

THE SCHEME FOR RECORDING PORTABLE ANTIQUITIES IN BRITAIN: PROGRESS REPORT

Introduction

At the conference 'La Storia Mutilata' held in Rome in December 1997 and now recently published, I described the system in England for the protection of archaeological objects⁽¹⁾. I described three different aspects: the new English law of treasure, the English rules for the export of archaeological objects, and the new voluntary scheme for the reporting of finds of archaeological objects which was then just starting. Here I want to talk further, in the light of two years further experience⁽²⁾, about the scheme for the reporting of finds, though I will begin with a few remarks about the new English law of Treasure⁽³⁾.

The English Law of Treasure (1996)

The English law of Treasure, a revision in 1996⁽⁴⁾ of the previous law of Treasure Trove, is different from the antiquities laws of many other countries. The main difference is that it does not declare all archaeological finds as the property of the state, but only some of them. It tries to define the most important of them by their material – thus any object which contains 10% gold or silver or any group of coins; a group of 2 or more silver and gold coins or a group of 10 or more base metal coins. Since the change in the law⁽⁵⁾ there has been an increase in the number of finds declared: the annual number of cases was about 25 before the new law, and now it is about 200, some of these finds containing of course many thousands of pieces.

The reasons for this increase are twofold. First the new law includes more finds than before, and, secondly and more importantly, there is now greater public awareness of the system and more finders are reporting their finds to the authorities.

Many of these finds are acquired by museums. If they are not acquired by a museum, then they are returned to the finder who may keep or sell them. When they are acquired by a museum, then the finder is given the value of the find, which is fixed by an independent committee which consists of archaeologists, lawyers, dealers, and metal detectorists. In the first year of operation of the new law 100 cases of Treasure have been acquired by museums. 51 of these were hoards of coins which have been acquired by 24 museums, and about EUR 120,000 has been paid to finders⁽⁶⁾.

So the new law has seen success, and many new finds are now in museums where they can be held safely for research and displayed for the enjoyment of the general public.

“Finding Our Past”: the scheme for recording archaeological finds

But what about all the other finds made every year, perhaps some 400,000⁽⁷⁾ of them, which are not covered by the Treasure law? The first point to discuss is the reason why they are not covered by the Treasure law. This is because in England we have made a fundamental distinction between ownership and information. Information about all finds is important, but there is no reason why they should all pass into the ownership of the state and the museums of a state. Museums simply could not look after all these objects properly, and, even if they could, it is not at all clear that they would really want to have them. Museums are not just depositories, and there is no point in finds being in them unless some use is made or is likely to be made of these finds. The two main uses are to enable the public to enjoy them or to provide the opportunity for further research.

For most of the thousands of objects found today (for example, another standard Roman coin of Hadrian), a good record is sufficient for the purposes of further research, so there is therefore no reason for them to be acquired by museums. So, for them, information is more important than ownership. Recording this information about newly found objects is the point of the second new initiative in England, the Scheme for the Recording of Portable Antiquities. In 1996 the government published a discussion document⁽⁸⁾ which contained proposals about ways of preserving this information.

The most important decision for the government to make was whether the scheme should be compulsory or voluntary. After consultation with interested groups the government decided to choose a voluntary scheme, because it was thought too difficult to pass legislation and because it was thought it would be impossible to police such a law. The choice of a voluntary scheme does, in fact, have other benefits. It will only work if the general public wants to support it. Changing public attitudes has therefore emerged as one of the key objectives of the scheme: encouraging people to understand that finds are not just things to sell, but are important for our history, and that because of this it is vital not to lose information about provenance and context.

The voluntary scheme began with a pilot project in late 1997 with the appointment of a central co-ordinator, Roger Bland, and of Finds Liaison Officers in 6 parts of England. Earlier in 1999 the scheme was extended with the appointment of 5 further officers in other parts of England and Wales. At the same time an Outreach Officer was also appointed, and it is his job to ensure that the achievements of the scheme are made available to a wide public, and not just archaeologists. He does this

by promoting the scheme in newspapers and other media, by publishing a regular newsletter, and, in particular, by establishing a website for the scheme. I will return to the website later.

