 5 BC, the tribal king was Cunobelin, immortalized by Shakespeare in his play, *Cymbeline* (note that I quote the play at the beginning of *The Ravenhoe Cauldron*).

It was at Camulodunum in AD 49 that the Roman Emperor Claudius finally defeated the fearless Boudica, the Icenic queen who had, as one biographer stated, "Kicked some serious Roman butt." Thereafter, Colchester was settled by Romans, then Saxons, then Normans, and the rest, as they say, is history.

The Colchester Museum boasts one of the world's finest collections of Celtic, or pre-Roman British artifacts, the majority of which were locally excavated. One stunning collection of gold torques (an open-ended necklace) was unearthed by a farmer while plowing his field. The museum is housed in an original, vastly restored brick castle built by the Normans around the year 1076. The bricks are

discarded material originally produced by the local Roman conquerors. In addition to Celtic history, the museum is understandably rich in Roman artifacts as well.

Not even London's famed British Museum can boast a pre-Roman British collection comparable to Colchester's. As tourists, my husband and I stood gape-mouthed in the local museum, gazing upon these extraordinary works of gold craftsmanship. Virtually nothing like them exists in America.

While walking in a vast, open field reputed by the locals to have been the center of Cunobelin's kingdom, I recalled the words of a friend: "There's a book in this somewhere."

Well, here it is.