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# **In defence of detectorists: an analysis of the contribution of metal detected finds to the archaeological assemblage**

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## **Abstract**

Are metal detectorists really the bane of the professional archaeologist's career? Or can they provide a useful source of material that may not be found otherwise? This paper will consider both sides of the argument, demonstrating how some of the biggest issues many have with detectorists are not necessarily the immense barriers they seem and how archaeologists would benefit from working with detectorists and fostering good working relations. It will put forward the idea that this data, collected in the Portable Antiquities Scheme Database, can be considered a form of 'big data'. It is statistically significant due to its sheer volume and is, therefore, useful to archaeological research. There may be biases and flaws in the data, but this is true of all archaeological data and these can be overcome with proper research methodologies.

Keywords: archaeological context, amateur archaeology, big data, detectorists, material culture, metal detecting, nighthawking, portable antiquities, Portable Antiquities Scheme, public engagement with archaeology, treasure, treasure hunting.

## **Introduction**

'Show me to the non-ferrous metals, mate!'<sup>1</sup> TV sitcom 'Detectorists' is often cited, alongside finds such as the Staffordshire Hoard as contributing to a resurgence in metal detecting and the fact that the Portable Antiquities Scheme reached the one and a half million object mark in July 2020.<sup>2</sup> The above quote may be from fictional detectorist Lance, played by Toby Jones, but it also neatly sums up why this might not be seen as a good thing by all archaeologists.

Metal detectorists do not always have the best reputation amongst archaeologists, often decried as looters and nighthawkers (those who steal archaeological artefacts from protected sites under cover of darkness) at worst, and hobbyists more interested in finding valuable artefacts made of precious metals at best.

The purpose of this article is to examine the role of metal detectorists and metal detector finds in archaeological research and to combat some of the main arguments against their usefulness.

## **Public perceptions of metal detecting**

It is undoubtedly Treasure finds which draw the attention of most non-archaeologists. Finds such as the Staffordshire Hoard (PAS ref: WMID-399670) and the Leekfrith Torcs (PAS ref: WMID-FD08D9) have not only raised the profile of metal detecting but drawn crowds to museums and sometimes global attention. In fact, following their discovery in 2009 and 2016 respectively, a record number of new Treasure found by members of the public were recorded.<sup>3</sup>

## **Recording of metal detected finds**

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<sup>1</sup> Crook, Detectorists, episode 1 2014.

<sup>2</sup> Portable Antiquities Scheme 2023a; Shepperson 2017.

<sup>3</sup> Lewis 2017.

Of course, there can be little contribution of metal detected finds to archaeological research without somewhere to record those finds for future research. As part of the discussions for the 1996 Treasure Act, the Department of National Heritage (DNH) also considered non-Treasure finds. For archaeologists, the recording of non-Treasure finds is crucial. Whilst Treasure such as the Staffordshire Hoard may draw the attention of global press, it is the everyday items of day-to-day life that can inform us about the way of life of people in the past.

For this reason, the Portable Antiquities Scheme (PAS) was formed with an initial six pilot schemes, before growing to the national database (across England and Wales) that it is today.<sup>4</sup> The PAS database has been used for a variety of research projects.<sup>5</sup> Indeed, as part of their study of the Viking and Anglo-Saxon Landscape and Economy, Naylor and Richards suggest that such third-party data was growing in importance even almost a decade ago.<sup>6</sup> They suggest that this is down to a number of factors including time and resource pressures and the development of analytical techniques for data.

### **The contribution of small finds to archaeological research**

It is impossible to consider the importance of metal detected finds to archaeological research without also considering the contribution of small finds in general. By their very nature, finds recovered by metal detector are small finds as opposed to other types of archaeological evidence such as settlements, biological data or funerary evidence. The reputation of metal detectorists within archaeology is linked not only to the opinions held on the practice itself but to thoughts on material culture and small find research in general.

The opinion of some, if not all, on finds research is neatly summed up by a piece of feedback to a survey on archaeological specialisms which suggested that there was

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<sup>4</sup> Bland 2010.

<sup>5</sup> Naylor and Richards 2005; Richards et al 2008; Richards et al. 2009; Robbins 2013a, 2013b, 2014; Brindle 2013, 2014; Taylor 2020.

