

NOTES AND REVIEWS

Building bridges on Tyneside, June 2005

Suzie Thomas

'Buried Treasure: Building Bridges' was a one-day conference co-organized by the International Centre for Cultural and Heritage Studies at Newcastle University, Tyne and Wear Museums Service and the Portable Antiquities Scheme¹ (PAS). The attendance figure for the event was just short of 50.

Like the 'All that Glitters ...' conference in Cardiff in 2003, among others, it was arranged to run alongside the British Museum's touring exhibition 'Buried Treasure', during the exhibition's leg at the Hancock Museum. This exhibition was curated by British Museum staff, and aimed to display some of the most significant finds in England and Wales made by members of the public, and discuss the impact of these finds on the archaeological record. It had already been exhibited in London, Cardiff and Manchester and, after Newcastle, went to Norwich. Naturally, a key theme of the exhibition was that of the PAS and its objectives. Most of the items on display (such as the Mildenhall Treasure and the Hoxne Hoard) had high gold and/or silver content, and were nationally famous, although the exhibition did attempt to emphasize the value of 'treasure' as knowledge of the past rather than the money that could be gained by selling such items. While touring the exhibition nationally one of the aims was to run relevant events alongside it, hence the staging of 'Buried Treasure: Building Bridges'.

The conference was open to anyone, but particularly to archaeologists and metal-detector users, with the hope of creating a forum for debate between these two groups. To increase accessibility, the event was staged on a Saturday and conference

fees were kept to an absolute minimum. To encourage attendance from metal-detector users, local metal-detecting clubs in the northeast were even invited to display some of their finds at the conference, which several did, bringing their own display cases and a range of metal finds ranging from the Anglo-Saxon period to modern material.

The hobby of metal detecting has had a significant impact on archaeology in the UK as a whole, and has generated differing opinions among archaeologists and heritage professionals since its emergence as a major hobby in the 1970s (e.g. Dobinson and Denison, 1995). Initial reactions to the perceived threat of metal detecting to archaeology included national campaigns such as 'STOP' (Stop Taking Our Past), launched in 1980 by the Council for British Archaeology, Rescue (the British Archaeological Trust), the Museums Association and four other leading heritage and conservation organizations. Although the campaign eventually ran out of momentum, it reflected alarm in the archaeological profession at the prospect of amateurs with metal detectors combing archaeological sites for finds.

Indeed, even though the situation is somewhat different at the present time, with governmental support for the PAS, an unprecedented increase in reported finds (Museums Libraries and Archives Council (MLA), 2005: 7) and increases in cooperation and communication between archaeologists and bodies representing metal detecting, there remain very apparent tensions between archaeology and the metal-detecting hobby, which are discussed below.

Conferences similar to 'Buried Treasure: Building Bridges' have taken place in other parts of the country to look at the issue of metal detecting, such as the above-mentioned 'All that Glitters ...' conference in Cardiff, and PAS annual conferences in London, but this was, to the author's knowledge, the first time that this type of event had taken place in the northeast of England. This meant that, for local people interested in this topic, an opportunity was afforded for the first time for them to come together to discuss metal detecting and archaeology without having to travel a great distance to the south of the country.

The conference Aims and Objectives were as follows.

Aims

- 1 To support actively the Portable Antiquities Scheme and similar projects.
- 2 To promote the ongoing cooperation between archaeologists, museum professionals and academic researchers in the field (hereafter called heritage professionals) and members of the public actively engaging with archaeology, especially metal-detector users.
- 3 To demonstrate the importance of working together to record the information surrounding finds.
- 4 To demonstrate the current initiatives which promote cooperation between the public and heritage professionals, and which benefit from its results both on a national and a local level.

Objectives

- 1 To present information from not only heritage professionals but also metal-detector users.
- 2 To provide speakers from different backgrounds both on a local and a national level.
- 3 To provide delegates with an opportunity to view the touring exhibition 'Buried Treasure' at the Hancock Museum.
- 4 To provide a forum for delegates and speakers to engage in debate on the subject.
- 5 To provide local metal-detecting clubs with an opportunity to showcase recent finds.

