

Portable Antiquities Scheme: Advice for Finders of Archaeological Objects



The Portable Antiquities Scheme was established to promote recording of archaeological objects found by the public and to broaden awareness of these finds for understanding our past.

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What is the Portable Antiquities Scheme?

Every year many thousands of archaeological objects are discovered by members of the public, mostly by metal-detector users, but also by people out walking, digging their gardens or whilst going about their everyday work. These finds have the potential to tell us much about the past; how and where people used to live and about the types of objects they made and used.

Since 1997 the Portable Antiquities Scheme Finds Liaison Officers have examined over 100,000 objects, many of which would have otherwise gone unrecorded.

The aims

To advance knowledge of the history and archaeology of England and Wales by systematically recording archaeological objects found by the public.

To raise awareness among the public of the educational value of archaeological finds in their context and facilitate research in them.

To increase opportunities for active public involvement in archaeology and strengthen links between metal-detector users and archaeologists.

To encourage all those who find archaeological objects to make them available for recording and to promote best practice by finders.

To define the nature and scope of a Scheme for recording Portable Antiquities in the longer term, to assess the likely costs and to identify resources to enable it to be put into practice.



Anglo-Saxon disc brooch recorded
by the Kent Finds Liaison Officer

What types of archaeological finds would you like to record?

We would like to know about everything that you have found – not just metal objects.

We record all objects made before about 1650. We may be selective in recording finds of later objects.

It is often best to let the Finds Liaison Officer see all your finds, especially if you are unsure what they are: a nondescript lump of copper-alloy may turn out to be a fragment of an archaeologically important Bronze Age ingot.

When I go metal-detecting I often pick up worked flints and pieces of pottery as well as metal objects. Would you like to see these as well?

Yes – because these are also important archaeologically.

What type of information about my finds do you want?

We would like to record details of the objects that you have found, including a description, weight and measurements.

We would also hope to record where and how they were found, including how the land is used; for example a ploughed field or in a garden. We may also wish to photograph or draw your finds.

How long will this take?

Generally the Finds Liaison Officers prefer to borrow the finds for a time, so they can research and record them properly. You will be issued with a receipt whilst they are in our care.

Who will have access to the information about my finds?

Our aim is to make as much of the information available as possible while protecting your personal details and protecting archaeological sites from damage.

Precise details of findspots will be made available to the Finds Liaison Officers, the Sites and Monuments Record, and other statutory bodies such as English Heritage, Cadw and the Royal Commission on the Ancient and Historical Monuments of Wales.

We will publish details of the finds you show us in our online database (www.finds.org.uk), but the findspots of objects will not be identified more precisely than a National Grid Reference (NGR) of four figures (which identifies 1km square). As we want to protect archaeological sites from damage, such as nighthawking, the most sensitive findspots will not be identified as accurately as this.

Please note that the information given to Finds Liaison Officers by finders is subject to the Freedom of Information Act (2000) and the Data Protection Act (1984).

Will my finds be taken away from me?

No. We only want to record information about your finds. The acquisition of objects by museums is an entirely different procedure.

Museums may sometimes be glad to have the opportunity to acquire your non-treasure finds, but this could only happen with your agreement and that of the landowner.

Am I legally obliged to report all my finds?

No. The Scheme is entirely voluntary. However, you must report material which constitutes Treasure, or which you believe may be Treasure. If your find counts as Treasure under the Treasure Act (1996) a museum will have the option to acquire it.

If a museum does wish to acquire Treasure that you have found you can expect to receive its full market value, provided you had permission from the landowner to search on the land where it was found and abided by the Code of Practice on the Treasure Act.


Copies of the Code of Practice on the Treasure Act that explains the definition of Treasure may be obtained free of charge from your local Finds Liaison Officer or from the Department for Culture, Media and Sport (Tel: 020 7211 6200). See also www.finds.org.uk/background/treasure.asp

Do I need permission before I start searching with my metal-detector?

Yes. Always obtain permission from the landowner before using a metal-detector. This includes land which is publicly accessible, such as beaches, footpaths, or council-owned land.

Detecting on scheduled monuments is strictly forbidden unless permission has been obtained from English Heritage (in England) or Cadw (in Wales). We cannot record objects that have been illegally recovered.

