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Finding our past: the Portable Antiquities Initiative in Somerset and Dorset

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In February of 1999 Ciorstaidh Hayward Trevarthen was appointed as Finds Liaison Officer for Somerset and Dorset. The post is one of several pilot projects forming the Department for Culture, Media and Sport's Portable Antiquities Initiative. The Somerset and Dorset scheme is jointly funded by the Heritage Lottery Fund and Somerset and Dorset County Councils.

The aim of the scheme is to encourage those making chance finds, metal detector users and casual fieldwalkers to record the objects they discover. The objects are identified and the information added to the scheme database and the local Sites and Monuments Record. Elements of the data gathered are also available on the Portable Antiquities website (www.finds.org.uk).

The scheme has been developed as a result of changes made to the law regarding treasure. The Treasure Act 1996 came in to force in September 1997, updating the ancient common law of Treasure Trove. Under the old law archaeological finds could only be declared treasure (and therefore acquired by the Crown) if they were substantially of gold or silver, and considered to have been buried with the intent of recovery. It had long been recognised that this law was inadequate for the purpose of protecting archaeological finds. The new Treasure Act has now broadened the definition of treasure. The main points are set out in the DCMS leaflet *The Treasure Act – Information for finders of treasure (England and Wales)* and are summarised here:

- Objects other than coins: Objects of a least 10% gold or silver that are at least 300 years old when found.
- Coins: all coins from the same find that are over 300 years old when found (if they are of less than 10% gold or silver, there must be at least 10 coins).
- Single coins are not Treasure.
- Associated objects: objects that are more than 300 years old which constitute part of the same find as coins or gold and silver objects.
- The law of Treasure Trove still applies to gold and silver finds that are less than 300 years old.

This wider definition has meant that a greater range of material is now afforded protection under law and that museums have the option to acquire items of significance whilst ensuring that finders and landowners are given the fair market value of the finds in compensation.

Despite the improvements this meant for finders and archaeology, it was recognised that there are still many thousands of objects unearthed every year in England and Wales that are not covered by the new act. Consequently, six pilot schemes were established to encourage the voluntary recording of these finds (Kent, Norfolk, North Lincolnshire, North West, West Midlands and Yorkshire). These first six projects have reported on their first year of

operation in the *Portable Antiquities Annual Report 1997–1998* (accessible on the Scheme’s website, see above). Approximately 13,500 objects were identified and recorded as a direct consequence of the scheme in the period of reporting. Between 90% and 99% of these originated from metal detectorists.

The establishment of five further projects (Hampshire, Northamptonshire, Somerset and Dorset, Suffolk and Wales) has expanded the scheme to cover more than half of England and Wales.

The Finds Liaison Officers in each area publicise the scheme through the local press, and by displaying leaflets and posters. They make contact with finders through attending metal detector club meetings and holding finds surgeries at local museums and other venues.

Artefacts brought forward are borrowed by the Finds Liaison Officer for identification and recording. They are returned to the finder together with a copy of the information gathered regarding the identification of the objects.

Together with information from the finder regarding where the finds were unearthed the records made are added to the scheme’s database and ultimately transferred to the local Sites and Monuments Record.

The Somerset and Dorset Scheme

The Somerset and Dorset project has succeeded in making contacts with many metal detectorists and other finders. Through attendance at metal detectorists club meetings and holding “Finds Surgeries” at museums, 66 finders have had objects recorded under the scheme. Around half of these are metal detectorists (see Figure 3.1 and the surgeries are proving particularly useful in contacting non-detectorists finders (eg those making casual finds in their gardens).

By the end of September 1999 over 1200 objects had been received by the Finds Liaison Officer of which 587 had been recorded and returned. Of the remainder, around 450 did not fall within the scope of the scheme and the rest were awaiting recording. Figure 3.2 shows a breakdown of these figures in more detail.

Since this information was compiled the number of finds recorded has risen to 1202 (to the end of March 2000) with an estimated 500 awaiting identification. Around 800 objects have been entered onto

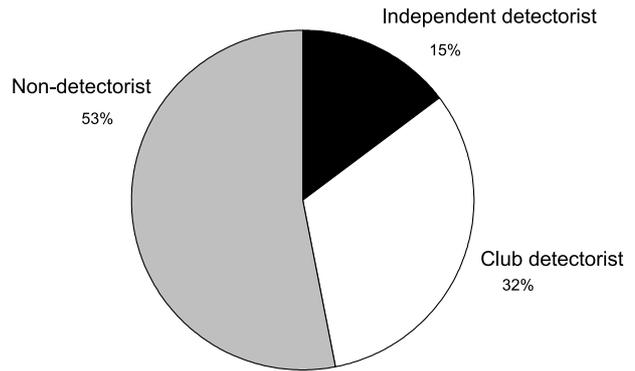


Figure 3.1: *Types of finder (to end of September 1999, total = 34).*

the scheme’s database and can be transferred to the relevant SMR.

The finds cover a range of materials and periods. They include prehistoric flint and metalwork, numerous Roman coins and brooches, occasional Saxon metalwork, medieval coins (for example see Figure 3.5 on page 18), pottery and dress accessories and many items of post-medieval date.

