

Archaeologists and Metal Detector Users: Unlikely Bedfellows? The Durobrivae (Water Newton) Metal Detecting Rally

Suzie Thomas, PhD Candidate, International Centre for Cultural and Heritage Studies, Newcastle University. s.e.thomas@ncl.ac.uk

INTRODUCTION

Archaeology and metal detecting are not always comfortable bedfellows. In the United Kingdom this is particularly relevant, where not only are there many metal artefacts in the archaeological record, but also where the legal controls affecting metal detecting are less stringent than in many other European countries (NCMD 2005). Largely due to events in the 1970s and 1980s, metal detecting is not only normally a legal activity (although illegal metal detecting occurs too), but also has quite a political lobbying capacity due to the formation of national representative bodies.

From doctoral research by the author into the relationships between archaeologists and metal detector users in England and Wales, it has become clear that attitudes towards this relationship, held both by archaeologists and metal detector users, vary greatly. Traditionally relationships have been problematic between archaeology and metal detecting, stemming from initial archaeological outrage at the promotion of metal detectors for treasure hunting from the late 1960s onwards (Hopkirk 1969: np). In more recent times however, there have been increased efforts to promote co-operation rather than antagonism. For example, the Portable Antiquities Scheme (PAS), active throughout England and Wales since 1997, engages with chance finders of archaeological material, especially metal detector users (PAS 2007). Other examples exist of archaeologists and metal detector users working together on specific projects. There are several community archaeology projects in the UK where metal detector users have taken part, alongside other members of the public (Isherwood, *pers. comm.*, 9th October 2007). Yet there is evidence of discord still existing between both parties. A glance at many online discussion forums will reveal individual archaeologists demonstrating strong disapproval of even metal detector users who are perceived as responsible. Personal communications with metal detecting club members has also revealed considerable mistrust of archaeologists by some metal detector users, exasperated by a feeling that they are not yet fully respected by archaeologists, often based on first hand experiences.

To a certain extent this mistrust is at least partially understandable on the part of archaeologists, with a number of well-documented instances of nighthawking of known archaeological sites. "Nighthawking" is the term used for metal detector users operating illegally, for example knowingly looting protected sites or trespassing on private land. Such instances include Corbridge, in Northumberland which had a spate of nighthawking closely documented in the mid 1990s, and which now employs a security guard at night (Dobinson and Denison 1995), and Wanborough in Surrey, a Romano-British temple site, which experienced large scale looting in the 1980s (Thomas, 2005). Oxford Archaeology is currently conducting research into the extent of nighthawking at present (2007), their results are awaited with interest.

METAL DETECTING RALLIES

Metal detecting is a popular hobby in the UK, with upwards of 200 metal detecting clubs and societies in England and Wales alone. One type of event that seems to prove popular among metal detector users is the metal detecting rally. These are organised meetings, usually over a weekend, where large numbers, often hundreds, of metal detector users convene to search over a specific area of land, with permission obtained beforehand by the rally organiser. Some metal detecting rallies are run as a business, known as *commercial rallies*, where the organiser and (usually) the landowner will make a significant profit from the charge made to rally participants. *Charity rallies* also take place, where the money raised is for a charitable cause.

For a number of reasons, metal detecting rallies are a cause for concern to the archaeological community. Although representatives of the PAS are usually present to record finds (although rallies also take place where such staff are not present), the percentage of finds actually recorded in this way is acknowledged to be small. This is partly because recording of finds is voluntary (except in instances of Treasure under the Treasure Act 1996¹), meaning that rally participants can legally choose not to record anything if they wish, and can exercise selectivity in what they do choose to record. Another cause for concern is that rally sites are often chosen based on likely productivity in order to attract participants, and while scheduled archaeological sites are protected under the Ancient Monuments and Archaeological Areas Act 1979, the area immediately around the scheduled area, likely to produce relevant material, is not protected. Popular rallies organised at locations such as Thornborough (close by to a scheduled henge monument), and Snape (adjacent to a medieval castle – Figure 1), both in North Yorkshire, demonstrate the attractiveness to metal detector users of searching such areas.



Figure 1 Camp site at Snape metal detecting rally (September 2006), with Snape Castle in the background. Photo: Suzie Thomas

¹ Under the Treasure Act 1996 certain archaeological material in England and Wales are Crown property, and their discovery must be reported. Categories affected include gold or silver over 300 years old, and prehistoric metal items. For summary see http://www.finds.org.uk/treasure/treasure_summary.php [accessed 29th November 2007].

