

# Editorial: Portable antiquities: archaeology, collecting, metal detecting

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## 1. Introduction

Metal detecting and archaeology do not always coexist peacefully. Indeed, even in the current climate of participation and inclusion within public and community archaeologies, there are still issues of trust to address, relating to both metal-detector users and archaeologists. While in the UK there have been disagreements between archaeologists and metal-detector users over the years, there have also been some significant steps made in encouraging metal-detector users to cooperate with the archaeological sector. Perhaps the most successful and best known of these is the [Portable Antiquities Scheme](#) (PAS), active across England and Wales. Add to this mix those that provide the commercial demand for metal-detected finds, the dealers and private collectors, and a clash of interests and motivations seems inevitable. Most would hope that relationships, positive in many cases but also problematic, will improve, both in the interests of enhancing the recording of non-stratified finds, and of promoting a publicly accessible and inclusive archaeology. However, is this an inevitable progression, or ultimately unachievable?

Within the archaeological community generally, it is likely that archaeologists, whether working in the commercial sector, academia, museums, heritage sites, local government or as volunteers, will have an opinion about metal detecting. Some archaeologists see metal-detector users at best as misinformed amateurs with little grasp of the archaeological consequences of their actions, at worst little better than thieves. However, increasingly, the metal detector is becoming accepted as a survey tool, the person operating it (whether archaeologist or hobbyist) regarded as a vital member of an archaeological team. This is a developing theme in the UK, as [Ferguson's article](#) shows with the potential value to conflict archaeology research offered by metal detected data. Indeed metal detected finds are significant for artefact studies as a whole, which perhaps makes engagement more of a necessity than an option for researchers in this area. As [this collection of articles](#) as a whole show, the issues are certainly not limited to the UK.

Within the metal detecting community too, one can find a spectrum of opinions about, and levels of interaction with, archaeologists. These can range from positive collaborations, even with lasting friendships developing, through to absolute refusal even to engage in discussion with archaeologists, let alone share information about discoveries. Key to all cases is the concept of trust, or lack of it. With an awareness of these issues, and a feeling that it was a timely moment to address and discuss these issues in a suitable forum, a conference was organised, described below, from which the inspiration came to develop this special issue of *Internet Archaeology*.

## 2. Talking the Talk

In the past decade, there have been numerous conferences and seminars in the UK aimed at promoting cooperation between archaeologists and metal-detector users, both at national and regional levels. For example, there are the annual conferences held at the British Museum in London by PAS, which have taken place since 2004. The National Museum of Wales in Cardiff hosted a conference on metal detecting and archaeology titled 'All that Glitters...?', also in 2004. In 2007, the South East regional group of the Council for British Archaeology (CBA) themed their annual conference around the subject of archaeological finds discovered in the topsoil through a variety of methods, including metal detecting, with a 2010 seminar held in Wells, Somerset, by CBA South West also addressing issues around metal detecting and the law.

In the light of this tradition of conferences and seminars, I was involved with the organisation of two conferences in 2005 and 2010 held jointly at Newcastle University and the Hancock Museum. Both conferences aimed to encourage contributions not only from archaeologists and academics, but also from metal-detector users, and in 2010, collectors and dealers of ancient coins too. The 2005 conference, 'Buried Treasure: Building Bridges' was notable for the reception it received from archaeologists on the email discussion forum [Britarch](#) (see Thomas [2006](#) for a review of the conference and the debate surrounding it). A subsequent book (Thomas and Stone [2009](#)) also found its origins in that event. In comparison with the low attendance and apparent attitudes of several (although, it must be stressed, not *all*) archaeologists, the attendance, support and feedback from metal-detector users appeared very positive.

In March 2010, what was, in many ways, a 'follow-up' conference, titled '[Portable Antiquities: Archaeology](#),

[Collecting, Metal Detecting](#)', took place, again at Newcastle University and the Hancock Museum, now refurbished and renamed the Great North Museum: Hancock, and organised in partnership with the CBA. As with 'Buried Treasure: Building Bridges', the feedback from the 2010 conference seems to have been largely positive from those that attended. A significantly higher proportion of the audience were archaeologists, including those connected to PAS and Scottish, Jersey and Manx Treasure Trove, research students, representatives from national heritage organisations across the UK, and practitioners actively engaged in different types of 'community archaeology'. These were joined by at least two individuals connected with the sphere of coin dealing and collecting, as well as a reasonable number of metal-detector users, although fewer of these than had attended the conference in 2005. One of these collectors, [Sayles](#), of the [Ancient Coin Collectors Guild](#), features in this special issue.