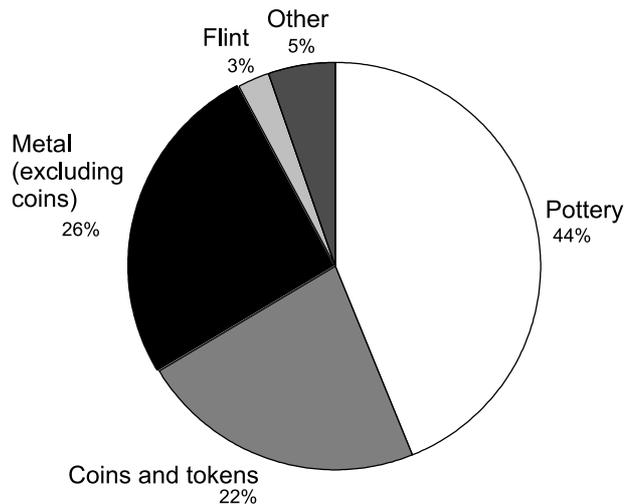


Figure 3.2: *Types of recorded find (to end of September 1999, total = 587).*

Case Study 1

Early on a family arranged to see the Finds Liaison Officer at the Dorset County Museum. They brought along their ten-year-old son, Andrew, who had been collecting finds from his family’s farm in east Dorset. They arrived with three large Jacobs’ Cream Cracker tubs of pot sherds and clay-pipe fragments. The

majority of the material was Victorian and modern china, but amongst it were a flint blade, a bronze-age flint discoidal knife and several sherds of medieval and post-medieval pottery.

On returning the items after recording, the Finds Liaison Officer went through the material in some detail, in order to explain how to recognise older pottery types and worked flint. A few months later, Andrew and his family returned with a smaller collection of finds, all of which were relevant to the scheme. This group included a flint scraper and a medieval jug handle.

Case Study 2

Mr Slade of Somerset (an independent metal detectorist) brought in a group of finds early in the scheme and has subsequently brought in several others. Almost all are unusual for the area of West Somerset where they have been unearthed. Indeed West Somerset as a whole has produced few archaeological objects. Mr Slade's finds include Roman coins and brooches, medieval coin weights, a late Saxon stirrup strap mount and medieval pilgrim badge (Figure 3.3). This is a probably unique find for the whole county. It depicts St Anne teaching the Virgin Mary to read and dates from the 15th century.

The same finder has also brought in two Tudor silver gilt dress hooks. One has been subject to a treasure inquest and the Somerset County Museum intends acquiring it, the other has been kindly donated by the finder and the landowner.

Case Study 3

In April of 1999 three detectorists brought in a hoard of 1079 Roman radiate coins dating to the late 3rd century. A few weeks or so previously they had unearthed a Romano-British lead cremation vessel and reported the find to Steve Minnitt at the Somerset County Museum. The Finds Liaison Officer received the hoard and other items and reported them to the coroner as potential treasure. Amongst the items was a piece of folded gold sheet which was identified at the British Museum as a basket ornament (possibly an earring or hair-tress ring) dating to c.2500–2000 BC. These finds have been declared treasure and the British Museum has expressed a wish to acquire elements of the hoard and the basket ornament.



Figure 3.3: *Lead pilgrim badge (depicting St Anne teaching the Virgin Mary to read) found by Mr J Slade. 15th century. (Approx. 21mm by 21mm)*

The finders were excited by their discoveries, having spent many years detecting before making this find. One of the finders wrote a piece for *Treasure Hunting* magazine about their experiences and made kind reference and acknowledgement to the County Museum and the Finds Liaison Officer:

“It has also been very interesting meeting [...] the local Finds Liaison Officer. She too has been most helpful and encouraging ... Hopefully our experience goes to show that metal detectorists and archaeologists can work together.” (Usher 1999)

Such an un-looked for recommendation is very important for the scheme locally and nationally.

The finds recorded in the Somerset and Dorset scheme are already proving to have interesting implications for the understanding of the area's archaeology.

In addition to the unusual material from West Somerset, there have also been several Anglo-Saxon objects presented for identification in both counties. The Anglo-Saxon period is generally considered to be poorly represented in the archaeological

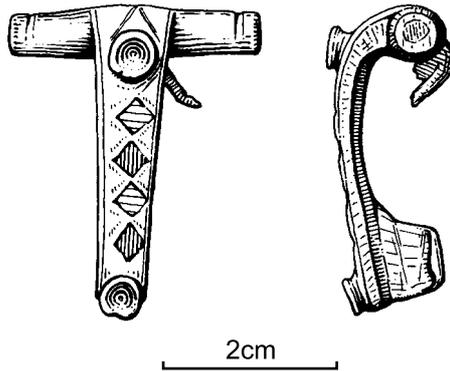


Figure 3.4: *Romano-British headstud brooch found by Mr M Cowan. (drawing by M Trevarthen)*

record, so such finds can be considered important in expanding our understanding of patterns of activity in the period.

Objects brought in have also helped to confirm the existence and dating of sites and patterns of settlement suggested in the region. An example of this comes from South Somerset where a finder has been unearthing material from the periphery of a recognised settlement site, giving an indication of the dating of the site and perhaps extending the area known to be contained by this activity.

It is unlikely that many of the finds now recorded would have been otherwise reported. At least one item of Treasure (Mr Slade's silver gilt dress hook) would not have been recognised as such and reported were it not for the scheme. Also, through publicising the scheme and encouraging finders to come in to museums, the public is being put in direct contact with archaeologists and has a chance to contribute to archaeological study and understanding.

Overall, the scheme is raising awareness of archaeology and the potential of casual and metal detected finds to contribute to it. Greater co-operation between professional archaeologists and those whose hobby touches on archaeology can serve to benefit by providing access to new information for all involved. Continued liaison will provide is an excellent opportunity to enhance the archaeological record for Somerset and Dorset.



Figure 3.5: *Silver longcross penny (obverse) found by Mr J Slade. 14th century.*