What advice do you have for metal-detector users?

The Portable Antiquities Scheme encourages metal-detector users to act responsibly, and take the opportunity to record finds discovered so they may add to our knowledge of our past. Finders contributing to the Scheme will be fully acknowledged. 

If you are using a metal-detector, finds can be recovered from the ploughed surface of a field without disturbing any archaeological layers that there might be below. However, recovering objects from below the plough-soil will cause damage to archaeology and should be avoided. On land that is not ploughed archaeological layers can be much closer to the surface and so much more vulnerable to damage.

Make a note of the findspot, either using a map or hand held GPS device. All finds are evidence of human occupation, and can help us understand more about a particular area or object type. As more and more finds are recorded we will begin to be able to trace patterns in the way they are distributed and these will provide vital clues to the activities of our ancestors. In this way we can together solve some of the problems of our past.

If you find anything really exciting, fragile or complex it's worth consulting your local FLO to see if an archaeologist can help you dig it out. Archaeologists can lift fragile objects and, most importantly, are able to record the context in which the find was made.

How can I clean my finds?

Metal objects should be kept dry. At most gently remove loose soil from the find. With objects such as coins, do not try to remove corrosion and never polish or apply abrasives. Do not dip metal objects in lemon juice or vinegar as this can destroy the whole object. If you apply oil this can attract grit and it is difficult to remove. Some pottery and flint can be cleaned by being gently washed in water. Inexperienced cleaning can reduce both the archaeological and the commercial value of finds. Your local Finds Liaison Officer can offer basic advice and can put you in touch with experts who can provide more specialist advice if necessary.

A useful Guide to Conservation for Metal Detectorists by Richard Hobbs and others (2002) has been published by Tempus.

What will I gain from reporting my finds?

Your local Finds Liaison Officer will be able to offer you a wide range of services:

- finds identification (either personally, or after consulting a specialist) and recording;
- advice on conservation and storage;
- advice on the Treasure Act;
- he or she will also be able to inform you of the importance of your material for the understanding of our history.

If you would find it useful, your local Finds Liaison Officer will be very glad to pass on to you a copy of the information recorded.

I have been metal-detecting on a local farmer's land, with his agreement, and have discovered a whole range of material from Roman to modern times. If I report these finds, won't this simply lead to the area becoming a scheduled monument, meaning that I can no longer detect there?

This is highly unlikely. Only sites of national importance are scheduled (which means that it is illegal to use a metal-detector on them without permission from English Heritage or Cadw) and metal-detector finds on their own are not enough to lead to a site being scheduled, although such sites may be scheduled if other, more detailed, information about them exists.

There is no known example where new detector finds on their own have led to a site being scheduled.

I have been detecting for more than a decade and have a large collection of finds made over the years. Am I expected to have this material recorded?

That is entirely up to you, although we would be very glad to know about your finds. If you have a lot of material the Finds Liaison Officers are likely to concentrate on the most recent discoveries. However, we would like to record all your finds and we suggest that you discuss the logistics of this with your local Finds Liaison Officer.

Are you only interested in seeing finds made by metal-detector users?

Not at all. We would like to see archaeological objects found by anyone. However, metal-detector users do discover the majority of archaeological objects, so we are particularly keen to make contact with them.

Reporting your finds

By December 2003 the Portable Antiquities Scheme will cover the whole of England and Wales, and your contact is the local Finds Liaison Officer for your area. A full list of contact names and addresses can be found at www.finds.org.uk or telephone 020 7323 8611 for details of your local Finds Liaison Officer. If the post of Finds Liaison Officer in your area is vacant, please contact the Portable Antiquities Office (on telephone 020 7323 8611 or email info@finds.org.uk) for an alternative contact. Our address is: Portable Antiquities Scheme, c/o Dept. Coins & Medals, British Museum, London WC1B 3DG.

The Portable Antiquities Scheme is managed by a consortium of national bodies led by Resource: The Council for Museums, Archives and Libraries. Resource provides the strategic leadership, advocacy and advice to enable museums, archives and libraries to touch people's lives and inspire their imagination, learning and creativity.

Cover: The Welsh Finds Co-ordinator, Mark Lodwick, investigates a Late Bronze Age hoard with the finder, Alan Jenkins