So what has the scheme achieved so far? I would like to discuss these under several different headings: 1. objects recorded; 2. provenance; 3. the availability of information; and 4. changes in public attitudes

1. Objects recorded.

There are two aspects to this. The first is the enormous quantity of objects that have been recorded. In 1998 the total for the first year was almost 24,000 objects, including some 10,000 coins⁽⁹⁾; for 1999 the figures were 29,000 objects, including almost 13,000 coins⁽¹⁰⁾. So in two years information about a total of 53,000 objects including 23,000 coins has been recorded. Much of this information would not have been recorded without the scheme, and I think these figures speak for themselves. There has already been a massive rescue of information.

However it is not the intention of the scheme to record absolutely everything, and modern material has been excluded. So not everything that has been shown has been recorded. For example a collection made from a site over many years consisted of some 906 objects, but included only 29 objects made before 1700. Only these 29 have been recorded, and they include a Roman spoon and a Viking coin weight. They are among the many objects of individual importance that have been recorded. Most of the objects are not, however, individually important; it is their provenance that makes them important.

2. Provenance.

All the finds are recorded with details of their find-spot. There are two main benefits. One is that the distribution maps of finds are improving all the time. In the case of England there are two periods where this is especially important, the late Iron Age, just before the Roman invasion of AD 43, and the early middle ages⁽¹¹⁾. For both these periods we depend a lot on distribution maps of coins finds for information about the political history of the period. So far the scheme has added information about 1500 Iron Age and 2000 early medieval coins, an enormous additional amount of information. The level of information about find spot varies; at present about 60% of the finds have been recorded to 100 metre squares, and there is a steady improvement in this rate as the scheme progresses.

As important as the records of coins with find spots is the information that has

been recovered about the very existence of some archaeological sites. For example, 16 out of the 18 Anglo-Saxon cemetery sites identified since 1973 have been discovered because of the recording of chance metal finds. There are some spectacular examples, such as prehistoric timber circle near Holme in Norfolk.

You might think that this is actually not such a good thing. Perhaps it would be better if these sites remained undiscovered until they can be properly excavated. This is a point, but not a convincing one. This is because many sites have been and are being damaged or destroyed by farming. A survey has estimated that over last 50 years 30% of sites have been damaged by agricultural activity⁽¹²⁾. The rapid identification of sites is therefore important, and in some areas (Norfolk) the choice of sites to excavate is now influenced by metal detecting in some 60% of all cases. Moreover, as we know, once a site has been disturbed by ploughing the objects start to decay more quickly than before the air was able to penetrate the soil.

3. The availability of information.

So much information is being recorded that it is very difficult to make it available to others, whether the academic community or the general public. But this is where new technology is extremely relevant, and the scheme has already established its own website⁽¹³⁾. This has four main benefits. First, it provides a much simpler way for the information to be published. I hate to think how long we would have to wait for the 50,000 objects already recorded to be published in printed form, in articles or books; how much money this publication would cost and how much you would have to pay to buy all the books which contained it. But because the Finds Liaison Officers record the finds directly onto a database, it is much easier to make the information available on the Internet. And when it is on the Internet it is available not just to archaeologists, historians and museum curators, but also to the general public.

Secondly, and this is an obvious point, it is much easier to search a database, so we will not have to spend all those days searching through books in the way that we have in the past. This should improve the quality of research since we can ask more questions.