<sup>6</sup> Naylor and Richards 2005: 83.

little competition for the services of finds specialists as most people do not think this is a valuable area for study.<sup>7</sup> Other research has suggested a similar unfashionable view of finds research,<sup>8</sup> possibly linked to backlash against the culture-history paradigm of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.<sup>9</sup>

Nevertheless, fieldwork and collection of material culture is 'the bread and butter of all archaeologists'.<sup>10</sup> Several more recent works have suggested that finds research is of high importance to archaeological study.<sup>11</sup>

If finds research itself is seen as unfashionable, this will undoubtedly have a knock-on effect on perceptions of members of the public who attempt to collect such finds. Recent work, particularly utilising large databases of finds has also demonstrated renewed interest in finds research.<sup>12</sup>

### **Metal detectorists – amateur archaeologists or looters?**

One of the common criticisms of metal detectorists is that, rather than being an important source of material culture data they are merely looters out to find 'Treasure'. One concern is that some detectorists may not report all their finds to archaeologists or their local Finds Liaison Officer. Instead, they may choose to keep them or sell them privately. Comparison of the number of finds reported to the PAS (44,268 in 2008) with the estimated number of metal detectorists (circa 9,000)<sup>13</sup> may initially seem to back up this supposition. Though it has also been suggested that high-profile cases of finds with large valuations actually encourage people to search for, and report, more artefacts.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Aitchison 2011: 42.

<sup>8</sup> Cumberpatch and Blinkhorn 1997: 5; Chitty 1999; Swift 2007: 25.

<sup>9</sup> Taylor 2020: 16.

<sup>10</sup> Lucas 2001: 3.

<sup>11</sup> CIFA 2014; Johns 2007: 29; Cooper 2007; Lavan et al. 2007.

<sup>12</sup> See, for example, Naylor 2006; Richards et al. 2009; Robbins 2013a, 2013b, 2014; Brindle 2013, 2014; Webb 2011; Taylor 2020; Swift 2009.

<sup>13</sup> Gill 2010a: 2-3.

<sup>14</sup> Wilson 2009; Gill 2010b, 2010c.

Detectorists are, of course, out to find artefacts. Detecting manuals explain how to find a 'productive site' by identifying areas where finds have already been reported.<sup>15</sup> Looting is undoubtedly an issue, but many archaeologists agree that there is no serious threat to archaeological heritage from looting.<sup>16</sup>

It is also important to consider that to vilify metal detectorists and portray them as threat to 'serious' archaeology would only damage relations between professional archaeologists and hobbyist metal detectorists, possibly further encouraging them not to report their finds. This is an issue highlighted by those on both sides. Catherine Johns described the mutual suspicion between detectorists and archaeologists with metal detecting often seen as 'borderline criminal activity'.<sup>17</sup>

Perhaps even more relevant to the issue of finds reporting is how the detectorists themselves feel they are viewed by professional archaeologists. David Barwell, as Chairman of the National Council for Metal Detecting described the relations between detectorists and archaeologists as, '... when I walked into a museum and said, "Good morning, I am a metal detectorist," I might as well had said, "Good morning, I have leprosy"'.<sup>18</sup> If detectorists feel they are distrusted and looked upon with disdain by archaeologists, where is the incentive for them to work with professional archaeologists on reporting and interpreting their finds?

Can it be demonstrated that good relations between archaeologists and metal detectorists actually improve the reporting of finds? Austrian heritage protection laws are such that metal detecting licenses are only granted to archaeology graduates. A study of finds reported in Austria demonstrated that, contrary to the intended effect, the rules led to a reduction in finds reported and meant that the National Heritage

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<sup>15</sup> Villanueva 2006, 2007; Grove 2005.

<sup>16</sup> Austin 2010; Renfrew 2010; Moshenska 2010.

<sup>17</sup> Johns 2007: 31.

<sup>18</sup> Barwell 2006: 15.

Agency Bundesdenkmalamt (BDA) were not aware of many archaeological sites.<sup>19</sup> Criminalisation of amateur archaeological activity does not prevent metal detecting or the recovery of finds by members of the public, it only means that archaeologists are not aware of this material and are unable to use it for study.

It is not only criminalisation that prevents effective use of finds made by members of the public. Metal detecting is widespread in France but the finds are not recorded anywhere,<sup>20</sup> meaning that the information they could provide is lost. Recording of finds made by members of the public is also seen by several other countries as a solution to looting.<sup>21</sup>

The importance of good relations between archaeologists and detectorists is also backed up by the view of a detectorist, Neil Allen, who wrote of his experiences for the Institute of Conservation when he described the ‘cyclical’ nature of the acrimony between the two.<sup>22</sup> He also described working closely with archaeologists to mutual benefit, metal detecting on sites for fieldwalking and checking spoil heaps for finds. Another detectorist, Steve Bolger describes how not all detectorists are out to make money from metal-detecting, many of them are simply ‘genuinely interested in the past’.<sup>23</sup>

## **Buried Treasure**

It is impossible to discuss the contribution of metal detected finds to British archaeology without mentioning the contribution of headline-grabbing Treasure finds. Perhaps the most well-known of these finds recently has been the Staffordshire Hoard. Discovered by metal detectorist Terry Herbert in Hammerwich, Staffordshire in 2009 the hoard attracted significant attention from members of the public and archaeologists – both in Britain and worldwide.

