

# A Dentist's Dilemma

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*In 1861 the Royal Irish Academy was offered the disc of a Later Bronze Age gold dress-fastener by a Clonmel jeweller and dentist. A fragment of the disc survives in the National Museum Collections. This article traces its known history.*

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During the nineteenth century one of the Royal Irish Academy's main concerns was the acquisition of material for its Museum. The records of the Academy's Antiquities Committee, in particular, contain much information concerning objects which were acquired and others which were not. The purpose of this note is to relate an object in the collection to an earlier record of the same object.

In October 1861 Mr. J. Wallace a "Jeweller and Dentist, Watch and Clock Maker etc. etc." of Mary Street, Clonmel, wrote on three occasions to Edward Clibborn offering for sale a disc from a gold fibula or dress-fastener weighing 3oz. 15dwt. Mr. Wallace warned that in his capacity as a dentist he made use of gold and therefore he demanded £5 per ounce. He threatened either to melt it or to pass it through the rollers to flatten it unless the Academy would pay his price. This correspondence and the Antiquities Committee's response to it, recorded in the Minute Book, are as follows:

Edward Clibborn Esq.

October 15th, 1861.

Dear Sir,

I beg to remind you of a pleasing and interesting conversation in your *Unique Museum*. Relating to Gold Fibulas etc. etc. about which you promised to write. I regret to say its days are numbered with me as I intend to commit it to the crucible, after the lapse of two years and three months in my possession. Unless the *Royall Dublin Society* will arrest that *execution* and preserve a fragment of so noble a specimen of *Ireland's* greatness.

I remain Sir yours most respectfully.

J. Wallace

3oz 15dwt

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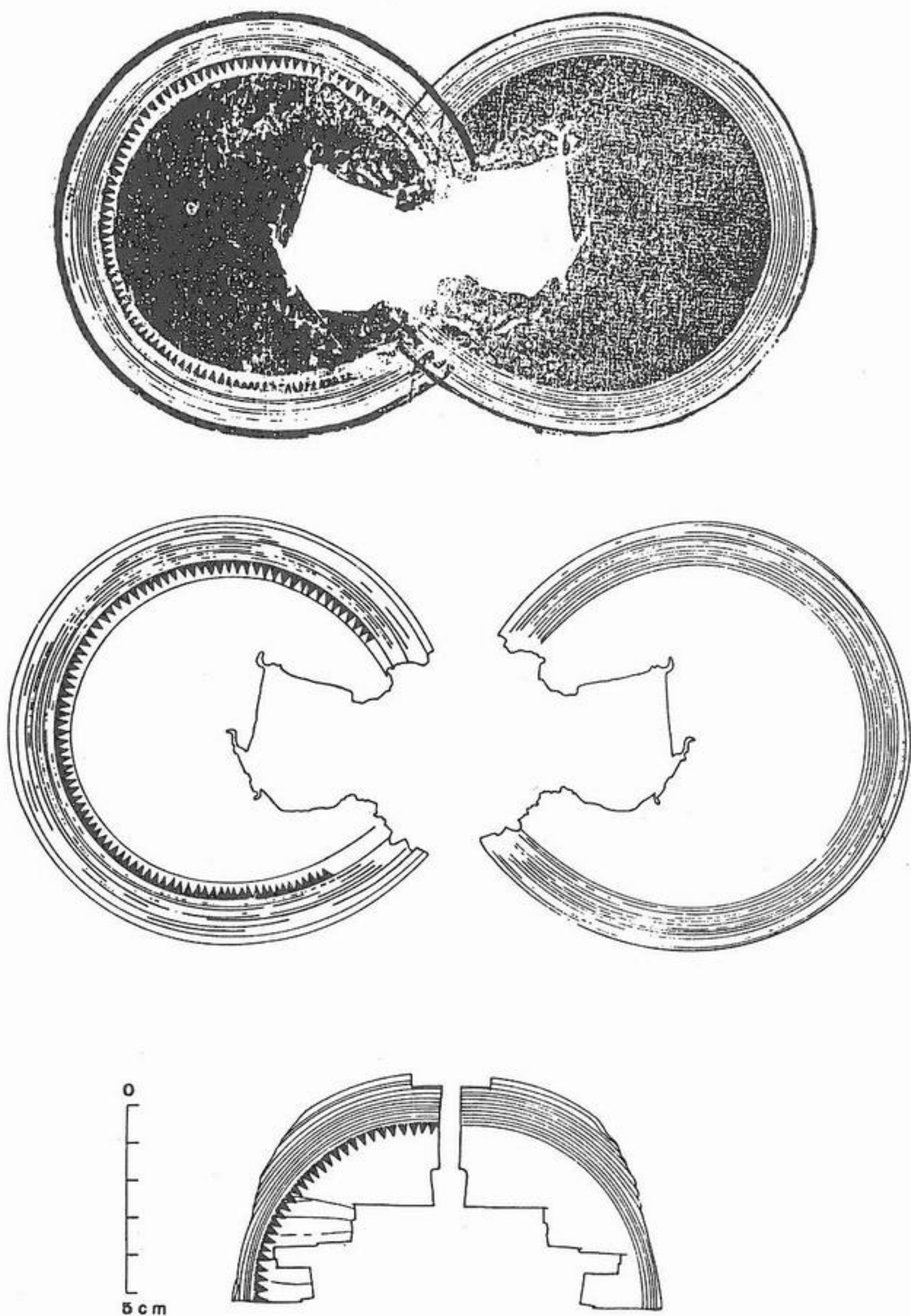
October 18th, 1861.

