

1. Introduction

Like most other countries, Scotland has a system and law in place to deal with chance finds of artefacts by members of the public. This article will not discuss the minutiae, details, or processes of the [Scottish system](#) since that information is already in the public domain. What will be discussed are those aspects and issues less evident from press statements or annual reports, often issues that professional archaeologists are happy to discuss among their peers, but less happy to put in print. These may best be summed up as the challenges and difficulties of taking the principles of any system that is designed to work for the public good and actually putting them into practice. These are perhaps issues that are apparent the furthest away one is from the centralised, managerial structure of a government heritage body. On the other hand recognising and dealing with these issues will be a frequent experience for those who engage directly with the public; such problems are then certainly of interest and perhaps more important than the fine print and protocols of a particular system. Significantly, the majority of discussions of systems to deal with portable antiquities deal only with the substance of the law and with what happens to an object once it has been reported to the relevant authorities. By way of contrast, this article will discuss the factors in play before an object has been reported, or even discovered.

At the same time this article will attempt to capture sentiments and statements that are commonly expressed in media and fora other than peer-reviewed journals and conferences, sometimes personally to the author. These are the opinions and perceptions of members of the public, by and large comprising metal-detector users whom the author interacts with on a daily basis. In Scotland, it is only relatively recently that metal-detector users have made a sustained impression on the archaeological record. The success of the [Portable Antiquities Scheme](#) (PAS) in England and Wales has meant this group is very much in the thoughts of the archaeological profession, but it is instructive to reflect—in Scotland, as in other jurisdictions—how quickly this change has taken place. A glance through the archives demonstrates how rapidly the assorted cast of dog walkers, gravediggers and farmers who made up the ranks of chance finders has been comprehensibly replaced by a relatively homogeneous group, with specific needs and expectations. An essential aspect is the manner in which archaeologists have adapted—or less helpfully, reacted—to this change. It is not merely the case that there has been a wholesale shift in how chance archaeological finds are made and by whom, but also in how archaeologists perceive both finds and their finders. Taken together, these issues and expectations are also a useful nexus at which concepts such as the private ownership or sale of artefacts are often raised, and notions of morality can be called into play as often as legality.



Figure 1: Like the Rorschach ink blot test a subject's immediate reaction to a common archaeological find might be most telling. Is it a museum display or a curio for the mantelpiece, a source of new archaeological information or a viable commodity? © Crown Copyright

Overall, some of these issues and problems may be particular to Scotland, others to the UK, while others may have resonance further afield, some perhaps limited by legislative practice while others may be universal issues surrounding public engagement. A particular aspect is that Scotland operates a distinct system for portable antiquities, while remaining part of a unitary state where the law regarding ownership of finds can be very different. While the law is distinct there are also wider cultural influences, which can differ in expectations regarding who should possess such items and how they are valued. How such objects are treated in law may not accord with popular conceptions of what should happen. This is not as simplistic as hazarding that a finder might not obey the law because they disagree with it, but rather they may not be aware they have to obey it, because value judgements as to what is significant or 'valuable'—and therefore what must, legally, be reported—may be completely different.

Thus this article will deal in detail with relationships between metal-detector users and archaeologists; this is a topic which has been covered elsewhere, and the intention is not to go over old ground, but rather take a more considered approach to the rewards and challenges of working with metal-detector users from the point of view of a heritage professional. The main source for this article will be the experience of the author over the last ten years working in the [Treasure Trove Unit](#), both on policy and in outreach activity, with metal-detector users. This approach will be perhaps more anecdotal and personal, but it is very necessary. Archaeologists may like to think of artefact studies as objective, and certainly when an object is secured in a museum with a provenance and associated assurances the case may seem very simple indeed. What is lacking in such a consideration are the other circumstances surrounding discovery, and they can make the reality much less tidy. A useful analogy might be to the process of archaeological excavation; every archaeologist is aware of the processes and inherent limitations of excavation and factor this into their assessment of the objects recovered. They should be equally aware of the processes by which a chance find makes its way into a museum or database, and the cultural and social factors that influence the circumstances of discovery and reporting.

While the popularity of metal detecting may seem a new development, it is worth putting this into context; what may surprise many archaeologists is that as a hobby it is around 50 years old (Addyman [2009](#), 51-3). While many archaeologists might feel alarmed by objects being found outside their control, this circumstance by itself is hardly novel. When considering the collections of most museums it is obvious that a considerable proportion are not objects found by archaeologists, but rather are those found by chance. A case in point is the significant collections of medieval hoards held by the [National Museums Scotland](#), all of which were found by either gravediggers or agricultural workers in the later 19th century. To this haul can be added (from the same institution) the Torrs Chamfrain,

the Croy and Norrie's Law hoards, and the Deskford carnyx. Whatever the controversies of metal detecting, that objects are being found in ways beyond the control of archaeologists is nothing new. Nevertheless, it must also be said that the advent of metal detecting has meant that chance finds are not quite made by chance, and that they are being discovered by a group with a specific culture, ethos and needs. As will be seen below, the greatest influence on the Scottish system for portable antiquities has been this shift in circumstance and it is questionable whether existing systems anywhere could cope with this change without adapting to meet it.

Such adaptations are themselves part of what the author would characterise as an obligation for archaeologists to engage and ameliorate 'real world' impacts on the archaeological record, which they are powerless to halt. A useful analogy might be with the 'rescue' movement of the 1970s, an attempt to protect the archaeological record from becoming collateral damage in the face of increasing development and construction (Rahtz [1974](#)). This is not to say that metal detecting is an intrinsically destructive activity (although some caveats might apply) but rather that archaeologists have in the past proved able to change methodologies and approaches to meet such challenges. In that sense engaging with metal-detector users is a necessity rather than an option.

To the general public and metal-detector users, archaeological concerns might look like professional jealousy or, as one metal detectorist put it to the author, a worry that an individual with no formal qualifications and a metal detector can apparently find more than an archaeologist with formal qualifications and experience. Many archaeologists will have their own variation on this experience and within this one misconception a considerable proportion of the problems and difficulties lie. Firstly, it demonstrates the misunderstanding of what archaeology is on the part of many metal-detector users, but it is exacerbated by a misunderstanding of what metal detecting is on the part of many archaeologists.

So far, perhaps, so familiar, but the familiarity of many issues is part of the problem; that they have repeatedly been aired over the last few years suggests that they have not been solved. Some might object that the work of the PAS has resolved many issues, as indeed it has. Nevertheless, it is instructive how many of the problems raised in earlier volumes are still problematic; Tim Schadla-Hall's comments about finders 'still' putting coins in cola to clean them is instructive (Schadla-Hall [2006](#), 38). Finders 'still' do, and much worse besides, and it seems fair to ask why this might be.

To return to an earlier point, archaeologists are quite right to be concerned by objects discovered outwith their control, although sometimes these concerns have been communicated rather poorly. These concerns are nothing to do with professional jealousy and everything to do with the information that might be lost if objects are cleaned, or other finds discarded as the finder did not recognise their importance. However, no archaeologist with a public remit should assume such concerns will automatically be recognised or understood. The larger public debates around such issues tend to reflect an obsession with objects themselves rather than the cultural value of the object or what can be learned from it. If outreach has been successful in many areas in actually getting finders to report their finds, then it should also deal with the underlying issues, which still have the potential to cause difficulties.

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