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POWER OF PUBLIC: THE PORTABLE ANTIQUITIES SCHEME AND REGIONAL MUSEUMS IN ENGLAND AND WALES

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Introduction

This paper looks at two initiatives in England and Wales relating to portable heritage: the Treasure Act and the Portable Antiquities Scheme. No other country in the world has a comparable approach to dealing with archaeological objects found by the general public. The Portable Antiquities Scheme in particular provides the public with a genuine means of becoming actively involved in understanding Britain's past for the benefit of all. This paper looks at both these initiatives and examines the lessons which regional museums across the globe can learn from them.

Portable Antiquities in England and Wales: The legal position

In 1996, a new law came into force known as the Treasure Act (Department of National Heritage, 1997). The Act was a revision of the ancient law of Treasure Trove that had been in existence for many hundreds of years and was badly in need of reform. In England and Wales, treasure is now defined as any object more than 300 years old made of more than 10 per cent gold or silver. In the case of coins, there needs to be at least two gold or silver coins found in the same location (in order to exclude casual losses on an archaeological site), or ten or more base metal coins. Another aspect of the Act is that any archaeological finds found in association with gold and silver objects also count as treasure. For example, the Snettisham jeweller's hoard (Johns, 1997) contained both gold and silver items as well as gem stones and base metal coins. All these items, as well as the pottery container in which the find was discovered, would count as treasure under the new legislation.

In addition to extending the definition of treasure, another change removed an anomaly with the Treasure Trove law which meant that in every treasure case a coroner needed to be satisfied that there was an intention to recover the find. Under the new legislation this anomaly, which was very difficult to demonstrate in court, was removed. In practice this means that deposits such as grave goods found in association with inhumation burials and accidental losses such as medieval gold rings can count as treasure under the new legislation.

When a treasure find is made, the finder has a duty to report the object(s) within 14 days to his or her local museum, finds liaison officer and most importantly local coroner. The British Museum in England or the National Museum in Wales then examines the find. If deemed to be treasure, and if the find is wanted by a local or national museum, the coroner will hold an inquest to establish that the find is treasure. If declared treasure, an

independent committee values the find, and the finder receives the full value for which it is thought the find would realise on the open market.

By rewarding finders for declaring objects in this manner, the amount of archaeological material that is sold illicitly on the antiquities market has undoubtedly been reduced. Last year there were over 220 cases of treasure, whilst before the Act there were on average only 20 cases per year (Department for Culture, Media and Sport, 2000b, p.2). Although this is partly due to the fact that the definition of treasure has been extended, greater public awareness of the treasure process has also been a factor in the success of the new legislation. The increase in the number of cases also allows regional museums in England and Wales to purchase these finds to enrich their collections, when previously it tended to be the national museums (such as the British Museum) who acquired these finds.

The Portable Antiquities Scheme

To complement the Treasure Act a new voluntary recording scheme was also introduced in England and Wales in 1997. The vast majority of finds made by the public fall outside the scope of the Treasure Act (for example, late Roman bronze coins casually lost on archaeological sites and prehistoric flints), but are nonetheless important finds archaeologically. Before 1997, it was not the responsibility of any national or regional body in England or Wales to record these objects, meaning that much valuable information about Britain's past was being lost every year. The Portable Antiquities Scheme was therefore set up to record finds made by the public, but differs from the Treasure Act because finds only have to be reported on a voluntary basis. There are currently eleven regional finds liaison officers and a small central co-ordinating unit of two staff, and just over half of England and the whole of Wales are covered by the project. The Scheme is publicised through leaflets, a newsletter, annual reports and a website (www.finds.org.uk) and by outreach work in the areas officers have responsibility for.

Metal detecting in the UK

The main focus of the Portable Antiquities Scheme's efforts is on the large number of metal detector users operating in Britain. It is estimated that there are at least 15,000 people in Britain using metal detectors on a regular basis, although there may be as many as 30,000 (Dobinson and Denison, 1995, p.6). Metal detectorists may find as many as 400,000 objects annually of potential archaeological importance, and once again this figure may be much higher (*ibid*, p.8). Metal detectorists chiefly collect metallic objects, but also pick up ceramics and lithics.