The proximity of the Durobrivae (Water Newton) metal detecting rally in August 2007 to the Roman town of Durobrivae (Connolly 2007: 1), near Peterborough in Cambridgeshire, was again an attractive proposition for the 324 participating metal detectorists. The rally organiser even claimed that he could have sold upwards of 600 tickets based on the demand (Smith *pers. comm.* 28th July 2007). This rally was also significant because it was selected to be featured on “The One Show”, a primetime BBC1 magazine television series featuring events and stories from across the country. Thus extensive publicity was generated around the event and fact that archaeologists and metal detector users were to be working together.

METHODS USED

A consultant archaeologist was brought in to work alongside the rally organisers. This was done partly as a result of political repercussions of the planned rally, including a short-notice change of rally location, all which are largely still the subject of sensitive debate, and are not discussed at any depth in this paper. A project design was developed to carry out archaeological fieldwork alongside the rally, utilising the metal detector users themselves (Connolly 2007). It was hoped that the land that was selected for the rally, although not the initial choice of area, could potentially reveal a lot of information about the area surrounding the known settlement site, through the recovery of metal artefacts from disturbed plough-soil (Connolly 2007: 3).

The recording method used was extremely simple, but potentially very effective. All metal detector users were to be armed with numbered plastic bags and corresponding flags, the idea being that each time a find was made; it would be bagged with the bag’s unique number written on the flag, which was left to mark out the find spot. Archaeologists, many of whom were student volunteers from Newcastle University, then followed the detector users, collecting the flags and recording their locations using GPS devices (Figure 2). The metal detector users were then expected to hand over their numbered finds bags to the team of identification specialists, including county archaeologists and PAS staff, to be returned to them after the identifications had been made and noted. Using the GPS recordings gave an accurate distribution of the finds.



Figure 2 Newcastle University archaeology student taking a GPS recording of a find spot (marked with a small flag, bottom left). Photo: Suzie Thomas

The author was invited to attend the weekend as part of her doctoral research, a section of which has involved questionnaire surveys of metal detector users at metal detecting rallies. In addition, given the unusual nature of the rally, a stand-alone evaluation of the weekend from the perspective of a community archaeology project was carried out. In this case, the “community” with whom the archaeologists were engaging were metal detector users, as opposed to a local geographical community. As Connolly (*in prep*) evaluates the metal detecting rally through analysis of the archaeological data, the intention of this evaluation was to focus on the individuals involved, aiming to measure the extent to which this “community” felt it was engaging with archaeology, or indeed whether it was aware of what was being attempted. Given the history of tensions between archaeology and metal detecting, it was of interest to record the perspectives held by the metal detector users about the rally and the archaeological methods being employed.

Isherwood (*in prep.*) suggests that ethnographic methods are well suited to the observation and evaluation of community archaeology projects. A number of ethnographic methods – questionnaires, informal interviews and field observation – were employed, to ensure triangulation (Hammersley 1990: 84).

The questionnaires, already devised for the author’s PhD research, had extra questions specific to this rally added to them, combining “closed questions”, providing quantifiable and non-biased results (Fowler 1993: 56), with more qualitative questions. These were included in the questionnaires, in order to gain more detailed information on certain issues leading out of the closed (yes/no) answers. A sample of participants were asked whether or not they noticed anything different about this rally compared to others that they had attended, and if so, what. Particular to this research exercise was the issue of whether or not the increased archaeological presence was noticeable to participants, and whether or not they were particularly aware of the “bags and flags” system that was underway. They were then asked if they viewed the archaeological presence as a positive or a negative aspect of the weekend, and asked to explain the reason for their answers. These questions provided both qualitative and quantitative data for use in evaluation. Additionally, a smaller sample of metal detector users was further interviewed informally. The interviews were deliberately left unstructured, but led out of issues raised during the questionnaire survey and other informal conversations. This followed O’Reilly’s (2005: 148) guidelines for an “ethnographic interview”, where directed questions may first be used to lead to “more informal discussions later”, based on the initial information from the more directed questions, in this case, the questionnaire contents. Other people involved with the rally, including the farm manager and PAS staff, were also interviewed in a freestyle manner as opportunities presented themselves over the rally weekend, in order to gain their impressions of the event. Verbal consent to use the recorded interviews for research purposes was recorded along with each interview.

