

Archaeology, Collectors and Preservation: a Reply to David Gill

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We have become accustomed to assessing both the PAS and Treasure Act in terms of important finds preserved in national collections and the numbers of recorded pieces of information about objects found by members of the public. This however conflates the results of two different processes, the first is accidental finds made by members of the public going about their everyday lives, while the second source of these objects is from the deliberate exploitation of the archaeological record as a source of collectables for entertainment and profit. While the first is wholly uncontroversial, the latter involves a complex of issues connected with the way the archaeological record is treated and managed. David Gill however questions the degree to which a reporting system like TA/PAS prevents damage to the archaeological record from the activities of artefact hunters and collectors. His text is an important contribution to the ongoing wider discussion of these complex and difficult issues.

Preservation

Gill notes that many sites are being exploited as a source of collectables, and whole sites are being robbed out. It is therefore an entirely pertinent question to ask to what degree the entries in the PAS database and acquisitions under the TA are mitigation of damage caused to the archaeological record (not just by information loss) by unrestricted artefact collecting (Barford 2005). A second issue is the degree to which the information retrieved is usable for archaeological purposes. To assess this we need to know to what extent the patterns of reporting reflect patterns of activity of artefact hunters and collectors affecting the archaeological resource.

A fundamental point that needs stressing is that what we call 'metal detecting' is collecting and not any form of archaeology. Artefact hunters are not involved in the search for archaeological information about the sites they search, but treat them as sources of things to collect. How representative is what they recover of what was in the archaeological record? If we look at the database (state at the beginning of October 2010), it has 413,000 records. According to the search engine, these break down as follows: copper alloy 233,500 (an exceptionally high percentage of them coins), lead and lead alloy 18,200, Iron 1,540. A search for eyes-only artefacts (from field-walking) produced 11,000 lithic artefacts and 5,993 ceramic items (550 'tile,' 42 'pottery'), and 75 pieces of slag (see also Bland 2009: 72, fig 6.5). Obviously these are not representative of the artefacts actually present on the sites being searched by these people, and we cannot treat this as any form of recovery of the archaeological evidence from the sites searched (English Heritage 2006). This raises the question of how one can use these reported collectables for any but

the most simple of archaeological analyses. Sadly, it seems from the detecting literature and forums that many of the other metal artefacts dug up but not added to a personal collection or sold (including some that during an excavation would be recognised as archaeological evidence such as casting waste and lead scrap) are regardless removed from the site and disposed of, thus denuding the sites searched in a manner which is totally random and undocumented, affecting then their future usability in surface surveys.

A question of particular importance is that of the numbers and types of archaeological artefacts removed from the archaeological record, but not recorded in the public domain (see Barford 2006a; 2006b; Bland 2006a and 2006b; Barford and Swift in press). Gill mentions the Heritage Action Erosion Counter. There are many indications that a great many finds are not being reported under the present system. Pollard (2009: 183) for example has drawn attention to the fact that the typical sort of material that battlefields produce is not found in the PAS database, but comparatively large amounts of it are identifiable on Internet auction sites. A website allowing UK metal detectorists to show-and-tell the highlights of their collection (the UK Detector Finds Database) currently has some 25,250 artefacts on display ('recorded'), less than 10% of which seem to have been reported to the PAS. Every week several thousand apparently freshly dug-up 'British antiquities' are sold through Internet sites like eBay (not to mention their contribution to 'bulk coin lots' offered by many foreign dealers) many of them the sort of material which should be being reported to the PAS, but in relatively few cases do their sellers indicate to responsible collectors wishing to purchase such items that they have been.

Artefact Hunting as Rescue

Collectors of portable antiquities in general like to emphasise that far from being solely an archaeologically destructive activity, collectors 'save' and 'preserve' portable antiquities. The artefact hunters of England and Wales are no exception. They claim (and some archaeologists concur) that the objects they accumulate are under severe threat from artificial agricultural chemicals and plough damage (Blunt 2005) and this supposedly justifies their wholesale removal from the ground by whatever means. The evidence behind this assessment has however yet to be gathered, and it is interesting to note that many of these artefacts are recovered from soil that has been farmed and fertilised for centuries with the vast majority still in a reasonable state of preservation. Evidence of the overall condition of the non-ferrous and lithic objects visible in the PAS database, and those offered as 'British antiquities' on eBay (or recovered in detecting surveys – Connolly 2007: figs on pp. 98-125) does not support the notion that these processes are occurring to the extent claimed (see Barford and Swift in press: Chapter 11 for a lengthier discussion).