For many years in Britain, there was little communication between professional archaeologists and metal detector users. Archaeologists were very concerned about the damage which detectorists were doing to archaeological sites, the most famous case being the destruction of the

Roman temple at Wanborough, Surrey, and the theft of thousands of Iron Age coins and other objects (O'Connell/Bird, 1994). Through the Portable Antiquities Scheme and other liaison work, it is clear that although there are still some detectorists who illegally detect on archaeological sites and cause a lot of damage, the vast majority are law abiding and simply want to participate in learning about our past and want to find objects of historical interest.

Agricultural Damage

In any case, archaeologists would be wrong to consider metal detector users as the main cause of damage to archaeological sites. It has become clear in recent years that the principle threat to Britain's heritage is not from acts of vandalism by treasure hunters but from modern farming techniques. In 1995, English Heritage conducted an extensive survey of England's archaeological heritage and estimated that over the last 50 years, 30% of archaeological sites had been damaged by farming methods, in particular deep ploughing (Darvill/Fulton, 1998). Deep ploughing drags archaeological objects up from layers in the subsoil, effectively removing them from their archaeological context. Once in the surface ploughsoil, metal objects in particular are vulnerable to further physical damage from ploughing, renewed corrosion due to different and variable temperature and moisture levels, and arguably corrosion from modern farm chemicals such as pesticides.

The vast majority of metal detected finds in Britain are found on such land - about 88% (Department for Culture, Media and Sport, 2001, p.45). Therefore in effect, the detectorists are doing archaeologists a favour by recovering material which is no longer in its archaeological context and is highly susceptible to further deterioration. By encouraging finders to record this vulnerable archaeological material with the Portable Antiquities Scheme, archaeologists are effectively able to record finds recovered at no cost to themselves and which would almost certainly otherwise go unrecorded. And if not logged, these finds may not survive in the topsoil for more than another decade or so.

The Portable Antiquities Scheme in practice

The Scheme has now been running for over three years. Over this period, the finds liaison officers have recorded almost 66,000 objects of archaeological interest, and almost 2,000 members of the public have recorded their finds under the Scheme (Department for Culture Media and Sport, 1999, 2000a, 2001). About 35% of all finds recorded are coins.

How finds are recorded

Finds liaison officers visit metal detecting clubs and amateur historical groups. They collect finds from these amateurs and identify their objects. They also offer advise on conservation and storage, record where finds

have been made (and explain the importance of provenance and context), and tell finders what they must do if they have found treasure.

The finds liaison officers also work with their local museums to set up recording days, or finds surgeries (fig. 1). These events are publicised through local museums and libraries, and members of the public are encouraged to bring in things which they may have found. In the past this has led to some extraordinary discoveries, such as a gold and garnet 9th century cross found by a farmer in the 1970s (fig. 2). The finder had made the discovery on his own land, but had not shown it to any museums or archaeologists. It was only when his daughter took the cross to a finds day at a local museum set up by the Portable Antiquities Scheme that the importance of the cross was established. This demonstrates very clearly the importance of the Portable Antiquities Scheme for actively engaging the public in recording our shared archaeological heritage.

Working with Professional Archaeologists

The project also encourages detectorists to help with professional archaeological investigations. The Westhawk Farm, Ashford site, in Kent, where metal detectorists were involved from the beginning of the two-year excavation project, provides an excellent example of this fruitful relationship. 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 a geophysical survey of the site, the finds data contributed significantly to the location of the subsequent excavations. The finds themselves were of great importance as only a small fraction of the 20-hectare site was excavated with the rest of the archaeology preserved *in situ*. Many of the finds provided the only evidence for past activity on certain parts of the site; for example, in one area, a single Iron Age coin recovered by a detector user provided the only evidence of pre-Roman activity.

In addition to the survey work, the professional archaeological unit excavating the site worked with hobby detectorists on the excavations themselves (fig. 3). The detectorists located metal objects in context, marked their position, and the archaeologists then excavated the objects by hand. The detectorists also searched spoil heaps for any finds missed.