The Newcastle University students kept field notes, in which they were asked to record their observations and impressions of the weekend. This not only recorded the students’ impressions about the weekend (including whether the metal detecting rally met with their preconceptions or not), but also any specific incidents that had appeared significant to the students at the time. These field notes, while useful, were more limited than those made in more extensive ethnographic research exercises due to time constraints. For example, the students received only one briefing meeting

about their assignment prior to the metal detecting rally, and far less time was spent among the subject group than would usually be allotted. O'Reilly (2005: 93), for example, observes that anthropologists "often advocate spending at least a year among the group", rather than, in this case, albeit unavoidably, one weekend.

EVALUATION RESULTS

The complete questionnaires are currently being further analysed. However, the questions added specifically to the Water Newton questionnaires are included here. Of 324 participants, 75 were targeted over the weekend by the questionnaire survey. This gave a sample of 23%, but was all that was possible due to time constraints over the weekend. The quantitative results could be tabulated, whereas the qualitative could be generally divided into types of responses, but also individually cited where appropriate using an "evocative" or "illustrative" approach (Mason 2002: 176).

Question 10: Do you view this rally as particularly different to others that you have attended?

	Question 10
Yes	38
No	35
Did not answer	2
Sample Total	75
<i>Population Total</i>	324

This indicated a very close split, with two respondents failing to answer. Of the respondents that responded "yes", who were then asked Question 11 (**If yes, in what ways do you think it seems different to other rallies?**), 11 (30% of "yes", 15% of the total sample) identified the higher archaeological presence with the enhanced recording system as the reason why they felt that the rally was different. Other reasons cited included general comments about the size or organisation of the rally in comparison to other metal detecting rallies, and a small number (6) commented on the short notice change in location of the rally area as a problematic aspect.

Question 12: Do you regard the presence of archaeologists here as positive or negative?

	Question 12
Positive	65
Negative	6
Neither or both	4
Sample Total	75
<i>Population Total</i>	324

"Neither or both" signified where the respondent chose not to answer, or felt that there were both positive and negative aspects to the archaeological presence. Some 87% felt that the archaeological presence was a positive aspect to the event. When asked to explain their answer to Question 12 in Question 13, 36 (48%) cited the importance of working together with archaeologists as their main reason why their

presence was positive. A further 18 (24%) felt that the archaeologists were useful for the identification and recording of their finds. Of the negative responses, the politics immediately beforehand were cited as a problem, and some felt that archaeologists were interfering with the rally by being there at all.

To summarise the informal interviews: nine metal detector users were interviewed; as well as the farm manager; the finds specialists (the County Archaeologist and two employees of the Portable Antiquities Scheme) and the consultant archaeologist brought in by the rally organisers. The interviews with the metal detector users revealed that not only were some still suspicious of the motives of archaeologists (and thus potentially reluctant to co-operate too much for fear of then losing access to land through scheduling, for example, the system by which archaeological sites are identified for legal protection), but they also regarded the event as an opportunity for archaeologists to learn more about metal detecting, rather than for themselves to become better acquainted with archaeological techniques. That said, many of the archaeologists interviewed did comment on the fact that more finds were being brought forward for recording than would normally be expected at a rally where no extra archaeological work was being carried out. However, it was unclear initially whether this indicated more metal detector users bringing finds forward, or just the same proportion as usual bringing forward more of their actual finds rather than being selective in what they showed the archaeologists.

Nighthawking was not seen specifically by any of the participants, although the author was “gifted” a “nighthawk torch” that one of the metal detector users had discovered in an adjacent field (Figure 3). The interview with the farm manager also revealed that nighthawks had hit the fields in the area in the past, and that he effectively saw staging the rally as a way of deterring subsequent nighthawks.



Figure 3 "nighthawk torch" discovered at Durobrivae (Water Newton) metal detecting rally. The flashlight is red, so as not to stand out in the dark to potential onlookers. Photo: Suzie Thomas

The field notes kept by the students reflected the issue of finds selectivity as well. A number of students observed metal detector users in the field who were unsure of whether to bother marking the find spots for small artefacts such as musket balls and even flint artefacts. Two students observed a negative incident between the consultant archaeologist and two hostile metal detector users, who seemed completely uninterested in engaging with the archaeologists (or archaeology itself as a concept), and were unimpressed with the organisation of the recording system (Jackson 2007

