
Finding our Past: the Portable Antiquities Scheme in England and Wales

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Introduction: a strategy for recording chance archaeological finds

The Portable Antiquities Scheme was introduced at the end of 1997 as a complement to the Treasure Act which became law in 1996. The new Act ironed out many of the anomalies of the Medieval law of Treasure Trove: for instance, under the old law only gold and silver objects from a hoard would qualify as Treasure, under the new Act associated objects (e.g. the pottery container of a coin hoard) also qualify (Figure 1: The Snettisham jeweller's hoard). There was also a requirement under the old law to provide evidence at the coroner's inquest that there had been an intention to recover a find, which meant that many objects more likely to have been casual losses or votive deposits were not covered by the legislation (e.g. medieval gold finger rings; inhumations).

These modifications have had an immediate and positive effect on the reporting of Treasure finds: since the Act came into force at the end of 1997, there has been a seven-fold increase in the number of Treasure finds reported. However, the Act does not apply to the vast majority of archaeological objects found in England and Wales which are not composed of gold and silver, for instance Bronze Age axes, and, for this reason, the government initiated a series of pilot schemes to record these finds. The underlying motivation however to this initiative was to address the large scale and highly politicised issue of metal detecting. There may be as many as 30,000 metal detector enthusiasts in Britain today¹, there are certainly at least 13,000, all finding metal artefacts, but also items usually picked up during field surveys, i.e. worked flint, tile, brick and pottery. It is extremely hard to estimate the amount of material being found by this body of hobbyists: Dobinson & Dennison (1995: 8) estimated 400,000 pre-1600 finds, but that was based on responses from only 69 individuals. My own survey of metal detector users in Kent²

estimated that there may be about 100,000 finds of potential archaeological importance recovered annually in that county alone. So the estimate of 400,000 could be rather conservative: perhaps we are looking more in the region of 1 million finds a year. Of course, the vast majority of these finds are of limited archaeological value (broken toy soldiers, poor quality Victorian shoe buckles), but despite this, prior to the scheme it did not fall within anyone's remit to actually provide a means by which this material could be assessed. The voluntary scheme therefore provides a means by which this material can be recorded, without relying on the goodwill of over-stretched museum staff and other individuals working within the heritage sector.

The voluntary recording scheme in practice

There are currently 11 Finds Liaison Officers (FLOs) based in various regions covering about half of England and the whole of Wales³. These areas are Dorset/Somerset, Hampshire, Kent, Norfolk, North Lincolnshire, the North West, Northamptonshire, Suffolk, Wales, the West Midlands and Yorkshire. There is also a co-ordinator (Roger Bland) based partly at the DCMS and partly at the British Museum, and myself, the Outreach Officer, based with the British Museum. Funding currently comes from central government, the Heritage Lottery Fund and the British Museum. At the time of writing, a bid to the Heritage Lottery Fund for the financing of a national scheme is being put together for submission in late 1999.

Although the role of the FLOs is very varied, their main task is the recording of archaeological finds. A very pro-