In the case of the hoards which are processed under the Treasure Act (although there are notable exceptions such as the Staffordshire Hoard), many seem to be coming from undisturbed deposits under the ploughsoil (Chiselden Cauldrons, the Frome Hoard and the Vale of York [Harrowgate] Hoard for example). What archaeological justification is there for encouraging their removal from otherwise unthreatened sites? This is

especially the case when we consider all the costs for purchase ('reward') at market value, conservation and further investigation to put them in their proper site context taken into account. Apart from the objects themselves, very rarely in fact do we get any reliable and detailed information about the wider context of the deposition of the object, most finds (despite this being discouraged by the TA's Code of Practice) tend to be dug up wholesale by the finder, sometimes digging into the night or over a period of days, before he reports it. When an investigation is initiated by such a find, it rarely consists of more than a metal detector sweep of the surrounding area and a small hole dug at the find spot, not big enough to locate its relationship to a wider landscape. Soon after the archaeologists have gone, any evidence left undiscovered is no doubt completely disrupted by the metal detector users who then visit the area around the find spot when it becomes known (either legally, that is in an agreement with the freshly-rewarded landowner, or as trespassers) to try their luck.

The scale of the damage to the archaeological record because of the way the current Treasure Act works seems to be on the increase. Gill notes that the media coverage of such finds and the size of the reward are encouraging the use of metal detectors in the fields of England and Wales with the prospect of financial gain and media acclaim. In 2005 there were 600 such finds, by 2007 it had gone up to nearly 800 (Bland 2009: 67, fig. 6.3). Is this due to a 20% increase in metal detector use as a result of publicity of such finds? Is there a non-finite reserve of such treasures in the fields of England, or will we see a drop in number of Treasure finds reported as the resource dries up?

New Information?

Gill asks whether known sites act as focal points for artefact hunting. The answer can be found in many 'how to do it' manuals for the metal detectorist (e.g. Villanueva 2006, 2007; Grove 2010) which describe how to find a so-called 'productive site.' The method basically consists of finding out where archaeological finds have previously been reported (but also predicting from them where other sites may be). There are even commercially available databases, like ARCHI 'the fully-searchable database of the positions of more than 125,000 UK Archaeological sites' compiled in part from searching the contents of archaeological journals and similar sources. As a result, according to the preliminary results of work by Brindle (2007) comparing Roman sites represented in the PAS database with those previously recorded in the Historic Environment Record (HER), in Wiltshire of the 33 Roman sites reported to the PAS, eleven were already recorded in the HER. In Warwickshire, 22 of the 42 sites represented in the PAS database were already known from the HER. In Kent 8 of the 23 sites in the PAS database were previously recorded in the HER. Brindle's work suggests that in some areas of Britain about 40% of the information about the location of sites reaching the PAS from artefact hunters duplicates information already known. In order to put the PAS database into perspective, such studies urgently need repeating for other areas and periods.

A lot of work is currently being done with the PAS database to demonstrate its 'uses' for archaeological research. Much of this however is simplistic typological culture-

historical dot-distribution map-based work which Gustav Kossinna would feel very much at home with. To what extent can the selectivity of these data however support more sophisticated analyses? Ongoing research by Katherine Robbins at Southampton may provide an answer to some of these questions.