Two weeks ahead of the conference, the [National Council for Metal Detecting](#) (NCMD) informed the organisers of their decision to withdraw participation from the event, including the short-notice removal of two speakers and a session chair. The NCMD is one of several national organisations that seek to represent the views and interests of metal-detector users. Owing to its reputation for engaging in debate with Government decision-makers and heritage organisations, it has been regarded historically as an important group to involve in discussions concerning metal detecting (their support, for example, was key to the formation of [PAS](#) in 1997).

The reasons for their withdrawal were explained in a letter to the CBA, who were, perhaps significantly, co-organisers of the conference along with Newcastle University, which they requested be circulated to the conference delegates. These included alarm at the recent publicity given to the problem of nighthawking, which they believed that the CBA was treating as an opportunity for 'attacking the hobby of metal detecting' (Wells [2010](#)). As with the instance of negative comments on [Britarch](#) in May 2005 not being representative of all archaeologists, many of whom are happy to discuss metal detecting in a positive light, it would be wrong to imply that the position or decision taken by the NCMD secretariat necessarily represented the views of all metal-detector users, nor even necessarily all of the NCMD membership. Present at the conference were representatives of the United Kingdom Detector Net (UKDN), who reported positively on their online discussion forum after the event, stating that they had 'been to a few meetings like these before and this was definitely the best atmosphere one has been held in' ('kev woodward' [2010](#)). In addition, bemusement was expressed by many UKDN forum participants at the stance taken by the NCMD, with a whole thread even developed with the title 'NCMD Excuses'.

This serves to introduce some of the background issues that accompanied the conference when it took place, and to illustrate that, despite some bad feeling from a section of the British metal detecting community, others were willing to engage with the event and even found some value in that participation. In particular, [Redmayne and Woodward](#), who feature in this special issue, gave a positive paper highlighting the work of the online metal detecting community, [UK Detector Net](#) (UKDN), and in light of the NCMD withdrawals, presented one of only two papers representing the metal detecting community at all in the line-up of speakers and chairs at the conference, and the only speakers representing an organised metal detecting group.

A number of the speakers from the 2010 conference have contributed to this special issue ([Campbell](#), [Ferguson](#), [Fox](#), [Redmayne and Woodward](#), [Sayles](#), and [Wilson and Harrison](#)), with additional articles serving to broaden out the themes to take in perspectives from different countries beyond the UK and USA ([Gransard-Desmond](#) on France and [Ndlovu](#) on South Africa respectively). Furthermore, response articles from recognised legal experts ([Gerstenblith](#) and [English](#)) and the founder of the Portable Antiquities Scheme ([Bland](#)), add context and a rare opportunity to read in one place a range of responses from key opinion formers. [English](#) provides a comprehensive overview of the collection of articles here, while [Gerstenblith](#) also usefully adds a brief analysis of relevant US law, while [Bland](#) includes in his response article summaries of the Treasure Act 1996 and the Portable Antiquities Scheme as they operate in England and Wales.

### 3. Nighthawks and Nighthawking

One of the most contentious issues between archaeologists and metal-detector users is that of [nighthawking](#) - the illegal use of a metal detector on private, scheduled or otherwise protected land. This issue, unmistakably a criminal activity, is addressed head-on in particular by [Wilson and Harrison](#), and picked up on by others too (e.g. [Ferguson](#) and [Gransard-Desmond](#), the latter discussing the situation in France, where campaign groups such as HAPPAH (*Halte au Pillage du Patrimoine Archéologique et Historique*) actively oppose metal detecting). Historically, there are well-publicised instances of nighthawking in England, such as at [Corbridge](#) (Dobinson and Denison [1995](#)), [Wanborough](#) (Thomas [2009](#); Faulkner [2003](#), 174-75) and Donhead St Mary (Cleere and Marchant [1987](#), 73). It should be clear what the dangers posed to archaeology are, not to mention the effect on landowners who are victims of trespass and property theft.

However, legally behaving metal-detector users also dislike nighthawks because of the connotations associated with them - implying as it might in certain media representations that metal detecting as a whole is illegal, a form of looting, or at the very least an immoral activity. [Redmayne and Woodward](#) in their article highlight the emphasis placed by the UKDN on being aware of, and sticking to, the law. The desire by legitimate metal-detector users to disassociate themselves with nighthawks became particularly apparent in 2009 when Oxford Archaeology, following a study into the current levels of illicit metal detecting, published a report on nighthawking ([2009a](#)), with an accompanying summary document (Oxford Archaeology [2009b](#)). [English Heritage](#) and partners commissioned the research, to assess the scale of nighthawking, including which regions and sites may be the most vulnerable to it.