Thirdly, advances in modern technology mean that it is becoming much easier to link databases together. So in England we have three principle databases for coins: the Finding Our Past database, the Celtic Coin Index at Oxford⁽¹⁴⁾, and the early medieval database in Cambridge⁽¹⁵⁾. Soon it will be possible to pass data automatically between all three. Links to other databases are also important. For example, each county (a geographical unit) in England maintains what is called a SMR, a

Sites and Monuments Record, and again information will be able to be passed to this. In Britain we also have an overall gateway for archaeological material provided by an organisation called the Archaeological Data Service, which also has its own on-line catalogue⁽¹⁶⁾, and which means that it will be possible to have a more integrated search of archaeological data.

New technology has other benefits, since it enables some information to be withheld. So, for example, details of the finder are not made available on the Internet to protect his or her privacy. More significantly, the very detailed information about exact find spots is not made available on the Internet, to ensure that sites are not attacked by ‘nighthawks’⁽¹⁷⁾, even though the information can be made available to those with a serious interest.

Technology, as we all know, is changing very fast. Some of these changes such as the links with other databases are still some way in the future; in the nearer future, however, we expect to be able to add pictures to the on-line catalogue. This is expected within the next year.

4. Changes in public attitudes.

The main emphasis of the scheme so far has been on co-operation between archaeologists and metal detectorists. This is a big change. In the 1970s there was almost no contact between these two groups, who hated each other. But although that did not stop the finding of objects by people with metal detectors, it did stop the recording of any information about the objects: even if they were shown it, some museum curators would refuse to identify an object if it was found with a metal detector.

Metal detecting is not against the law in England except on designated archaeological areas, and there is a large number of metal detectorists, possibly some 15-30,000 people, although it is very difficult to know for sure. Some of these people are criminals who are interested only in making money. In England they are called ‘nighthawks’ because they tend to work by night when they attack archaeological sites. But an important achievement of the Scheme has been to establish a distinction between these people and the majority of metal detector users, who are actually more interested in history than in making money. These people usually keep what they find – they want to have their own pieces of history, and they do not sell them for profit. They are often very knowledgeable about antiquities, and it is not unusual to meet some who are better at identifying medieval coins than many museum curators. However they have not usually studied archaeology or history very much, and by being self-taught, do not usually appreciate the importance of keeping detailed

records of provenance. This is now changing, and part of the work of the Finds Liaison Officers has been to explain the importance of provenance. I have already described some of the benefits. Some hoards which might not have been declared have been reported such as one of Roman gold coins from Didcot. Sometimes people with metal detectors now even participate officially in excavations, under the supervision of trained archaeologists.

However, the scheme focuses on a much bigger 'public' than just the metal detectorists. Those working on the scheme talk to more general groups of people about the scheme and about archaeology, and in particular many of them give talks to schools. We hope that the scheme will develop into a resource for members of the general public who are interested in their past and for children studying many subjects like history and geography at school. The availability of the data recovered by the scheme on the Internet means that someone interested in what happened in the area he or she lives in can find out more information about it, and that children can do school projects based along similar lines. Involving interested adults is relatively simple, as the main thing you have to do is provide the information. It is much harder to involve schools because their curriculum is already very full, and we are hoping to develop ways of making the scheme very relevant to specific parts of that curriculum. The greater emphasis in education today of encouraging the child to find out for himself should help.

Conclusion

In this paper not much attention has been devoted to the interpretation of the data that has been recovered. The emphasis for the moment is on recording data which would otherwise be lost. Its interpretation can come later.

There remains much to be done for the future. We will soon learn whether the scheme will continue. It depends on whether or not the application for money is accepted by the Heritage Lottery Fund⁽¹⁸⁾. Even if it is, then the scheme will be guaranteed for only three years, and we will have to find other means of continuing it. Within the scheme itself there is a need for much development work. One is technological, for example adding pictures to the database and improving the links between databases. Another concerns the development of the educational aspects of the scheme, and developing ways in which it can be made part of both formal (i.e. school) and informal (i.e. general) learning. Finally, there is a big need for training since it is not easy to find the right number of people with the expertise to identify objects and coins. They do not exist in such a large number at the moment, so we must find people with a good historical or archaeological background who can learn.