Outreach: Scale and Nature

The figures quoted by the PAS (Bland 2009: 71) suggest it is ‘reaching’ the majority of the artefact hunters in the UK (though the discussion tends mainly to focus on those using metal detectors). This is achieved by three mechanisms, the first is when the collectors themselves voluntarily visit their local Finds Liaison Officer (FLO) with things they have found (in the same way as before the PAS existed members of the public had often shown finds to museums). More effective is sending the FLO to venues where there are concentrations of metal detectorists (and other artefact hunters) with many finds to show. Thus an important part of data gathering is visits to metal detecting clubs where the FLO examines what members have brought along to those meetings. Thirdly FLOs travel to the many large and small commercial artefact-hunting rallies up and down the country to record finds extracted from the sites being searched. The involvement of the PAS and other archaeologists in commercial artefact hunting rallies in the UK is highly controversial (Dannell 2008) and at odds with professional codes of ethics (such as that of the IFA) forbidding archaeologists from involvement in commercial activity of this type. It should be noted that the role of collectors’ clubs and rallies as a means of boosting finds record numbers is seldom mentioned by the advocates of other countries adopting a PAS clone-like approach to the archaeological record and collecting. To emulate the PAS numbers would first need the setting up of metal detecting clubs and organizing commercial artefact hunting rallies with all that this entails.

The statistics of ‘metal detectorists offering finds for recording’ offered by the PAS are in this regard therefore somewhat misleading. An artefact hunter who shows one or two recordable items out of the dozens he will find a year at a club meeting or rally, figures in the statistics alongside those who self-record the vast majority of what they find over a year. These numbers therefore give a somewhat false picture of the progress of ‘outreach.’ While the PAS may indeed be ‘meeting’ a large proportion of the (still unknown) number of metal detectorists in England and Wales, it cannot be claimed that in the process they have seen a substantial portion of the material removed by those individuals from the archaeological record week after week, year after year.

It should also be noted that there are regional differences across the UK in the distribution and nature of metal detecting clubs and the manner in which rallies are organized. Many metal detectorists (and most collectors of other artefact types) do not belong to any organized clubs or attend rallies and are thus outside the reach of ‘outreach’ and statistics compiled on this basis. These are among the factors which affect the degree to which the PAS database is in any way representative of what is being taken from the archaeological record of England and Wales by collectors.

In order to secure continued funding, the PAS has a vested interest in representing the ‘vast majority’ of artefact hunters in England and Wales as being ‘responsible’ and bringing finds to the PAS for recording (or potentially so, if enough resources were put into the ‘outreach’ to them), and demonstrating the benefits (in terms of numbers of finds made and what we can learn from them) of collaboration with them. It is however very clear that to persuade these secretive people to come forward and report ever-larger numbers of finds, the PAS has had to adopt a softly-softly non-judgemental approach to artefact hunting and collecting. This seriously hinders its ability to be rigorous in its approach to defining what is and is not ‘best practice’ in artefact hunting and collecting. Observation of the interaction of the PAS with metal detector users (in particular on metal detecting forums and through their own forum when they had one) shows clearly that the PAS has a concept of ‘outreach’ that basically is to encourage the flow of data to its database and avoid saying or doing anything that might disrupt that.

Legitimisation of Collecting

Artefact hunters and collectors in turn grasp this opportunity with alacrity, and in return for ‘supporting the Scheme’ (providing substantial numbers of dug-up finds to record) expect it to function as a means to protect their hobby from criticism, providing arguments for its justification and continuation as well as lending it an air of responsibility and legitimacy. To an extent this is exactly what happens, and the PAS is now seen as a ‘partner’ of artefact hunting and collecting (Clark 2008) and a collector-friendly mediator between artefact hunters and the Establishment which at times puts it in an intolerably awkward situation. It has to be said that collectors tend to treat the PAS somewhat instrumentally, including what amounts to a denial of its overriding purpose to mitigate the archaeological damage done by artefact hunting failing to attain the standards of best practice. As one detectorist put it in the opening speech of a 2005 conference on ‘Building Bridges,’

I want to send a clear message to all these bureaucrats, ‘get off our case’ and leave the responsible hobby alone. Attempts to inflict archaeological controls prevent serious co-operation [...] we will, not tolerate meddling in the hobby or the Scheme. (Austin 2009: 121-2)

One rather wonders what sort of co-operation he had in mind. Part of the trouble here is that in artefact hunting the sole measure of ‘responsibility’ when examined more closely often can be broken down into ‘we are not all nighthawks’ (trespassing artefact hunters). This ignores a whole series of issues about the difference between merely legal and fully ethical in terms of the conservation and sustainable management of the archaeological record.