Dear Sir,

Many thanks for your kind information relative to treasure trove etc, for my dental business I purchase *Gold* in London for which I pay 80s per oz. of 18 carats, this disk of fibula, it is more finer and mallable and well suited for a Dentist. I would have changed its figure ere this, were it not for the respect I had for it, it being only second to the largest found showing the exquisite taste of the *artist* and *workman*. In conclusion, I will preserve its figure for ten days more and after that period its present appearance *vanishes*. Should the Royal Irish Academy think well of purchasing this splendid fragment they will *please* to communicate before the above time expires. The disk weighs three oz fifteen dwt. and the lowest pirce [*sic*] I will take is five pounds per oz.

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Illus. 1. *Top:* Mr. Wallace's impression of the dress-fastener terminal—internal and external faces (overlapping slightly). *Middle:* Both faces redrawn, and separated, from the impression. *Bottom:* Both faces of the surviving fragment.

I remain Sir yours most respectfully,

J. Wallace

Edward Clibborn Esq  
Royal Irish Academy  
19 Dawson Street  
Dublin 2.

P.S. I enclose a rubbing or impression of the two sides. J.W.

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October 22nd, 1861.

Edward Clibborn Esq.

Dear Sir,

I received your favour of the 21st inst. for which I thank you for your *trouble* and kind *information*, you will pardon me for repeating my former observations, stating I pay five pounds per oz for flattened plated *Gold* to Messrs Ash and Sons of 8-9 Golden Square, London. This *disk* as I observed is finer and more malliable and only requires to be passed through the Rollers which I have by me in this instance it saves me the cost and dangerous risk of posting. I am of oppinion that their are many private *Gentlemen* who would not hesitate to comply with my price in purchasing a *remnant* of so *noble* an *ornament* and such *intrinsic value* were it not for the writers means being rather limited he would feel *much pain* at either parting with or changing its figure, hoping you will pardon me for all this trouble.

I remain Sir, yours respectfully,

J. Wallace

The Rough Minute Book records on 19.10.1861 "Letters of J. Wallace, Jeweller and Dentist, Clonmel describing disk of fibula 3oz 15dwt and rubbing—offered at £5 per oz. or else to be melted".

The Minute Book reads:—

*Sat. 19 October 1861*

Read a letter from J. Wallace, Watchmaker, Clonmel, offering the disc of a gold fibula weighing 3oz 15 dwt @ £5 per oz

*Ordered*

That Mr. Clibborn do inform Mr. Wallace that if the article be submitted to the Committee under the Treasure Trove Regulations they will recommend the Government to authorise the payment of the full value for it.