Finally, I would like to mention the international relevance of the scheme. The first point to make is that the approach is by no means confined to England. A very similar approach exists in other northern European countries, which have similar Treasure laws. For example in Denmark the law is similar, and so is the informal and voluntary collaboration between archaeologists, museum curators and metal detectorists. Many thousands of coins have been recorded there as a result of a similar sort of co-operation⁽¹⁹⁾. The English system, perhaps because it has begun only recently, uses IT more, but its most novel characteristic is, I think, the way that it is as much a scheme about archaeology for the public as it is a scheme for rescuing data. The conception of the scheme has evolved from one focussing on an archaeological outcome to one with an outcome of wide social benefit.

The similar approach in Denmark and England may seem very strange to those who come from other parts of the world. The main point to stress is that the English and Danish approach is based on practicalities not theory. We do not talk about the theory of whether or not the State should own all antiquities and so on, but on practical questions of what can be achieved. Maybe the system is not ideal from a theoretical point of view, but I would argue that it is a very effective one. Not everything has been preserved, as I have said, and there are indeed problems of criminal export, but against that we now have the new data, some 50,000 records of objects which have been preserved for ever.

Notes

(1) A. Burnett, 'La nuova legge inglese di "Treasure" e il nuovo sistema di notificazione dei piccoli oggetti archaeologici', in S. Sorda (ed.), *La Storia mutilata*, Rome, 1999 (Istituto Italiano di Numismatica. Studi e Materiali 6), pp. 51-60.

(2) This paper was given in April 2000. It is a pleasure to record how much of what has been achieved depends on work by Roger Bland and Richard Hobbs, whose generous help in preparing this report is warmly acknowledged.

(3) For an earlier report, see R. Bland, 'The Treasure Act and Portable Antiquities Scheme: a Progress report', *Art, Antiquity and Law*, 4,3 (1999), pp. 191-203.

(4) The text of the law can be found at: www.hmso.gov.uk/acts/acts1996/1996024.htm. The text of the Code of Practice can be found at <http://www.britarch.ac.uk/cba/potant10.html>.

(5) The Treasure Act came into force only in September 1997.

(6) *Treasure Annual Report 1997-98* (Department for Culture, Media and Sport, 2000) (ISBN 0-10-556670-5).

(7) C. Dobinson and S. Denison, *Metal Detecting and Archaeology in England* (Council for British Archaeology/English Heritage, 1995).

(8) *Portable Antiquities. A discussion document* (Department of National Heritage, 1996).

(9) *Portable Antiquities Annual Report 1997-98* (Department for Culture, Media and Sport, 1999).

(10) *Portable Antiquities Annual Report 1988-99* (Department for Culture, Media and Sport, 2000) 29,418 objects, of which 12,881 coins

(11) But also for other periods. For example, the very unusual group of medieval finds from South Ferriby, published by B. Cook, 'Medieval and early modern coin finds from South Ferriby, Humberside', *British Numismatic Journal* 68 (1998), pp. 95-118.

(12) T. Darvill and A. Fulton, *MARS: The Monuments at Risk Survey 1995* (English Heritage, 1998.)

(13) <http://www.finds.org.uk>, where additional information about the scheme can also be found.

(14) <http://units.ox.ac.uk/departments/archaeology/ccindex/ccindex.htm>

(15) <http://www.fitzmuseum.cam.ac.uk/coins/emc.html>, with its own on-line catalogue covering coins made between 450 and 850.

(16) www.ads.ahds.ac.uk.

(17) This is the colloquial word used in Britain to refer to people who raid archaeological sites with metal detectors at night.

(18) One of the Funds set up by the British government to distribute the profits from the National Lottery to 'good causes'.

(19) See J.C. Moesgaard, 'The law and practice concerning coin finds in Denmark', *Compte rendu CIN* 46, 1999, pp. 23-32.