Public Perception

Another important issue is the manner in which archaeology’s largest outreach scheme to the general public (the PAS) is affecting public perceptions in Britain (and beyond) of archaeology, the archaeological record, and the need for its preservation from uncontrolled damage and unsustainable exploitation.

As a means of protection of the archaeological resource, the Treasure Act is not only supremely badly named, but promotes the view among public and lawmakers that ‘the only things that matter’ are things like shiny treasure objects of gold and silver. The media coverage accompanying each important find acquired for the nation (or the release of another PAS Annual Report) can inevitably do little else than promote a picture of the discipline of archaeology as little more than glorified treasure hunt for such glittery treasures worth a lot of money or cutesy figurines and other attractive objects with ‘an interesting story to tell.’ Anyone can make up a story, and the PAS may fairly be accused at times of representing archaeology as something that can be done by buying a metal detector and learning how to use it. At a time of financial stringencies the question, ‘in which case, what do we need archaeologists for?’ is not without significance.

In other countries what is happening in the fields of England under archaeologists’ noses is called ‘looting.’ The British public is told however that artefact hunters are the ‘unsung heroes of the UK’s heritage’ (e.g. Kennedy 2007), which totally negates any efforts that other archaeologists may attempt to make to convince the public that the archaeological record is fragile and finite and should be cherished and used in a sustainable manner for future generations to enjoy. It is of course on this premise that the whole of developer funding is based. Kennedy’s article for example, in one of the ‘serious’ newspapers, ends with a section on ‘fabulous places to hunt.’

At the same time this same mode of outreach, which condones and maybe even encourages private artefact collecting instead of condemning it, stifles any real public debate in Britain on the topic as a whole, which prevents the general public being made aware of the full range of portable antiquity collecting and heritage issues of growing concern in the archaeological world these days. There is an obvious connection between this and the disturbing amounts of potentially illicitly obtained material from all over the ancient world being openly traded in Britain, most frequently with no questions being asked.

The Future

Britain’s current approach to portable heritage issues (as archaeology in general) is incredibly ad hoc. The PAS serves to allow national policies of artefact hunting *laissez faire* (and is the only thing which absolves Britain from a massive overhaul of the heritage protection legislation in this regard). It is disturbing then that, as an afterthought to the creation of the Treasure Act, it does not even have an existence guaranteed by law and currently limps along from one financial crisis to the next, shedding staff and essential functions.

Gill urges that changes are needed in the legislation of England and Wales in the manner of definition of the finds that should be acquired for public collections. It is clear that the criterion adopted should be that of archaeological and cultural significance rather than one based as at present on precious metal content. Found accidentally today, objects such as the Vindolanda tablets, Folkton Drums, or Lewis Chessmen would not have

fallen under the scope of the Treasure Act any more than the Crosby Garrett Helmet did, and yet are undeniably worthy of the status of national treasures.

Perhaps now that the PAS has already established rapport with a substantial number of the artefact hunters in England and Wales, there is a logical solution to ensuring it an independent and legally guaranteed permanent function within the British heritage management system. This solution would also need to create conditions for the staffing levels which the PAS needs to record the vast number of finds current British policies are allowing to be removed from the archaeological record, and to give members of the general public greater access to the evidence of the past of their regions. This would be through a revision of the Treasure Act making the reporting of all found archaeological material legally obligatory (as in Scotland), and through legislation empowering the PAS, with the aid of its finds consultants, to determine what is and isn't 'Treasure' (but please can we lose the name?) on archaeological grounds, which should then be acquired by the nation in the established manner, with the rest returning to the finder and landowner. Freed from the necessity to cajole secretive finders to show what they have taken from the ground, it could at last start pressing more vigorously for better practice among artefact hunters. Although costly, it is the logical consequence of what the PAS has shown over the past thirteen years to be the effects and needs of current British policies on artefact collecting.

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