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<sup>19</sup> Raimund 2011.

<sup>20</sup> Gransard-Desmond 2013; 25 Bland 2013.

<sup>21</sup> Portable Antiquities Scheme 2007: 21; Fincham 2008: 363-5; Gill 2010a: 9.

<sup>22</sup> Allen 2006: 78.

<sup>23</sup> Bolger 2006: 41.

As soon as the Hoard was discovered, it was recognised that it would reignite interest in Anglo-Saxon material culture and significantly increase the volume of material available for study.<sup>24</sup> It is also not possible to overstate the importance of finds such as this to public engagement with archaeology. The Staffordshire Hoard ignited an interest in Anglo-Saxon history and identity throughout a broad section of the population – over 40,000 people queued to see the find on the first day it went on public display.<sup>25</sup> Public feeling towards the find was that it ‘belonged’ in the Midlands, not a national museum in London, and a large-scale public campaign raised money to keep the Hoard in the area.<sup>26</sup>

That is not to say that no archaeologists have decried the Hoard due to its status as a metal detected find. Linked with the frequent perception of metal detectorists as looters, Catherine Hills, Senior Fellow at the McDonald Institute for Archaeological Research and Fellow of Newnham College, who has conducted extensive research into the archaeology of Anglo-Saxon England, stated that Terry Herbert was more concerned with discovering precious metal finds than the careful recording of archaeological material.<sup>27</sup> Indeed, she even extended this opinion to cover the professional archaeologists from Birmingham Archaeology who excavated the site after the find was reported. Several archaeologists have declared that the Staffordshire Hoard was vital to Anglo-Saxon archaeology,<sup>28</sup> whereas Hills declared that it would not, in fact, ‘rewrite the Dark Ages’ but merely provide some useful information on the development of weapons fittings.<sup>29</sup>

Hills’ opinions on the contribution of the Staffordshire Hoard to Anglo-Saxon archaeology, particularly the extension of her criticism to the team from Birmingham

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<sup>24</sup> Leahy 2010.

<sup>25</sup> Leahy and Bland 2009: 9.

<sup>26</sup> The Art Fund 2010; BBC 2013.

<sup>27</sup> Hills 2011.

<sup>28</sup> See, for example, Webster 2011, 2012: 121-5; Leahy 2010; Leahy and Bland 2009; Leahy et al. 2011; Høilund Nielsen 2010; Brooks 2010; Fischer and Soulat 2010; Pollington 2010 513-4.

<sup>29</sup> Hills 2011: 228.



Archaeology, seem as if they may be more connected to the method of its discovery than any objective assessment of its impact to the field.

The emergency fieldwork undertaken on the site of the find concluded that the remaining artefacts were contained within the topsoil and that they had been redistributed by ploughing.<sup>30</sup> Hills is correct to say that the finds lack stratigraphic context, but this type of context for the Staffordshire Hoard had been lost before any excavation had taken place.

Another often cited find when discussing metal detectorists is the Crosby Garrett helmet, a copper alloy Roman cavalry helmet found in 2010.<sup>31</sup> Not covered by the Treasure Act 1996, the helmet was sold at auction in 2010, with no full scientific examination and conservation able to be carried out before the sale.<sup>32</sup> The find location was not known with any degree of accuracy as it was over three months from its discovery before local Finds Liaison Officers (FLOs) were shown the hole from which the fragments were removed.<sup>33</sup> Nevertheless, the helmet has been variously described as an 'outstandingly important find...it is as an ensemble that the helmet is so exceptional and, in its specifics, unparalleled'<sup>34</sup> and internationally significant.<sup>35</sup>

In 2016, a further headline-grabbing Treasure find was made in Staffordshire with the discovery of four Iron Age torcs known as the Leekfrith Torcs. Similarly to the Staffordshire Hoard, the Leekfrith Torcs were, described by Julia Farley, British Museum Curator, as being of 'international importance'<sup>36</sup> and by Theresa Gilmore of the PAS as having the potential to transform archaeologists' understanding of the time period.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> Dean et al. 2010; Jones 2010, 2011.

<sup>31</sup> Francioni and Vrdoljak 2020: 205.