It was decided, on this occasion, to focus on England and Wales, because Scottish and Northern Irish provisions in the law for portable antiquities differ, and because PAS only operates in England and Wales. It was also the intention to maintain a focus on local issues.

Lord Redesdale (member of the House of Lords and Secretary of the All Party Parliamentary Archaeology Group) chaired the event, in which six papers were presented that looked at the relationships between archaeologists and metal-detector users on both a local and a national level, and at the wider themes of community archaeology.

The morning session was dedicated mostly to national issues, with the last paper before lunch and the afternoon papers focusing on specific examples pertinent to the north of England. After Lord Redesdale's opening remarks, Roger Bland, Director of the Portable Antiquities Scheme, began by looking at the origins of PAS with the reform of the law of Treasure in the Treasure Act. He discussed how it has developed over the last eight years and described the plans to develop the project over the years ahead.

The second speaker was Trevor Austin, the General Secretary of the National Council for Metal Detecting. In a paper titled 'The Sword of Damocles', he described the level of responsibility practised by most metal-detector users, their genuine interest in the past, and called on the archaeological community to be more open to discussion and to collaboration on projects with metal-detecting groups.

The final talk before lunch was by Faye Simpson, about an important site discovery with which she was involved while working as Finds Liaison Officer (FLO) for PAS for the Lancashire and Cumbria region. Cumwhitton, Cumbria, was the site of the first Viking cemetery of its kind found in England, and was excavated after a detector find was reported to the Portable Antiquities Scheme, resulting in a significant improvement of understanding of Viking presence and activities in northwest England.

During the lunch break participants were offered a guided tour of the 'Buried Treasure' exhibition, led by Steve Mclean, Curator of the Hancock Museum.

After lunch Philippa Walton and Dot Bruns, at the time the FLOs for the Northeast, and for Lancashire and Cumbria, respectively, made a joint presentation on experiences, successes and challenges in their regions. Next, Julian D. Richards of the University of York, described 'The Real Value of Buried Treasure – VASLE: the Viking and Anglo-Saxon Landscape and Economy project'. He explained how data collected via the Portable Antiquities Scheme were being used through the VASLE project to make a significant contribution to understanding the development of Anglo-Saxon and Viking Age landscape and economy, c. AD 700–1000.

The final speaker of the day was Elanor Johnson of Northumberland National Park, who talked about the Upper Coquetdale Community Archaeology Project, which, though in its infancy, was proving to be a very successful means by which local people in that part of Northumberland were able to become involved with researching and accessing their local heritage. Although Johnson's presentation did not specifically address metal detecting, it demonstrated the many ways in which the public can engage with the past through community archaeology, and offers were even made on the day by some conference participants to contribute to the Upper Coquetdale project with metal-detecting surveys.

The intended emphasis of the event was not that metal detecting was acceptable in all cases, but that metal detecting carried out responsibly and with communication with archaeologists can and does make a valuable contribution to the archaeological record. Lord Redesdale even called on the metal-detector users present to exercise further responsibility by reporting to the authorities any incidents of 'nighthawking' (illicit metal detecting) of which they were aware, in the interests of protecting the reputation of their hobby as a whole, as well as protecting vulnerable archaeology. Many of the papers also emphasized the value to knowledge about the past that metal detecting can contribute when practised responsibly, by reporting finds and recording finds spots to acceptable standards.