Aside from the obvious enhancements to the site archive from involving detectorists, there are also considerable additional benefits from the joint approach. Local detectorists will often know more about their local area in terms of its history than the archaeological unit excavating the site, as archaeological units in England often come from a completely different region of the country. The detectorists will in turn gain a deeper understanding of the mechanics and discipline of archaeology, particularly

the importance of context, which will consequently influence their behaviour when conducting their hobby (e.g. keeping more accurate records of where they find material).

Educating the public

Much of the work of the Scheme involves educating the public about why they should record their finds and allay their concerns about doing so. The degree to which this is necessary is dependent upon which area of the country a finder is making discoveries in. In some parts of Britain, there has been a long tradition of recording objects with archaeologists, meaning that this is rarely an issue for finders. In others, there is still a great deal of suspicion, with many finders reluctant to co-operate with archaeologists who they view quite often as being part of 'the establishment' which also comprises the police and the government.

Because of this reticence, a vital element of the work of the finds liaison officers is to build up trust with finders. Finders may be reluctant about supplying information about finds (particularly where they have made discoveries), for a number of reasons. Their first concern is that other metal detector users will find out where they have been finding objects, and try and steal 'their' sites from them. They also worry that archaeologists will try to get their sites protected, and thus restrict access to them. And lastly, finders are fearful of telling landowners that they are recording their finds, because landowners often believe, quite wrongly, that archaeologists may attempt to conduct excavations on their land at great inconvenience.

Finds liaison officers therefore keep a high profile amongst amateur archaeological groups and in particular metal detecting clubs. This way these concerns can be allayed and finders can gradually begin to see that the benefits of co-operation outweigh the negatives.

Portable Antiquities Scheme website (www.finds.org.uk)

A vital element of the Portable Antiquities Scheme is making the information gathered as widely and freely available as possible. For this reason a dedicated website was launched in 1998 and can be found at www.finds.org.uk (fig. 4).

The website provides information about the Scheme, including contact details for the finds liaison officers, news about regional events and local exhibitions, news about important new finds, and links to other related internet resources. However, the most important part of the site is a database of finds recorded under the Scheme. There is currently information about c.18,000 objects on the site, and these are accompanied by c.2,000 images.

The database is searchable by a simple "What?", "Where?", "When?" rubric (fig. 5). A drop down list of object terms, different counties and parishes in England and Wales and historical periods makes the search facility simple and user-friendly. Figures 6 and 7 provide examples of the type of information such a search will generate. It should be noted that not all the information about objects is provided on the internet: finders' names and addresses are not included, nor is very detailed information about where the finds have come from. Such information would only be provided to researchers who could justify needing more details about finds or groups of finds.

In the future, it is planned that the database will also include basic mapping facilities which will be extremely useful for numismatists, as much of their interpretative work is reliant upon plotting the location of finds at a national level. If the project can be extended over the whole of England and Wales, it will be possible to map regional differences in coin use and loss as well as the distribution of other classes of object.

Conclusions

What can museums learn from the Portable Antiquities Scheme and the Treasure Act?

The main lesson is simply that liaison with amateur finders and metal detector users is preferable to legislation attempting to restrict such activities. By engaging with the interested public, finders can be encouraged to help archaeologists and museum curators to understand Britain's heritage by reporting their finds, and in turn can feel that their contribution is valued and that they have an active stake in understanding a shared heritage. This is preferable to having restrictions on ownership of archaeological objects or the use of metal detectors that many countries have.

British treasure laws also help to reduce the number of portable antiquities which finders try to export illegally from Britain to sell on the antiquities markets. The situation in Britain is far from perfect, as finds still disappear into the antiquities trade, but at least the concept of a full reward for declaring finds can help to reduce this, as antiquities dealers are not able to offer finders a similar level of financial reward.



Figure 1. A finds identification day held in York, England, in September 1999. Such days prove very popular with the public, with over 250 finds being brought in for recording at this event alone.



Figure 2. The Holderness cross. This Anglo-Saxon gold and garnet pectoral cross was recorded at a finds identification day in 1998. The find had been made over 30 years ago and would probably have not come to light if the Portable Antiquities Scheme had not been operating in England and Wales.