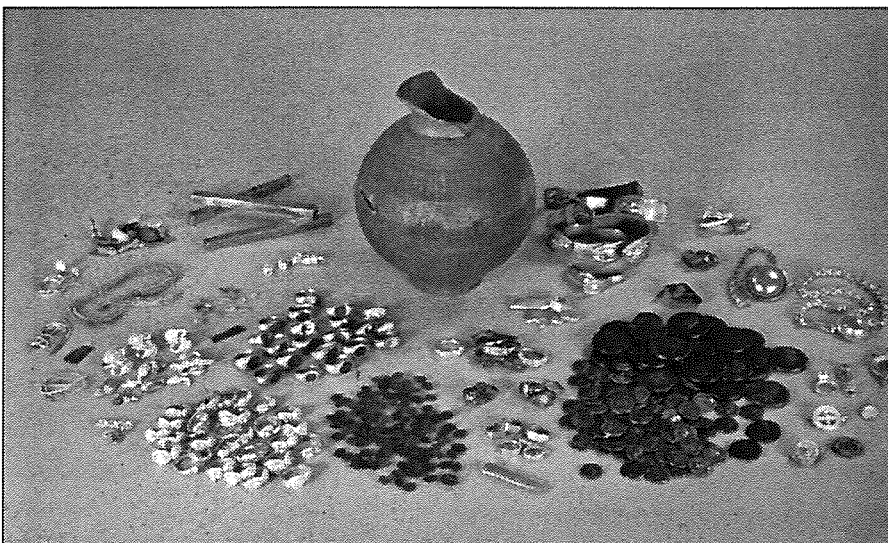


Figure 1: The Snettisham, Norfolk, 'jewellers' hoard. Under the new Treasure Act the gemstones, bronze coins and pottery container all qualify as Treasure alongside the precious metal items in the find. Copyright British Museum.



Figure 2: Angie Bolton, West Midlands Finds Liaison Officer, examines a find at a metal detector meeting.

active approach is expected of the post-holders who visit local metal detector groups and historic societies to record and take away finds and disseminate information about the scheme. Another important aspect of the work of the FLOs is to provide a link between local metal detectorists and local archaeologists. Since the events at Wanborough in the late 1980s (described in *British Archaeology*, July 1999: 6-7.), relationships between these two groups have varied considerably across the UK. In some areas relations have been extremely healthy (particularly in East Anglia), in others, there was very little contact between the two groups until recently (e.g. in Surrey).

An excellent example of this fruitful relationship is provided by the Westhawk Farm, Ashford site, in Kent, where metal detectorists have been involved as a direct consequence of the pilot scheme right from the start of the two-year excavation programme. The first involvement was a pre-excavation survey of the whole site involving six metal detector clubs from the county. This led to the recovery of about 2,000 artefacts, 300 of which were plotted by a surveyor. Alongside the results of the geophysical site survey, the finds data contributed significantly to the positioning of the subsequent excavations. The finds themselves were of great importance as only a small fraction of the 20 hectare site is being excavated with the rest of the

archaeology preserved in situ. Many of the finds provide the only evidence for past activity on certain parts of the site: for example, in one area, a single Iron Age coin provides the only evidence for pre-Roman activity. This part of the site is not being excavated by the archaeological contractors (Oxford Archaeological Unit (OAU)).

In addition to the survey work, OAU also used two local detectorists a day to assist their excavations, organised through the Kent Finds Liaison Officer. This involves locating material in context with the finds marked and then excavated by the archaeologists. Detectorists also search the spoil heaps for finds missed. Detectorists also have the opportunity to participate in the training excavation on the site and attend a series of lectures about the site and the archaeology of Kent.

Aside from the obvious enhancements to a site archive from involving detectorists, there are also considerable additional benefits from this joint approach. Local detectorists will often know more about their local area in terms of its history than the archaeological unit excavating a site, particularly as competitive tender under PPG16 has meant that it is not necessarily a local archaeological unit who will be awarded the excavation contract. The detectorist's involvement

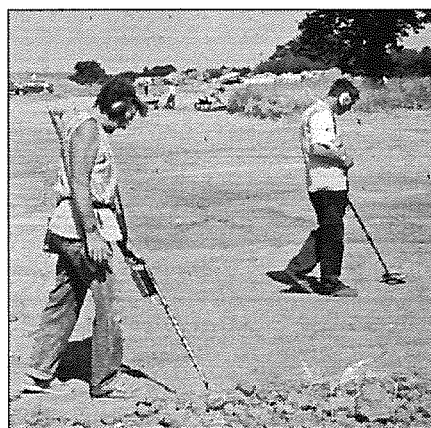


Figure 3: Local metal detector users assisting on the excavations at the Roman small town site at Westhawk Farm, Ashford, Kent. Co-operation between detectorists and archaeologists on projects such as this is a key element of the voluntary recording scheme.

will mean that they will have a deeper understanding of the mechanics and discipline of archaeology, particularly in relation to the importance of context, which will consequently influence their behaviour when conducting their hobby (e.g. keeping accurate records of provenance for their own finds). All these benefits have been a direct consequence of the pilot project.

www.finds.org.uk: a new public resource

All the data gathered by the FLOs is entered onto a specially designed database, written in Access 97. Originally it was hoped that an existing system could be used, preferably allowing information to be fed directly into local Sites and Monuments Records (SMRs). However, it was soon realised that no such suitable system existed, so one had to be developed.

