

Detecting Heritage: the Portable Antiquities Scheme

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From late summer to spring, it is not uncommon to see metal detectorists looking for archaeological artefacts on farmland in England and Wales. This is an activity in which, it is estimated, several thousand individuals participate each year. It is no crime in these countries to use a detector for this purpose, provided that their use is permitted by the landowner and is not taking place on a legally protected ancient monument. Since 1997 the documentation of such finds and other discoveries by members of the public by the Portable Antiquities Scheme (PAS) has established a major source of data for archaeological research and cultural resource management in Britain; new object records are currently compiled at a rate of 100,000 per year. This article describes the origins, achievements and challenges facing the Scheme almost 20 years after its creation.

Since the development in the 1970s of metal-detecting as a common hobby, archaeologists have been aware of the consequences for the understanding of the past. As well as the discovery of many thousands of undocumented objects, sites which were protected by the law have also been looted. When major finds of precious metal artefacts were reported, for example the late Roman hoards in which Britain is unusually rich, the law of Treasure Trove was not easy to apply as it depended on establishing the circumstances in which the objects entered the ground, often several millennia ago. With reform of the Treasure Act in 1996 (amended 2002) to simplify the legal protection for objects in precious metal and related categories, the PAS was established. Its purpose was to execute the terms of the Act and to arrest the loss of archaeological information by encouraging the reporting of all archaeological objects, whether legally protected or not. Following a pilot phase (1997-2003) it has operated on a national scale in England and Wales since 2003. The PAS comprises a department of the British Museum, period-specialist Finds Advisors and Finds Liaison Officers (FLOs) responsible for the counties of England and Wales. FLOs encourage the reporting of objects (dated up to AD 1700) and document them in a publically available database (www.finds.org.uk). Objects are normally returned to finders after being recorded, except those classed as 'Treasure'. The latter mainly comprise items of gold and silver over 300 years old and, for prehistoric periods, copper alloy and other metallic objects where more than two come from the same find. In these cases a public body may be offered the first opportunity to acquire them (at market value).

The success of the PAS can be measured in various ways. Many more Treasure cases are now documented annually than under the pre-1996 legislation, increasing from fewer than 50 per annum in the early 1990s to almost 1000 by 2013. Among these are finds of major historical significance. The most spectacular is the 'Staffordshire hoard', comprising more than 3,500 items of 7th or 8th century date, mostly gold and silver fittings from weapons. Their splendour evokes the martial magnificence described in the Old English epic *Beowulf*, and the hoard is unparalleled in early medieval Europe. Collectively also objects reported as Treasure are making a significant contribution to understanding the past. For example one third of the 732 Bronze Age gold objects known from England and Wales were documented between 1997 and 2010 by the PAS. These finds reveal much more intensive use of gold in southern England than suggested by earlier discoveries. Insights from mundane objects are just as significant. Among the c. 1,150,000 objects documented by March 2016, almost a quarter comprise Roman coins, a key source for comprehending coin circulation in a Roman provincial setting. The high resolution geo-referencing associated with objects (in c. 90% of current records to



Fig. 1: A gold and garnet sword hilt fitting from the 7th-8th century AD hoard found near Lichfield, Staffordshire (WMID-399670)



Fig. 2: The Middle Bronze Age (1700-1500 BC) gold cup from Ringlemere, Kent (PAS-BE40C2)

the nearest 100m²) also allows analysis of their distribution with GIS to illuminate landscape history. For example findspots of coins and other objects have revealed the dense occupation of the hinterlands of some Roman towns in central and eastern England. This spatial resolution also means that these data can be incorporated into the regional archaeological inventories (Historic Environment Records) which serve as the basis for assessing the archaeological impact of proposed developments in housing, infrastructure or industry.

The high resolution available for many findspots also illustrates the successful relationships established between FLOs and metal detectors users, almost all of whom now use GPS devices to locate their finds. Detectorists figure prominently too among the volunteers for the new Heritage-Lottery-funded scheme ('PAsT Explorers') which assists FLOs in documenting new finds. As well as digital projects of this type, the work of Finds Liaison Officers also includes more traditional public engagement, such as lectures, exhibitions, and 'finds days' at heritage sites.

Since its establishment the PAS has commanded wide support as a pragmatic means of mitigating a major loss of archaeological data, but continuing challenges remain. Some single finds which may be of major historical value but are not made of gold or silver lack the legal protection which would otherwise enable a public body to acquire them. One such discovery was the Roman parade helmet from Crosby Garrett, fetching a price at auction well beyond the purses of museums. Widening the scope of items protected by the Treasure Act to include objects of this type would be no easy task. Illegal detecting on scheduled ancient monuments, so-called 'night-hawking', continues to affect some sites. Sustainability too remains an ongoing concern. For its first years the PAS was financed by a grant from the Heritage Lottery Fund, but is now funded by the Department for Culture, Media and Sport. In this austerity era this funding has not been immune from the cuts that have reduced budgets for all state-funded heritage organisations in the UK.

We appreciate, of course, that the PAS and the legislative and practical basis on which it operates are unusual in a wider European setting. Nonetheless we encourage readers to explore the PAS and its data for themselves to assess its value. The database is accessible to all; research users may register for access that includes the geographical co-ordinates at maximum resolution.



Fig. 3: The Roman cavalry parade helmet from Crosby Garrett, Cumbria, after restoration (LANCUM E48-D73)

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