

Finders... (but not always)... Keepers

The metal detector has had a major impact on archaeology, both for good and for bad. What began as an apparently harmless and rather cosy hobby for solitary men, not that different from fishing really, rapidly developed into a source of considerable concern to historians and archaeologists, particularly the latter. Soon becoming bored and frustrated walking up and down large empty fields swinging their magic wands and finding only beer cans and the odd rusty horse shoe, many detectorists turned their attention to bona fide and well-known historical sites and, even worse, active archaeological digs. In their search for “treasure” they dug up willy-nilly any metal object they found on such sites, thereby destroying crucial dating evidence. In 1995 the Council for British Archaeology reported that of the hundreds of thousands of artefacts recovered by detectorists, only a tiny fraction of such finds were being reported to museums. Between 1988 and 1995 damage was reported to at least 188 scheduled monuments. Something had to be done to protect our historical heritage from this large scale vandalism.

Thus in the late 1990s the **Portable Antiquities Scheme (PAS)** was established to encourage detectorists, or anyone who had made an interesting historical find, to report this, so that it could be recorded and its importance assessed. **Finds Liaison Officers (FLOs)** were appointed throughout the country who were the first point of contact for the detectorists. During its first year of operation some 13 500 objects were recorded. By 2014 the millionth object was recorded, a Roman coin from the Seaton hoard. One of the most spectacular finds made by a detectorist was the Frome hoard of 2010 consisting of some 52 500 Roman coins. Most detectorists are more than happy to cooperate with the PAS and support its aims. Unfortunately a small minority reject this cooperation and continue to pursue their ambition to enrich themselves by digging up what they hope will turn out to be buried treasure. They operate, usually under cover of darkness, despoiling archaeological digs and have therefore been branded as “nighthawks”. Although small in number they remain a persistent thorn in the side of professional archaeologists.

The number of finds reported to the PAS is truly astonishing and one wonders, (at least I do), if there can be any more objects of value in the ground still to be dug up. On the face of it, it would seem that almost every field and copse in this country has yielded up some item, if not of monetary, then of some historical significance. The dedicated detectorist would, of course, reject this claim. He has spent too many futile hours plodding up and down fields with nothing to show for it except a few nails and, if he is very lucky, a Victorian penny.

Another question which can have no definite answer is at what point in our social history and development the individual no longer felt the need to bury his valuables in the ground. On the 3rd of September 1666, as the fire of London threatened his house, Samuel Pepys removed many valuable items by cart, but he also notes - *“I did dig a hole (in the garden) and bury my wine and my Parmazan cheese, and some other items...”* He did not record whether he ever collected his cheese, so perhaps it is still there to be discovered, although a pong detector, rather than a metal detector would be more useful in this instance.

In more recent times bank vaults have been used to secure money and valuables, but as events have shown, they are not totally safe. In April 2015 the Hatton Garden Safe Deposit Company was burgled and many millions of pounds stolen, much of which has not yet been recovered. Many must have wished that they, like Pepys, had opted also for a hole in

the ground. Ironically, the rather elderly men found guilty of the crime looked more like tired metal detectorists than the swashbuckling robbers of Hollywood fame.

As with most electronic gadgets metal detectors undergo continual development and range in price from under £100 to more than £1000, the higher price reflecting a greater degree of sophistication, the ability to discriminate between different metals and to penetrate the ground more deeply. It can only be a matter of time before a detector not only beeps at a find, but produces a 3D image of what it has detected under the soil.

The Staffordshire Hoard

The largest hoard of Anglo-Saxon gold ever discovered by a detectorist in a field near the village Hammerwich in Staffordshire, July 2009. 3500 items from the 7th and 8th centuries.



It has been valued at £3.285 million. So keep detecting!