Of the participants attending, the majority were from northeastern metal-detecting clubs, with most archaeologists and academics attending being either the speakers themselves or MA students and local

amateur archaeological society members. The low turnout by archaeologists may have been a result of the location, as travel to Newcastle from other parts of the country may have been considered too costly (although conference fees were kept very low). Another factor for this minimal representation of archaeologists may have been the number of negative comments provoked by the conference announcement on discussion forums such as the Britarch² discussion list – an email discussion forum provided online by the Council for British Archaeology. (It is important to point out at this stage that not all messages posted on the subject of this conference were negative, but certainly a high proportion were.) Emailed arguments about the conference focused in particular on the choice of title, as the term 'treasure' was seen as contentious. Some contributors also expressed concern about the potential for the conference to be simply a vehicle for 'propaganda' in favour of metal detecting while ignoring issues important to archaeologists. This, of course, was not the intention of this conference, but the debates online were observed with interest by the conference organizers. In addition, wider issues were raised, including the ethics of some of the corporate sponsors of the 'Buried Treasure' touring exhibition, and also the content of both the exhibition and accompanying website.³ It was something of a disappointment, therefore, given the liveliness of the debate online and the clearly strongly held views, that few archaeologists were present on the day to discuss their concerns with the other conference participants.

In the closing remarks, a number of issues were raised. Of particular interest to participants seemed to be the role of DEFRA (Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs), suggesting that it would be appropriate to invite delegates and even a speaker from DEFRA to future events. In the county of Northumberland in particular, it appeared that gaining landowners' permission to search areas was a significant challenge for metal-detecting clubs. Participants were in agreement, however, that the day had been very productive and that it should not be a one-off event. Other feedback suggested that it would have been of interest to hear a presentation from a local metal-detector user. In fact, a number of clubs had been

invited to send a speaker, but all declined on this occasion. This did not seem to dissuade local metal-detector users from coming to the conference, perhaps out of curiosity. It is possible that for future conferences they would be more willing to participate in this way, given the positive reactions from metal-detector users present on the day. In addition, some feedback suggested that there would be interest in hearing about issues for metal detecting and archaeology in other countries. It is therefore hoped that similar conferences will run again in the northeast, especially given the positive reaction it received from the local metal-detecting community. In addition, it is to be hoped that more archaeologists will attend future conferences on this subject.

ENDNOTES

1. The Portable Antiquities Scheme operates across all regions of England and Wales, and is a voluntary scheme to encourage members of the public, particularly metal-detector users, to declare archaeological finds to be recorded on the Finds Database. The PAS only operates across England (including the Isle of Wight) and Wales, because Scotland, Northern Ireland and the UK Crown Dependencies (Isle of Man and the Channel Islands) have different legislation and policies regarding chance archaeological finds. Further information about the PAS and the database can be found at <http://www.finds.org.uk>.
2. The discussion archives are available online at <http://www.jiscmail.ac.uk/lists/britarch.html>

(accessed 18 April 2006). For discussions relevant to 'Buried Treasure: Building Bridges' see the archives for May 2005.

3. Available at <http://www.thebritishmuseum.ac.uk/buriedtreasure/> (accessed 18 April 2006).

Suzie Thomas is a part-time PhD student at the International Centre for Cultural and Heritage Studies (ICCHS), Newcastle University (<http://www.ncl.ac.uk/icchs>). Her research title is 'The relationships between archaeologists and metal detector users in England and Wales: impact of the past and implications for the future'. She also is a visiting lecturer for Northumbria University; works intermittently at Bede's World museum in Jarrow; participates in MA teaching at ICCHS; and is a research assistant in Newcastle University's Historical Studies Department. Suzie has previously worked in several English museums, and has a BA in Archaeology and Prehistory, and a MA in Heritage Education and Interpretation. **Contact address:** ICCHS, Bruce Building, Newcastle University, Newcastle upon Tyne, NE1 7RU. E-mail: s.e.thomas@ncl.ac.uk

REFERENCES

- Dobinson, C. and Denison, S. *Metal Detecting and Archaeology in England*. Council for British Archaeology and English Heritage, <http://www.britarch.ac.uk/detecting/cont.html> (1995) (accessed 11 February 2006).
- Museums Libraries and Archives Council (MLA) *Portable Antiquities Annual Report 2004–2005*. http://www.finds.org.uk/documents/PAS_2004_05.pdf (2005) (accessed 15 April 2006).