

3. Portable Antiquities in the Public Realm

All of the above has served to provide an introduction for this last section, which attempts to summarise and provide a background to many of these issues. Most importantly, perhaps, the author will attempt a brief summary of his professional experiences dealing with metal-detector users over the past ten years. This is important for a number of reasons; the author would estimate that the vast majority of archaeologists in the UK have never encountered a metal-detector user, nor would their work give them reason to do so. This should make all parties pause for thought. To the metal detecting community, it may be a useful reminder that artefact studies (and the relationship that metal detecting has to that) are but a small subset of the wider archaeological picture of excavation, landscape survey and other work. To the archaeologist it rather begs the question of what knowledge many archaeologists rely on when they deal with metal-detector users for the first time. The author would suggest many archaeologists make do with received wisdom.

To the archaeologist the view that the past has influence on the present may be axiomatic, but it is the belief of the author that both sides of the metal detecting debate are caught within a paradigm of which they are unaware, and continue to talk to each other in a language of mutual incomprehension. In particular, many archaeologists are mystified by the lack of enthusiasm—or sometimes animosity—which they experience from metal-detector users, while many metal-detector users expect the same from archaeologists, and unhappily sometimes get it. In both cases, the author would argue, individuals have been bequeathed presumptions at second or third hand. Many of these beliefs stem from a heritage campaign that was until recently largely forgotten, at least by archaeologists. The Stop Taking Our Past (STOP) campaign was launched in 1980 by various organisations concerned at the implications of the growth of metal detecting across the UK. Although largely remembered as an archaeological campaign, it was backed not just by the Council for British Archaeology but also by the National Farmers Union among many others, suggesting a wider range of concerns (Thomas [2012b](#), 46-7). The influence of STOP is perhaps rather debatable, but the practical legacy is not; in simple terms it could be said to have driven a wedge between responsible metal-detector users and the archaeological community. This has allowed enduring misperceptions to develop on both sides, but it has also meant that the relative lack of attention from archaeologists has created a space in which metal-detector users have developed their own distinctive culture and ethos, which has in turn created barriers not just for engagement, but for comprehension.

It should be stressed from the outset that metal detectorists are rarely seeking 'treasure' in the commonly understood sense of that word; the hobby appears to have other rewards and many archaeologists are perhaps unaware of how much interest and motivation there is in seeking modern objects which would not interest archaeologists. In reality, individual motivations can be diverse (Thomas [2012a](#)), and a useful insight into motivation can be found in the fact that a number of metal-detector users are, in the experience of the author, also anglers, another pastime which appears to rely on seeking rather than finding as the source of pleasure. Nevertheless, this rather placid picture can be as much a source for disaster and discord as it is for concord and cooperation. In the intervening years, metal detecting has developed its own language, terminology and beliefs about the value and importance of objects which has developed independently from established archaeological knowledge. A good example of this concerns categories of finds that have no basis in reality, but have been created over the years until

supposition has become solid fact, and many will be familiar with 'love tokens' and 'Roman spoons' which are as real to many finders—and have as much subjective validity—as real categories of archaeological objects. One very real problem is the tendency for metal detecting as a hobby to focus on the objects alone as being desirable or interesting, what might seem a very natural outcome of the pursuit. Nevertheless, it is still the case that archaeological information such as findspot is of secondary interest to the object itself. To archaeologists one is as important as the other and an unremarkable Roman coin might become hugely significant in relation to an Iron Age site, for example.

One effect of the STOP campaign is that it created a gap between archaeology and metal detecting where this culture could develop. Yet the legacy of the STOP campaign endures in other ways; largely forgotten by archaeologists, it has become part of metal detecting culture. The presumption of archaeological hostility which STOP created in many quarters is not confined to an earlier generation of detector users, but something that the author has encountered in those too young to remember STOP, as well as in recent converts to the hobby. Like the Curse of Turan, the presumption of archaeological hostility to metal-detector users is renewed every generation. The cause of this can be seen clearly in the letters pages of metal detector magazines, where recently an individual writing under the nom de plume (perhaps more accurately a nom de guerre) of 'Bazza Thugwit' accused the archaeological establishment of plotting to 'tame the metal detecting beast' (Thugwit [2012](#), 59). These sentiments also find resonance in the decision by the National Council for Metal Detecting (NCMD) to boycott [the conference on which this issue of the journal is based](#). They can also be found in a lengthy letter (under the pseudonym Isley Walton, a small village in Leicestershire) that accuses government bodies of using covert legislation to restrict and control metal detecting (Walton [2010](#), 60). True, these letters spill over into paranoia (it is telling that the vast majority are anonymous) and it is hard to determine how many readers believe the content. Nevertheless, however distorted a view such letters represent, they do find some resonance in conversations the author has had with metal-detector users. There is generally a tendency to view legislation through the effect it has on metal detecting; neither Scheduled Ancient Monuments nor Sites of Special Scientific Interest are intended to ban metal-detector users, yet they are often seen as having this intent. Equally so, a recent seminar on heritage crime (in March 2012) which the author organised had some interesting responses from metal-detector users. While opposing illegal detecting and decrying the perpetrators, they voiced concern that any outcomes would be used to restrict metal detecting overall. The willingness to disown metal-detector users who break the law but the inability to accept that such laws are not a tool to restrict metal detecting generally is a recurring issue and the author would suggest an important part of any outreach would be to explain and justify stewardship laws which are often seen as merely anti-detecting.

Yet many archaeologists rely on similar learned responses. It is particularly the case that archaeologists of the generation who grew up with STOP have inherited certain precepts, even if they do not remember the campaign itself. In many areas of Scotland metal detecting is a relatively new hobby, yet one finder was told by a local council employee that 'too many metal detectorists spoil it for others, due to indiscriminate damage to sites and selling for profit'. At the time, this was an area with little or no detecting, and the individual could not have been speaking from personal experience. What does come through, however, is some of the more misbegotten language of STOP.

In spite of the high public visibility of portable antiquities, many on both sides still rely on vicarious perceptions. The effectiveness of any new outreach is limited still by many responding to these overtures with response and reactions that belong firmly in the past. This is less evident as many on both sides perpetuate disagreements by using the same language and terminology to represent different ideas and meanings. Both archaeologists

and metal-detector users use the terms 'site' and 'context', yet they use them to present wholly different ideas and meanings. Many on either side do not realise this, and the subtle professional meanings of a 'site' may be lost on someone to whom it simply means the field in which they habitually metal detect. Equally so, the habit of archaeologists switching between 'context' to mean a specific layer of an archaeological site and more general circumstances of finding, causes confusion among detector users. The author has heard more than once that as ploughsoil does not have undisturbed stratigraphy, any archaeological concerns are not valid.

Many of these problems might be briefly summed up as tensions when the professional standards meet the aspirations and aims of what is a leisure activity, and emotive and personal responses to objects can be a challenge for a system designed to be objective. One way to sum this problem up is in the publication of this series of articles. As co-editor, the author has had the privilege to read the other contributions while writing this one. Intriguingly, while [Tom Redmayne and Kevin Woodward](#) are concerned that many archaeologists have not reciprocated the detente made by many metal-detector users, it is clear that many archaeological contributors feel the opposite. It is, perhaps, in this no man's land of misapprehension that any solution should be found, and that we should move away from what often appears as a tussle for the possession of objects to ask and answer questions about the dissemination or ownership of the cultural value they represent.

[PREVIOUS](#) [NEXT](#) [CONTENTS](#) [HOME](#)

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