Figure 3. Metal detectorists working on a Roman site with professional archaeologists at Ashford, Kent. Increasing co-operation between amateurs and professionals is a key aspect of the Portable Antiquities Scheme.

Images provided courtesy of the Portable Antiquities Scheme.

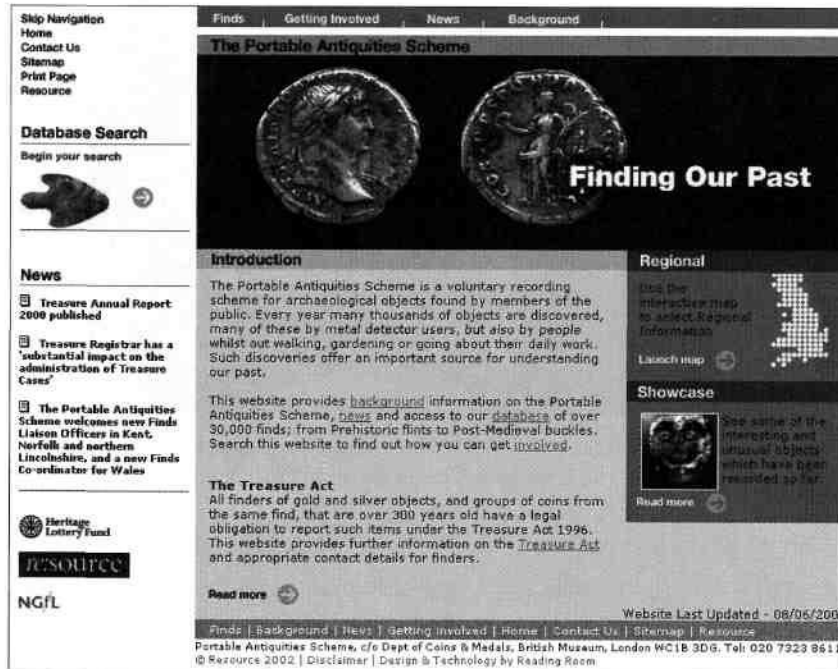


Figure 4. The homepage of the finds.org.uk website. The website provides information about the Portable Antiquities Scheme and access to the database of finds recorded under the project.

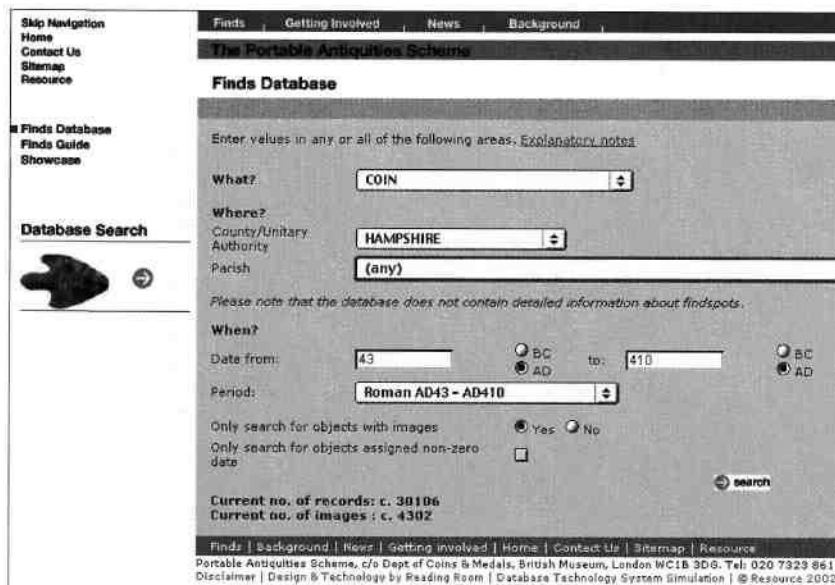


Figure 5. The search screen on the finds.org.uk website. The database currently has over 18,000 objects accompanied by about 2,000 images. In this example, a search is being conducted for Roman coin finds from the county of Hampshire.

Images provided courtesy of the Portable Antiquities Scheme.

