

## Lost Ashurnasirpal Relief Found in School Tuck Shop

by Christine Insley Green

Two important Assyrian gypsum bas-reliefs, the property of Canford School, Dorset, are to be offered by order of the governors at Christie's King Street on 6 July in the sale of Fine Antiquities.



EXCAVATED by Sir (Austen) Henry Layard at Kalhu (Nimrud) and Nineveh (Kuyunjik) between 1845 and 1851, these bas-reliefs are the last remaining gifts of the excavator to his friend and benefactor Sir John Guest of Canford Manor. Sir Henry was a cousin of Lady Charlotte Guest and a frequent visitor to the house, eventually marrying one of their daughters. As a young man, Layard travelled in the Middle East, eventually meeting Sir Stratford Canning, British Ambassador in Constantinople. As his protegee, he made reconnaissances throughout the Ottoman Empire, seeing at first hand the early French excavations of Paul Botta at Khorsabad. From 1845 onwards Sir Henry undertook his own excavations at Nimrud (biblical Calah), uncovering monumental gateway human-headed bulls and reliefs from the palace of Ashurnasirpal II (883- 859 B.C.). It is one of these bas-reliefs, the missing slab B from Room C of his North-West palace, thought to have been lost in the Tigris, which is being offered in July. It depicts a beardless eunuch or royal attendant, carrying a mace, bar and quiver, about to enter the King's presence, being 'anointed' by a winged protective deity who holds out a cone. Across the lower part of their bodies is the standard cuneiform inscription recounting the King's titles, claims and achievements, including the building of this palace.

The second, smaller bas-relief represents a 'head-count', three decapitated heads of bearded prisoners from one of King Sennacherib's campaigns in the East. It comes from his South-West palace, the 'Palace without Rival' at Nineveh (Kuyunjik) and can be dated to 704-681 B.C. Sennacherib, of whom Byron wrote 'The Assyrian came down like the wolf on the fold, and his cohorts were gleaming in purple and gold' is best-known from biblical sources as the King who captured Lachish, one of the most important cities in Palestine, but failed Jerusalem, thus fulfilling Isaiah's : (2 Kings, 18-20).

Sir Henry arranged for the reliefs to be packed and sent to London, where Victorians, steeped in the Bible, gave them no welcome. Because of the parsimonious Trustees of the British Museum, Sir Henry had to defray most of the transport costs himself. To his principal benefactor and friend, Sir John Guest, he donated several pieces. In 1851 Sir Charles Barry, architect of the House of Commons was commissioned to design a new building to house the Assyrian collection. The building became known as 'The Porch' or 'Nineveh Court', an addition to Canford Manor.

In 1919 the bulk of the collection was sold by Sir John Guest's grandson, Wimborne and acquired by Rockefeller. This now forms the bulk of the Metropolitan Museum's grand Assyrian galleries in New York.



In 1923, Canford Manor became home to an independent school and 'Nineveh Court' became converted into the school tuck shop known affectionately as 'The Grubber'. In 1959, seven further reliefs were sold, which were believed to be the final part of the collection, leaving behind three 'indifferent plaster casts'. Here, covered with whitewash they remained until in 1993 it was discovered that the upper part of one of the casts was the original missing bas-relief from King Ashurnasirpal's palace at Kalhu.

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