Discovery at Derrynafinn

IT WAS easy digging. It took us an hour and a half, slowly digging. We had to get down to the bottom to lift the bowl out...

"I thought at first the items were kitchen utensils — and very gaudy ones at that — and I bent down and picked up the chalice. And the gold was beautiful. It was miles away... I said, looking for a chalice! We were very excited. We were very excited.

Thus Michael Webb describes how he and his son Michael Junior unearthed, on an island in a Tipperary bog, the priceless collection of ancient Irish altar vessels which has come to be known as the Derrynafinn hoard.

"I was over the moon... when I realised what it was I actually could not speak."

It is now almost exactly ten years since the find was made — a find which had a major impact on the world of Irish archaeology and on the law of treasure trove. And to mark the tenth anniversary of the discovery, RTE 1 is screening a documentary tonight (10.10 pm) entitled "The Master-Smith's Own Touch", which augments the original film record made by Joe Mulholland and brings the Derrynafinn history up to date.

It's an intriguing history in many ways, not least in the account given of how each item of the hoard (chalice, wine strainer, paten, and bowl) can be related to other items in the National Museum collection, and to the intricate and often amusing animal drawings in the Book of Kells. The original Mulholland film was completed by Muiris McConghail in association with RTE and Dr Michael Ryan of the National Museum.

and it covers the first excavation at Derrynafinn, the first exhibition of the hoard (visited by 40,000 people in three weeks), and the restoration of the chalice and paten by experts in the British Museum.

There are also interviews with those immediately associated with the find, including Michael Webb, Sister Maureen Thornton and Brendan O’Riordan, the director of the National Museum. All were involved with the board in the first 24 hours of its discovery, and it is their accounts which lend a palpable excitement to this film, for all of them have total recall of what they felt, said, and did at the time.

Michael Webb (senior) told The Irish Times what exactly happened on Sunday, February 17th, 1980: "I was over the moon... when I realised what it was."

The Webb's kept their discovery secret for some time, and then — by agreement with the Webb's and the National Museum — the Nationalist proudly published a scoop, with complete Sister Maureen's unique set of pictures. The Webb's delighted was shortlived, however. The State made them what they regarded as a derisory offer of £10,000 for their find. Michael Webb was approached by Sotheby's that the board was worth '25 million or 66 million' and he set out on the long road of litigation — though he is proud of how long it would have been, "After my time in the High Court," he told The Irish Times, "I was a week."

Mr Liston for three and a half days. In the end the court ruling was that the treasure should be returned to the Webb's, subsequently, on approval, the State agreed. The Webb's were awarded £20,000 — one percent of the agreed valuation of the hoard, "It should never have gone to court," Michael Webb said, "and wouldn't if the original compensation offer had been better.

The Derrynafinn hoard is currently occupying pride of place in "The Work of Angels"; the British Museum's exhibition of Celtic metalwork masterpieces of the 6th to 9th centuries. The exhibition is due to come to Ireland in May and the screening of "The Master-Smith's Own Touch" will then be repeated by RTE.