and Fail 2007). However another noted how some metal detector users that had been unwilling to take part in the using of bags and flags at the start of the rally were very eagerly recording their find spots by the last day (Guthrie 2007). The practical drawbacks with the bags and flags system, largely a result of preparation issues ahead of the rally, were picked up on by all the students, echoing comments from the other archaeologists interviewed. Certainly some aspects could have organised more clearly, for example making sure that participants were better informed about what they were meant to do with the bags and flags that they were given, and that they had sufficient equipment, such as pens. Sibbesson's observation (2007) that the female students were probably treated with a more friendly attitude by many of metal detector users than some of the male archaeologists seemed to reflect a comment by one metal detector user to the author about it being a pleasure to work alongside such "lovely ladies". Jackson's observation (2007) about the hobby being a predominantly male activity also reflected this, as do the author's wider research findings. There are some women who do metal detect, but these are very much in a minority. Only 6 of the 75 questionnaire respondents in the evaluation were female. The six Newcastle University students were also all told at different times by different metal detector users that it had meant a lot to them that they were camping on site with them (some of the other archaeologists either lived nearby or decamped to different accommodation in the evenings), and the efforts to socialise with the metal detector users in the evenings (including an impressive effort at the karaoke night!) seemed to break down barriers and encourage the metal detector users to interact more openly. The author certainly noticed this in a number of the interviews carried out. For example, one metal detector users who had been border-line abusive at a previous rally was now comfortable being recorded talking about nighthawking. Jackson (2007) and Sibbesson (2007), however, noted that in some conversations regarding selling and recording finds, they were likely not getting completely honest responses in all cases. This certainly is a factor to be taken into account with the wider research into this area, and highlights the importance of gaining trust.

CONCLUSIONS

Obviously there may be debate as to whether this exercise actually counted as "community archaeology" in the strictest sense, something which in itself suffers from a lack of established theory until very recent times (Isherwood, *in prep.*). Cale (2005) suggests that "a holistic approach is developing which sits comfortably between archaeology and the social sciences" opening up new potential for the social aspect of community archaeology research. Certainly if public archaeologists are "people who consciously educate the public about archaeology and its objectives" (Smardz 2000: 238), then the archaeological presence and interaction at the metal detecting rally could surely be counted as an example of this type of objective. Mills (2007: 16) however, noted that few visitors from the local geographical area were present on site over the weekend and that more could have been done to engage local people.

There was certainly a wide audience reached through the television coverage, although this in itself caused tension in the way in which it was presented. The rally was featured in two editions of the programme, with the first edition on the Friday of the rally creating an impression that the event was predominantly led by the

archaeologists. As a result, the Monday transmission had to include an explicit reference to the fact that Durobrivae (Water Newton) was primarily a metal detecting rally, to which archaeologists had been invited, addressing an issue of “ownership” of the weekend. This issue was reflected in the attitudes of many of the metal detector users, both observed through the students’ field notes, and through a number of the ethnographic interviews, and by Mills’ review of the rally (2007: 16), which made the point that it was “first and foremost a detecting rally – not archaeology”. It would be interesting to see if there had been much response to the television programme from viewers with opinions about the rally.

The evaluation was used effectively, in that the observations made and the questionnaire data collected helped to establish an indication of metal detector users’ attitudes to the prospect of working with archaeologists. Fortunately most, although not all, seemed to feel that working with archaeologists in this way was a positive move, although the possibility that many were saying what they thought the interviewers wanted to hear has to be considered. Interestingly the sample’s indication of around 87% of respondents feeling positive about the archaeological presence at the rally seems to mirror Connolly’s estimated findings that approximately 80% of all the rally attendees were participating with the recording system (Connolly, *in prep.*). Given the lack of instruction on the first day in particular, it is remarkable that so many metal detector users appeared to take on the recording methodology so easily. This reflects the observations of the finds specialists that they had noticed a much higher rate of recording than at most metal detecting rallies.

The questionnaires were a useful way of collecting quantifiable data that could be cross-referenced with the more qualitative information collected. With hindsight, it would have been productive to try and collect more questionnaires and interviews, and more training could have been offered to the field note-takers. It is hypothesised that similar evaluations of metal detecting rallies over a number of years could potentially indicate whether metal detecting attitudes towards archaeology and archaeological participation were changing, and whether more could be done to communicate and co-operate with this particular “community”. Given that most of the students involved in this exercise have since expressed interest in taking part in similar projects in the future, continuity and development in their observations could also be used as another way of recording any progress. The clear ethical dilemma of working so closely with metal detector users is surely offset by the increased data collected from this rally, which certainly would have gone ahead with or without archaeological involvement. It should follow, then, that if archaeological data is to be recorded at such rallies, then some record must also be made of the experience of the participants. From a personal perspective, given the nature of the author’s doctoral research, this was an extremely informative case study into the relationships between archaeologists and metal detector users in the UK, which need to be understood more fully in order to create effective solutions.

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