*Wed. October 22 1861*

Read a letter from Mr. Wallace in reply to Mr. Clibborn's letter to him.

*Ordered*

That Mr. Clibborn do inform Mr. Wallace that the Committee cannot deal with the gold article referred to until it has come before them.

At this point the correspondence seems to have ceased. At least there is no further reference to it in the minutes. It would seem that an opportunity to acquire the terminal disc of a gold dress-fastener resembling those from Clones, Co. Monaghan, and Castlekelly, Co. Roscommon, in size had been lost and that this "remnant of so noble an ornament" had been used to fill the teeth of the citizens of Clonmel. However, it is possible that, while some of the object may have been used in this way, not all of it was. Mr. Wallace was resourceful enough to send a rubbing or impression of both sides of the disc (Illus. 1, top). It is clear that this gold disc came from a fibula of substantial size and weight.



The impression indicates an oval-shaped, deeply hollowed terminal with a maximum diameter of 11.65cm approx. The disc of the Clones dress-fastener has a maximum diameter of 10.6cm. while the Castlekelly one is 12.4cm. in maximum diameter. Indeed, Mr. Wallace referred to his specimen as second only to the largest. This is a reference to the Castlekelly fibula (Nat. Mus. reg. no: W.122) which would have been on exhibition in the Academy. Mr. Wallace's impression shows that both the internal and external surfaces of the disc were decorated with a series of concentric ridges just inside the rim (Illus. 1, middle). These number nine and ten respectively. On one surface the area inside the ridges is decorated by a single row of incised hatched triangles. The impression also suggests that the rim of the disc was substantially thickened. These features are typical of the manufacturing and decorative techniques of gold dress-fasteners.

Armstrong<sup>1</sup> records a "Gold plate with circular edge bound by an outer rim of gold. It is ornamented with nine raised lines above which are a series of triangles shaded with single lines; this plate, now much cut, and flat, was probably portion of the ornamented disc of a fibula. No details as to its finding have been recorded. Weight 12dwt. 17gr." The Royal Irish Academy (Nat. Museum of Ireland) register number is R.4025. The original register entry is restricted to two lines and no information on how or when the fragment was acquired has been recorded although the date of entry in the register—June 1886—is noted. This may be due, at least in part, to the fact that at a certain period in its history the Academy's Antiquities Committee did not pay sufficient attention to registration and a large back-log of objects had to be registered together several years after their acquisition. This lapse resulted in the loss of much information. However, it has been possible through a careful search of the contemporary records to re-establish some facts relevant to the provenance and find-circumstances of some of this material. A later addition in pencil to R.4025 records "Presented by Myers". To date it has not been possible to identify Myers or his connection with the piece.

The terminal fragment survives in a very mutilated condition, consisting of a section of the rim and part of the disc (Illus. 1, bottom). The nine ridges and hatched triangles described by Armstrong match in every respect with the impression of 1861. As threatened by Wallace, the disc has been flattened and one surface shows evidence of a series of roughly scored lines which probably served as guides to cutting out strips of gold. The maximum dimensions of the surviving fragments are: Length of arc 9.1cm; max. width 4.9cm; thickness of rim 2.7mm; thickness of plate 0.64mm.

It is regrettable that Wallace did not offer any information on the history or provenance of the piece, though a Munster provenance might be considered. While we are also at a loss to know how and when the fragment entered the Academy's collection, we are lucky that even a small fragment of a once magnificent dress-fastener survives.

### Acknowledgements

I would like to thank the President and Council of the Royal Irish Academy for permission to publish the material from the Antiquities Committee Minute Books. Thanks are also due to Mrs. Bridget Dolan and Joan Jennings for facilitating the archival work. I also wish to thank Sadhbh Modell for the drawings.

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<sup>1</sup>E. C. R. Armstrong, *Catalogue of Irish Gold Ornaments in the Collection of the Royal Irish Academy*, 2nd Edition, Dublin 1933, p. 70, no. 179.