The programme used by the FLOs consists of a number of interlinked tables. These allow the following types of information to be recorded: provenance of finds (including county, parish, national grid reference, land use); finds from that findspot (utilising the **mda** object thesaurus); finders details and bibliographic references. At the time of writing, a link which will allow data to be transferred directly from this database onto the ExeGeSIS SMR system, which a number of counties are adopting, is being developed. Data in the meantime is transferred manually across to local SMRs, which is a fundamental part of the scheme's remit.

Data is also transferred onto the Portable Antiquities website at www.finds.org.uk. The site provides information regarding the scheme and relevant contacts. However, the most important part of the site is access to the database of finds records, of which there are currently around 3,000 (but this is soon to be increased to c. 7,000). There is currently a basic free-text search facility, but this will be greatly improved so that searches can

be well defined. The accuracy of the find-spot information is currently only at county level, but this will also soon be improved to include parish details. More accurate findspot information will not appear at present in order to protect the interests of finders and potentially sensitive archaeological sites.

The voluntary recording scheme and UK museum services

There are a number of impacts which the recording scheme is having, and will have under a national scheme, on the existing UK museum structure. The first is on management: if funding is secured for a national scheme, it is expected that 75% of posts will be based with museums and museum services. 10% of partnership funding is expected to come from these host bodies, with 5% of this being in kind in the form of management and 5% financial.

The second impact the scheme has had was not entirely envisaged when the scheme was launched. The FLOs occupy an unusual position in their areas, as of necessity they have to liaise with many different elements of the heritage sector and the general public, which museum curators and local archaeologists do not necessarily have to do. This means that better lines of communication are established by default between these various bodies (with the FLOs often developing considerable amount of public relations dexterity as a result).

A more tangible consequence of the scheme is the transfer of data onto SMRs. It has been a long standing problem in this country that although many detector finds have been recorded by museums, these have not necessarily been transferred on to SMRs. SMRs have also not generally tended to devote resources to the recording of stray finds, usually concentrating their energies on recording archaeological features.

The final impact the scheme can have on local museums is increasing their profile with the public. A major element of the job of the Finds Liaison Officers is to hold finds surgeries in local museums. This allows members of the public to bring in archaeological objects and have them identified⁴, which has the potential spin-off of bringing members of the public in to their local museum which they previously may not have thought worthwhile visiting.

References

Dobinson, C. & Denison, S, 1995. *Metal detecting and archaeology in England* (Council for British Archaeology and English Heritage).

1. Dobinson & Denison 1995, 6. This estimate was made by David Wood, a former secretary of the National Council for Metal Detecting (NCMD). There are two main representative bodies for metal detectorists in the UK today: the National Council for Metal Detecting (NCMD) and the Federation of Independent Detectorists (FID). The National Council is mainly composed of metal detecting clubs, but also has a number of independent (i.e. non-club affiliated) members. Both organisations are somewhat reticent about the number of members they have, as they are effectively in competition. We estimate that the NCMD has around 7,000 members: FID recently requested 6,000 copies of the 'Finding our Past' leaflet to mail to members, so that must be a good indication of the size of their membership. There are also two metal detecting monthly magazines: *The Searcher*, which has a circulation of around 8-9,000 (Karloyn Hatt: pers. comm.), and *Treasure Hunting*, which has a circulation of around 12,000 (PIMS Directory of Media Contacts). All these figures suggest that there are at least 13,000 detectorists in Britain, and an unknown number of individuals who are not affiliated with either of the main representative bodies.

2. 'Voluntary scheme for the recording of archaeological objects in Kent: annual report 1997-8', Dr Richard Hobbs, Kent County Council circular.
3. The Welsh appointee, Philip Macdonald, is the Finds Co-ordinator for Wales. Although he performs similar functions to the FLOs, he has to oversee the recording of finds by a large number of organisations throughout Wales which have agreed to become reporting centres for finds.
4. Although occasionally, members of the public can misunderstand the purpose of the exercise: the Kent FLO was recently asked to identify a fur coat during a finds surgery at Dartford Museum.

