A Controlled Metal Detector Survey in Kent

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Summary

In September 2000 a controlled metal detector survey took place on National Trust tenanted farmland in Kent. This was conducted by local detectorists under the supervision of the Finds Liaison Officer (Kent) and the Portable Antiquities Scheme Outreach Officer, with the full permission of the landowners and the tenant farmer.

The roughly rectangular survey site on open cultivated arable land, sloped from a natural ridge in the north-east, with prominent hills in the north and west and a noticeable valley between the two. It was surrounded by roads or trackways on all sides, and was adjacent to woodland in the north.

The project operated as a valuable pilot study for the new style of licensing arrangement which revised National Trust policy now allows in circumstances which are considered exceptional by the Regional Archaeologist or Archaeological Adviser.

Background

For several years detectorists had been searching in close proximity to the survey site, with full permission of local landowners. In February 1999 permission was sought for a controlled metal detecting survey on National Trust land. Whilst the Trust's policy at the time was a presumption against metal detecting on its land, specific circumstances existed in this case which made a controlled survey possible subject to licence.

Metal detecting in land adjacent to the site had revealed a good quantity of high quality single finds. These included a fragment of a Bronze Age gouge, several Iron Age brooches, a bronze awl, a potin, numerous Roman coins and brooch fragments, part of a rare Frankish bracelet and a late Saxon strap-end. Numerous late medieval and post-medieval items, including coinage, buckles and horse furniture were also recovered.

The Sites and Monuments Record identified significant archaeological features close to the survey site including, two Anglo-Saxon inhumations, a Jutish cemetery, and numerous Prehistoric and Iron Age single finds. Evidence for a Roman villa has also been discovered close by.

A local detectorist searching in the stubble field during a controlled metal detector survey on tenanted National Trust land in Kent.

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Aims

A primary concern was that the site was at risk of being nighthawked. Illicit detecting is a major problem for archaeologists since illegally recovered finds are not recorded and once removed are permanently lost from their archaeological context. Many of the single finds discovered in the initial detector searches were considered important to future academic studies, and since all material recovered in the controlled survey would be maintained within the public domain, access would remain possible for future study. Further, it was possible that finds recovered may represent evidence for underlying archaeological features currently subject to damage by ploughing. It was also considered appropriate to recover portable finds from the plough-soil where they were deteriorating due to natural corrosion processes and modern farming techniques.

Method

Six detectorists offered their services, with no remuneration or expenses paid for the entire survey period. The detectorists signed a risk assessment and a disclaimer agreeing to the terms and conditions of the survey – relinquishing rights to all finds, including treasure. The survey was supervised by the Finds Liaison Officer and the Portable Antiquities Scheme Outreach Officer. The Archaeological Adviser for the National Trust region and the Head Warden for the property visited the site to monitor progress during the survey and to meet the detectorists.

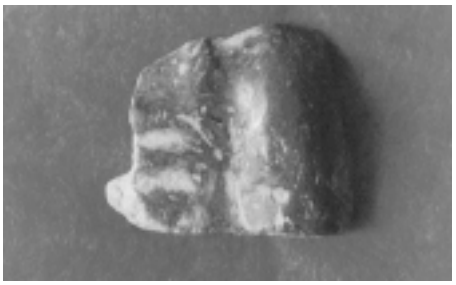
The search was primarily random, but restricted within a defined area marked by poles and tape. The field was divided into seven zones, not of equal area, but based upon topographical features. Finds were evaluated as they were recovered. Significant finds were marked with a cane, labelled, bagged, recorded with a number against a running list and plotted using a hand held GPS (Global Positioning System) device. All post-1700 material was recovered, collected in a bucket and assigned the appropriate zone reference letter. The time spent recovering objects from each zone varied, depending on the signals the detectorists received and based upon their experience of discovering single finds in similar soil conditions.

Results

The survey recovered mostly post-medieval material, though nineteen other finds, including a Bronze Age axe head fragment, three Iron Age coins, two Roman coins, several medieval buckles, a jetton, a copper alloy ring, a loom weight, a thimble and a vessel rim fragment, accounted for earlier occupation on the site. Interesting post-medieval items included strap fittings, buttons, tokens and coins. Besides these finds, another 438 post-1700 items were recovered.