<sup>32</sup> Worrell 2010: 30.

<sup>33</sup> Gill 2010a: 6.

<sup>34</sup> Jackson 2010: 2.

<sup>35</sup> Worrell et al. 2011.

<sup>36</sup> BBC 2017.

<sup>37</sup> Gilmore 2018: 32.

If, in these cases of exceptional and rare Treasure finds, archaeologists can overlook the lack of stratigraphic context (or, in the case of the Crosby Garrett Helmet even the lack of knowledge of the exact findspot), then why should this not be the case for the more mundane, everyday items reported to the PAS? Where a find is almost unique, the absence of those things considered key to archaeological studies can be overlooked in order to make use of an unprecedented find.<sup>38</sup> Not all of the finds reported to the PAS are as ornate as the Staffordshire Hoard or internationally important as the Leekfrith Torcs. Nevertheless, taken as a whole, the database represents an otherwise unmatched volume of finds easily accessible to researchers.

### **Context is king**

Hills' views on the Staffordshire Hoard encompass the lack of context alongside the view of detectorists as looters out to find Treasure rather than carefully record archaeological material. Context is generally considered to be a crucial element of the interpretation of any archaeological evidence, and this is something which has a large impact on the perceived usefulness of metal detected finds. In his study of *Personal Ornament in the Roman North*, Timothy Webb excluded finds from the PAS database on the basis of lack of context.<sup>39</sup> This is, perhaps, reasonable, as part of his research involved comparing finds from seven site types - military, vicus, town, villa, rural, cave and cemetery – and PAS finds are not associated with a site. Webb did, however, compare PAS finds to the Cumbrian rural assemblage, finding that whilst there was a greater percentage of metal finds in the PAS data, there were similar proportions of various artefact types.<sup>40</sup> This could be interpreted as Webb attempting to justify his removal of the PAS data by demonstrating that it does not affect his conclusions, thereby trying to have the 'best of both worlds'.<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> Taylor 2020: 30.

<sup>39</sup> Webb 2011.

<sup>40</sup> Webb 2011: 20.

<sup>41</sup> Taylor 2020: 22.

The argument that PAS finds have no context and are, therefore, of limited value is gradually losing ground. Not only have a number of recent studies used PAS data, but it is not necessarily correct to say that metal detected finds have no context. They may lack a secure stratigraphic context that could be provided by excavation but they do have a context – the location in which they were found. This is particularly relevant with the large number of entries in the PAS database – over one million. Daniel Pett, former Digital Humanities lead at the British Museum stated that such a large number of finds with detailed context of location the data are statistically significant. Something that would not be the case with a smaller number of finds.<sup>42</sup>

It must be considered that, at the time of making these comments, Daniel Pett was ICT adviser to the PAS and may be considered to be biased,<sup>43</sup> however, his views on the importance of the PAS are shared by others in the field.<sup>44</sup>

In 2007, to mark the tenth anniversary of the PAS, a conference was held bringing together wide-ranging research on a variety of topics and time periods – all using PAS data. Research varied from those studies which focused on using the data to study a large and easily accessible database of specific artefact types (for example lithics,<sup>45</sup> Iron Age sword strap fasteners,<sup>46</sup> or Anglo-Saxon brooches<sup>47</sup>) to those of a given geographic area.<sup>48</sup>

The PAS, along with Planning Policy Guidance 16 (PPG16) is also credited by Esmonde Cleary as having transformed understanding of Roman Britain by contributing a great deal of evidence to that previously available for study.<sup>49</sup> As of 28 January 2023 there are 187 doctoral level research projects, 20 large-scale Arts and

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<sup>42</sup> Pett 2010: 2.

<sup>43</sup> Taylor 2020: 26.

<sup>44</sup> Johns 2007: 31; Davis 2014, see also studies using PAS finds by Naylor 2006; Richards et al. 2009; Naylor and Richards 2005; Robbins 2013a, 2013b, 2014; Brindle 2013; Taylor 2020.

<sup>45</sup> Bond 2010.

<sup>46</sup> Andrews-Wilson 2010.

<sup>47</sup> McLean 2010; Dickinson 2010.

<sup>48</sup> For example, see Sumnall 2010.

<sup>49</sup> Esmonde Cleary 2014: 7-8.