The *Nighthawking Survey* (Oxford Archaeology [2009a](#)) has been criticised informally by some metal-detector users

for apparently failing to distinguish explicitly enough between law-abiding metal-detector users and nighthawks, particularly in the publicity surrounding its launch (e.g. BBC News [2009](#); Kennedy and Jones [2009](#)). Interestingly, and perhaps predictably, the willingness of many metal-detector users to assist archaeological researchers also apparently decreased throughout 2009 because of raised suspicion in the light of the report (Ferguson pers. comm. 14 May 2009). This could indicate a possible step backwards in relationships between archaeologists and metal-detector users, and certainly has implications for any future research involving discourse with the community. However, the level of publicity attracted by the report may ultimately have been beneficial, in that it brought the nighthawking debate back to the fore, reminding those involved with archaeology, metal detecting, and also the wider public, that there are still threats posed to archaeological heritage by looters using metal detectors.

The report itself acknowledged that relatively few metal-detector users chose to respond to the project's questionnaire survey (Oxford Archaeology [2009a](#), 19). This may have been due to suspicion about the organisations behind the formulation of the project, with some rumours appearing during and after the research phase that the commission was driven by a surreptitious wish to impose stricter controls on metal-detector users (e.g. Foster [2009](#)). This was doubtless in part the result of historical acrimony between archaeologists and metal-detector users. However, it is also likely that some of the graphics associated with the project, depicting the activity of metal detecting (without clear indication of whether it was depicting illicit detecting or not) may also have, undoubtedly inadvertently, caused offence to some at least. In one of the case studies presented in the report, of a scheduled site at Llyswen, Powys, it was stated that, while the metal-detector users involved had operated illegally, this was through ignorance that the area was protected rather than a deliberate intention to break the law. Despite this apparent ignorance of the law, photographs accompanying the case study labelled the metal-detector users involved as 'Nighthawks' (Oxford Archaeology [2009a](#), 60), which, again, could be construed as unnecessarily harsh under the circumstances.

The conclusions of the final report suggested that nighthawking was, '...low compared with other forms of damage to monuments ... although it still should be seen as significant given the potential for Nighthawks to disturb or remove nationally significant archaeological deposits' (Oxford Archaeology [2009a](#), 89). Among the recommendations, it was suggested that the law enforcement agencies needed clearer guidance on the effects of nighthawking and how to tackle the problem, to look at heritage crime issues, not only but including nighthawking. The report also recommended that metal detecting should be integrated more 'into the archaeological process' (Oxford Archaeology [2009a](#), np). This particular recommendation, along with the call to ensure that PAS continues, indicates that inclusion and involvement of metal-detector users with archaeological work is still seen as a means of promoting good practice within the hobby. Whether this particular recommendation is adopted on a large scale by archaeological contractors, who may be sceptical of the merits of involving non-professionals in certain assignments, remains to be seen. What is nonetheless clear is that the Nighthawk survey has acted as a springboard and knowledge platform for English Heritage, in partnership with enforcement agencies and a host of interested organisations and groups through the [Alliance to Reduce Crime against Heritage](#) (ARCH) (see [Wilson and Harrison](#)).

#### 4. The Problem of Contrasting Ideologies

The continued attempts to engage with metal-detector users and, by extension, the collectors of metal-detected material on matters of policy also seem to be problematic at every turn. For several years, the CBA led efforts to produce a *Code of Practice for Responsible Metal Detecting in England and Wales*, which finally reached publication in [2006](#). The consultations and discussions behind the final document included key heritage stakeholders such as [English Heritage](#), [Cadw](#), and [PAS](#), but also included the [NCMD](#) and the [Federation of Independent Detectorists](#) (FID) - all of whom allowed their logos to be displayed on the finished code. However, the code did not meet with approval by everyone, and the logo of the [Association of Local Government Archaeological Officers](#) (ALGAO) is conspicuous by its absence.

Now, six years on, the Code is still a source of contention, even for organisations that were party to its development. The NCMD express concern that adherence to the code is being used in too restrictive a way by agencies such as [Natural England](#), with the implication that if a metal-detector user does not abide by the code, they are automatically to be considered 'irresponsible' (Wells [2010](#)). This may seem a given to archaeologists, especially considering that the code of practice is specifically described as a means to 'responsible metal detecting' in its own literature (CBA *et al.* [2006](#)), and given that NCMD and FID seemingly signed up to the code's parameters. Perhaps this disagreement in terminology, and in what constitutes 'responsibility', is also symptomatic of an ongoing 'elephant in the room' of recent discussions - the fact that archaeologists and metal-detector users view the issues differently.