Most of the pre-1700 finds were found within the lower half of the site. It is appreciated that these were casual losses, and reveal little information regarding archaeology below the sub-soil. However, the Iron Age and Roman coins were located in relatively close proximity to one another and these may have been lost en-route to a spring, located to the east of the site. The hill in the west offers a natural vantage point from which travellers journeying east, along the ridge, may have sighted the spring and hence crossed the site. Interestingly a majority of the medieval finds were scattered to the west and south of the survey area, along a hypothetical route from the ridge, southwards, towards a second spring. Few finds were located close to existing trackways or footpaths.

A French jetton, dated c1540; the triangle and looped bars on the obverse represent the castles of Tourain and Tournois. The legend is probably fictitious. MICHAEL LEWIS/PORTABLE ANTIQUITIES SCHEME, KENT COUNTY COUNCIL



Bronze Age looped and socketed axehead fragment, dated to 900-700BC, which was recovered during the survey. MICHAEL LEWIS/PORTABLE ANTIQUITIES SCHEME, KENT COUNTY COUNCIL

Post-1700 finds were distributed evenly throughout the entire site, although an above average distribution of ordnance material was recovered from the hills in the north (close to woodland) and west, and near the farm buildings in the east. Domestic items were also found on the two hills. In general there was a low concentration of finds in the central parts of the field. This was less expected, as it was considered probable that plough movement would have taken finds off higher areas into the lower land below.

The soil conditions were not ideal for metal detecting. Although the crop on the site had been cut with a combine harvester, it had not been ploughed or rolled, and stubble 150mm high remained. The weather was generally sunny and hot, with rain late on the final day. Damper soil may have given better signals and shorter stubble would have allowed lower and easier sweeps of the detector. Nonetheless, the timing of the survey, designed to suit the agricultural calendar, did not allow for a significant amount of flexibility to maximise survey conditions. Future surveys would therefore benefit from lower, or no, stubble and some evening rain. Detectorists normally work on a field over a period of time, and it would be interesting to undertake a controlled survey over several months to evaluate results according to different conditions.

Many detectorists claim they have a feel for whether a specific area will yield good results. This 'feel' for a site is based upon the view that detectorists can highlight hot-spots in a field within a relatively short time, and then concentrate upon these areas of potential occupation. This contrasts with the method used during this survey, which was broadly systematic. The detectorists adapted well to bagging objects in defined zones and staking findspots with a cane. This allowed for a good degree of accuracy in plotting, and evaluating the interrelationship between find and findspots. The method proves that detectorists could adopt practical field techniques when working alone. Fields could be visually divided into workable zones, based on landmarks and the topography, and finds could be collated and bagged accordingly. The information could be translated to a map and significant finds recorded against the national grid reference, or with a GPS device. It is also clear from surveys elsewhere that detectorists can work in smaller zones, and this should be explored further.

It is recognised that detectorists are responsible for the vast majority of metal finds recovered in England and Wales today. It is therefore essential that finds recording is promoted and systematic search and recording techniques are developed in order to allow for better appreciation of the spatial distribution of detector finds and increased understanding of artefact typology. However, it was noted that the enthusiasm of the detectorist depends upon the site surveyed: if the site reveals few quality finds, then detectorists are likely to discriminate more and recover less. Detectorists also discriminate against ferrous objects, which in many instances are post-1700 agricultural losses. Consequently detectorists rarely recover iron objects, and significant objects are invariably overlooked. Since metal detector finds are not stratified, detectorist contributions to archaeological fieldwork are best directed to pre-excavation surveys (which could be non-invasive), spoil heap searches (recovering finds missed through the archaeological process) and the disposition of grave assemblages. Whilst detectorists are increasingly involved during archaeological investigation for such work this is still by no means common.

All significant items recovered during this survey were cleaned, conserved (where necessary) and stored in a public archive. The finds, together with a record of the field assemblage, have been recorded on the Portable Antiquities Scheme database and the Sites and Monuments Record. All post-1700 material was retained by the Finds Liaison Officer, but remains available for study and research: this collection has already been used in teaching undergraduate archaeologists at the University of Kent at Canterbury. It was an important part of the project outline that careful provision should be made for the conservation and storage of the items recovered. Nonetheless, it is always difficult to evaluate properly these needs before a site is surveyed and this is a potential problem for any archaeological investigation. The implications for conservation and long-term storage of recovered finds must always be carefully considered before embarking on a project of this sort, and due preparations made in advance of the recovery process. If not, we are in danger of creating a problem for the future through trying to find a solution for the present!