Humanities Research Council (AHRC) projects, 27 major publications, five journals and 11 Leverhulme funded projects registered with the PAS.<sup>50</sup> Much of this research consists of studies of the landscape and environs of known sites or areas of England and/or Wales such as Silchester,<sup>51</sup> Caerau Hill,<sup>52</sup> Stonehenge and Avebury,<sup>53</sup> and South Oxfordshire.<sup>54</sup> Others are large-scale, national research projects such as the VASLE project<sup>55</sup> or other research into how PAS finds can be used in archaeological research.<sup>56</sup> The importance of the PAS to these research projects is due both to the large number of finds in the database and the accurate recording of findspots which can be plotted and used for geographical information system (GIS) or statistical analysis.

There are vast amounts of data in the PAS database and, despite lacking a secure stratigraphic context, the finds in the PAS database do have context – that of their location.

The PAS database can also be considered an example of ‘big data’<sup>57</sup> which is associated with three concepts: volume, variety, and velocity.<sup>58</sup> It is clear how these concepts apply to metal detected finds. The PAS dataset is large and growing all the time (volume), it contains a variety of different types of finds from a wide range of time periods and locations (variety) and is updated all the time (velocity).<sup>59</sup>

There are of course biases inherent within metal detected finds. The main ones are firstly, towards the material – metal – and, secondly, where they are found – largely

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<sup>50</sup> Portable Antiquities Scheme 2023b.

<sup>51</sup> Barnett 2010.

<sup>52</sup> Davis 2014.

<sup>53</sup> Davis and Cripps 2011.

<sup>54</sup> Mileson 2011.

<sup>55</sup> Naylor 2006; Richards et al. 2009.

<sup>56</sup> Robbins 2013a, 2013b, 2014; Taylor 2020.

<sup>57</sup> Taylor 2020: 2.

<sup>58</sup> Laney 2001.

<sup>59</sup> Taylor 2020: 2.

on ploughed or rolled agricultural land with differences across the country according to where detectorists are most in operation.<sup>60</sup>

However, there are biases in all archaeological data, all of which is subject to the biasing factors of deposition, preservation, survival, recovery, and reporting.<sup>61</sup> Various researchers have put forward methods for overcoming the biases inherent in metal detected finds such as Robbins,<sup>62</sup> the authors of the VASLE project,<sup>63</sup> Brindle,<sup>64</sup> and Taylor.<sup>65</sup>

## **Conclusions**

Finds recovered by metal detectorists represent a large body of data that could be used by archaeologists and would be unwise to ignore. Databases such as the PAS database contain vast amounts of finds – mainly recovered by metal detectorists - with detailed location information that allows them to be used for mapping and statistical analysis. As has been explained in this article, several different research projects have shown the value of the data and how it can be used for research.

Whilst it may be the case that some metal detectorists are unscrupulous and interested predominantly in finds with monetary value, this does not mean that it makes sense to ignore metal detected finds. First, not all metal detectorists are looters and describing them all as such simply creates poor relationships between detectorists and archaeologists. This, in turn, leads to detectorists not reporting finds as they feel unwelcome.

Second, metal detecting laws and procedures in Austria and France have clearly demonstrated that attempts to prevent detecting or make it the preserve of

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<sup>60</sup> Robbins 2014: 74-75.

<sup>61</sup> Taylor 2020: 39.

<sup>62</sup> Robbins 2013a, 2013b, 2014.

<sup>63</sup> Richards et al. 2009.

<sup>64</sup> Brindle 2013, 2014.

<sup>65</sup> Taylor 2014, 2020.

professional archaeologists is futile. Austria in particular clearly demonstrates that detectorists will detect regardless of laws and regulations, only the finds will not be available for study. In effect, refusing to work with detectorists would only be needlessly self-destructive. Archaeologists can foster good working relations with detectorists to the benefit of both parties – as shown by Allen’s work with archaeologists<sup>66</sup> – or they can decry detectorists as looters and nighthawks, whereby detectorists will continue regardless but giving professional archaeologists no opportunity to influence practice or study the finds.

The usefulness of metal detected finds has clear real world implications for funding for projects like the PAS. The PAS is government-funded and so to receive sufficient funds to keep it running needs to be seen as useful to archaeologists and the general public. In 2015, an emergency grant from the Headley Trust charity kept the PAS running after threats to its funding.<sup>67</sup> In addition, Roger Bland, head of the PAS left following a six percent cut being passed on by the British Museum. These things occurred less than a year after the million objects landmark was reached.<sup>68</sup>

Therefore, the importance of metal detected finds has implications far beyond the relationship between detectorists and archaeologists. It is central to funding for schemes such as the PAS, keeping them running and keeping these finds from being lost to both professional archaeologists and the general public.

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<sup>66</sup> Allen 2006.

<sup>67</sup> Kennedy 2015.

<sup>68</sup> Atkinson 2015.



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