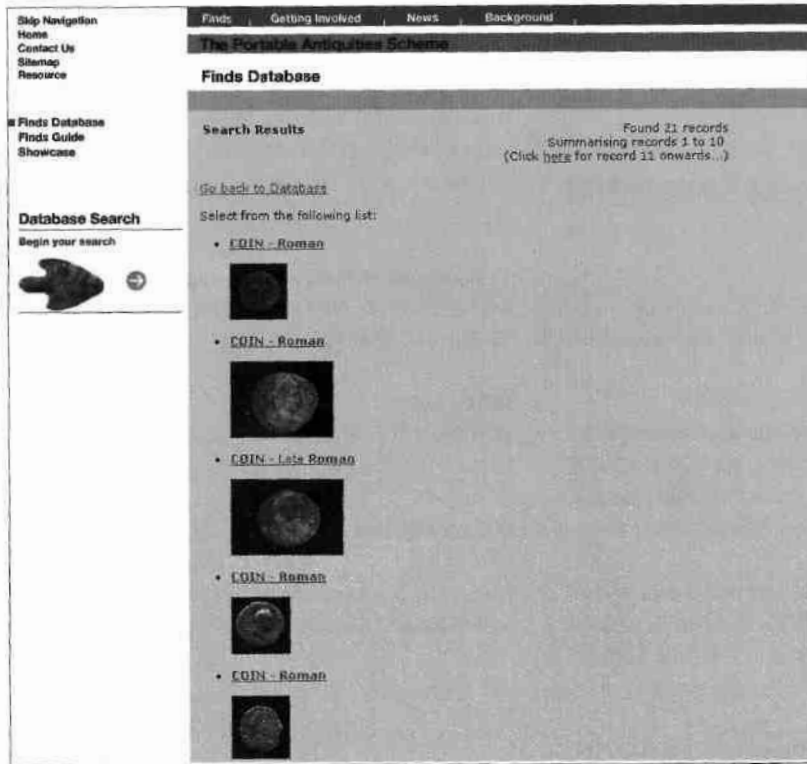


Figure 6. The results of the search on Roman coins from Hampshire. Summary records are provided for each relevant object on the database.

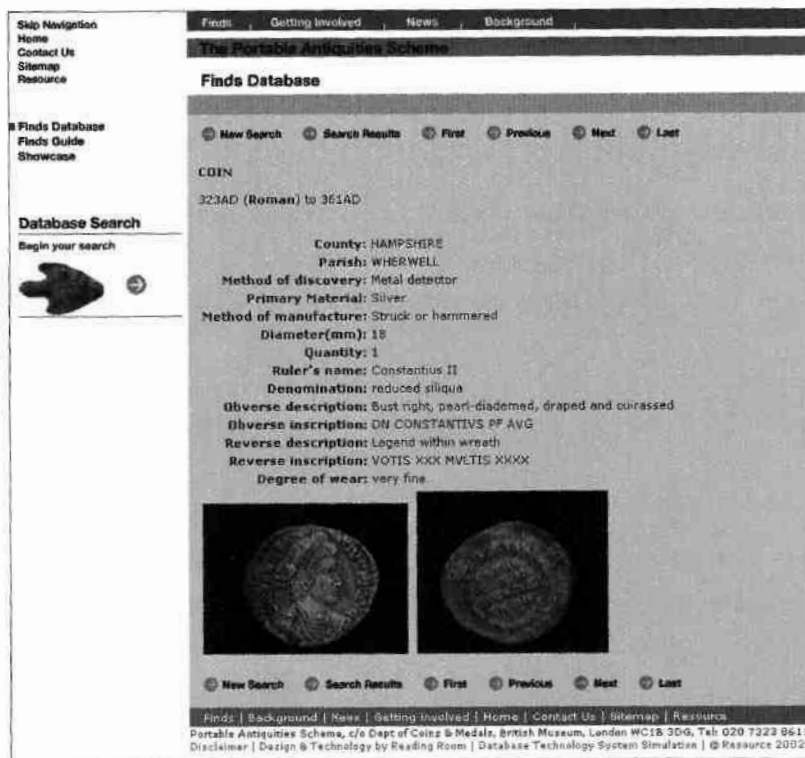


Figure 7. More detailed results from the search on Roman coins from Hampshire. Each object has details about where it was found and a description of it.

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