There has been collaboration stretching back to the 1970s when Tony Gregory, Kevin Leahy and a few others pioneered the recording of metal-detected finds. More recent cases of inclusion and involvement of metal-detector users on archaeological projects include the activities of NCMD-affiliated LEGISE (Landscape Explorers Group South East) in Kent, and excavation in East Heslington by the University of York involving the Central Yorks Metal Detecting Club. Richards and Naylor ([2009](#)) have also outlined the benefits of utilising metal detector data for a large-scale research project (see also Richards *et al.* [2009](#)). However, as [Sayles' article](#) in this special issue shows, and picked up on in discussion by the response papers, his perception, as a collector, of the apparent low significance that should, in his view, be afforded to archaeological context, is in contrast to more archaeologically focused articles such as that of [Ferguson](#). The inclusion of Sayles' article here, very much as an opinion piece, is particularly important therefore in order to demonstrate the often opposing standpoints that can exist outside of the

professional heritage sector.

## 5. What Happens Now?

There has been continued mainstream media interest in the metal detecting hobby and in its potential for uncovering priceless archaeological treasures, especially in the UK in the light of the Staffordshire and Stirling Hoards, both discovered in 2009. As [Bland](#) observes in this issue, [Wilson and Harrison](#) in particular have picked up, perhaps speculatively, on the potential growth not only in legitimate metal detecting as a result, but also the increased risk of illegal metal detecting. It may therefore seem timely to discuss the future of archaeology and metal detecting, especially with the debate and interest further generated by the 2010 conference in Newcastle. The feeling that the important discussions at that conference should be recorded in some way, and augmented by additional articles and contextualisation, was certainly a key factor in influencing the editors of this special issue to pursue its publication. However, the same could be said of almost any time in the past forty years. Metal detecting and the private ownership of cultural heritage, whether through licit or illicit means, seems to return to heritage debates time after time. The continued academic interest in global issues connected to the criminality of global trafficking of looted cultural objects is exemplified by the current European Research Council-funded project [Trafficking Culture](#) at the University of Glasgow. [Gransard-Desmond](#) and [Ndlovu](#) in this special issue also remind us that these issues and debates take place at a national level in jurisdictions outside of the UK, and that whatever legislation and practices prevail, key issues still emerge. Returning to the UK, whether through the first manufacture of hobby metal detectors in the late 1960s; the emergence of STOP (Stop Taking Our Past: see also [Campbell](#) for discussion of its legacy), and its nemesis, the Detector Information Group (DIG) in the late 1970s/early 1980s, or the enactment of the [Treasure Act 1996](#), archaeology, collecting and metal detecting debates recur.

The turbulent history of the relationship between archaeologists and metal-detector users continues to have resonance, with many metal-detector users continuing to cite past anti-treasure hunting campaigns in recent arguments for distrusting archaeological organisations (see [Wells 2010](#)). This was a theme that often emerged in interviews with metal-detector users at rallies, and questionnaire responses from metal detecting clubs ([Thomas 2012](#)). Hence, any attempts from heritage organisations to address issues concerning or involving metal detecting must be carried out sensitively and transparently, taking the long-held perceptions of many metal-detector users into account. This requires patience and regular, open contact with representative metal detecting groups, as well as work at a 'grass-roots' level with individual clubs and hobbyists. However, the time also needs to come when metal-detector users as a whole are prepared to 'let go' of previous decades of experiences and confrontations. They need to accept, as many already do, that as long as they engage in a hobby that has a direct effect on the physical remains of the past, they too have a responsibility to record their finds openly and honestly, and to a standard acceptable and useful to archaeological research. Recent research has shown that a staggering number of people in the UK are interested in archaeology, whether through active involvement in a group or society ([Thomas 2010](#)) or as viewers of a wide range of heritage television programmes ([Piccini 2007](#)). This is not only for the sake of the archaeological record, but also for the hobby's reputation and for the interests of the wider interested public. It may be too much for either side to hope for the other to undergo major ideological changes, although [PAS](#) has made headway, as has the private, detector user-run [United Kingdom Detector Finds Database](#) (UKDFD), in instilling the idea with metal-detector users that recording finds is a worthwhile activity. The debate might continue for many more decades, often with periods of strong disagreement. However, it is important that clear and open communication, even when difficult to maintain, is not disregarded in preference to paranoia and the pitfalls of second-guessing. In this light, it is intended that this collection of articles is not necessarily seen as a definitive volume on the issues around portable antiquities, but rather a snapshot of contemporary viewpoints and positions, while inviting, we hope, further discussion in academic and unbiased forums in years to come.

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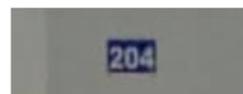
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