

How I "Joined the Club"

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What is about metal detecting that inspires us to embark on a virtually ceaseless quest for that illusive thing called "treasure" and what does that term actually mean to us?

There were many (and perhaps still are some) in the archaeological "establishment" who would have had everyone believe that we are a thoughtless bunch of pillagers sneaking about at night seeking to rob the country of its heritage.

However, nothing could be further from the truth for the majority of us. Yes, there are those whose only aim is to profit from their finds but we all know these people are in the minority.

My personal quest was inspired back in the 1970s when reports began to appear in the papers about spectacular finds made with metal detectors. While these stories stimulated my imagination of piles of gold coins lying underground just waiting to be discovered, they were also the first time that I had been informed that our own country had a rich and fascinating history. This was possibly not equal in terms of technical abilities

as that of the Egyptians or Greeks, but perhaps equal in terms of religion and culture.

However, there was a problem and that was the lack of easily available information. This contributed to a missed opportunity in my early youth to "discover" British archaeology.

It was known amongst my clan of what would now be described as "Hoodies" that somewhere on Saddleworth moor was a Roman Fort. This notion obviously inspired all sorts of imaginings and was a distraction from the sometimes grim reality of life on a northern

English town. However, despite attempts to find its location from teachers, the local library etc., neither my inspired friends nor I could find out where it was.

Fast forward nearly 20 years to 1995, and to a walk on the North Downs. As my eyes surveyed that path ahead I noticed that the path seemed to be bounded by large walls of earth, which appeared to curve around 20 metres ahead. I didn't really think much of it at the time and put it down to landslides, and then the soil piling up over the centuries.

Further on, during my walk, I noticed something else that didn't look quite natural. It was a large pile of earth built into an oval mound. My first thought was that it was some kind of small dumping ground which had become overgrown, but I began to wonder whether it was on those ancient burial mounds I had seen on one of those TV archaeology programs.

By way of coincidence, an article appeared very soon after my experience in one of the Sunday magazine supplements. It was all about how archaeology was gaining in popularity. There was an address too, of *Current Archaeology* mag-

azine. I noted the address and found the phone number of the magazine's editor. I called him as soon as possible and took up a subscription. Over the following months my enthusiasm increased in intensity to a fever pitch, and I had come to the point where I wanted – or more like, needed – to get involved in a dig!

Then I hit another problem. It seemed like this archaeology business had already too many enthusiastic amateurs and there wasn't space for another in the club. Not one to be put off easily I got hold of a copy of *Lighthouse*, London's adult education course magazine and found to my delight that Birkbeck College ran a three year evening course in Field Archaeology. Surely, I would get into the club once I had some formal training in archaeology?

The tutors couldn't be better. Roman Studies run by Harvey, Medieval Studies (The Saxons!) taught by Dave Beard, and pre-Roman Studies with Hedley Swain. These guys already had day jobs and while I felt privileged to be taught by them they were doing it because they wanted to succeed in passing on their passion for learning.

However, with two Merits and a Distinction under my belt I still couldn't get into the archaeology club. What was wrong? Why wouldn't anyone let me go on one of their digs?

Never the quitter, I thought back to those days back in the 1970s and realised the answer was to buy a metal detector and become "Site Director" on my own digs.

The next Saturday morning I left Treasure World near Euston, London with a Laser B3 in my hands a smile on my face and a handshake from the proprietor, which could only mean one thing – "Welcome to the Club".

Metal Detecting & ARCHI Sites

The next stage in my quest was to find out where sites worth searching were. In my next article I will look at how this research was done, how long it took, and how it has helped me and many others.

Point 1.

Our ancient ancestors were intimately tied to their physical environment. So, if we can put ourselves in their frame of mind we are more likely to work out the landscape features they may have chosen to deposit their "gifts" (i.e. treasures and symbols) which tell us something of their culture. However, in order to do this we need to have some knowledge of the locations of existing sites so that we can visit them and view them in the context of the landscape that surrounds them.

Fig.1. The Green Man. An ancient deity often associated with the hunt. Hopefully, he'll guide you through that rain sodden field to the place where your ancient ancestors left gifts for you, their descendants, to find.



Fig.2. How many times have you thrown coins into a wishing well? Is it just coincidence that rainbows are at home in wet places!?

Point 2.

Looking for the "hidden" landscape features that reveal themselves as ancient sites once we are able to read the landscape.

Fig.3. At first glance this could be a simple mound of earth, but once we can read the landscape we see the ancient burial site.



Fig.4. Is this earthen bank the remnants of the walls of an ancient fort?

Point 3.

Once we can read the signs in the landscape it will be so much easier to work out where the settlements, shrines and places of work of our ancestors lie. Figs.5-7 show a Merovingian gold tremissis (AD 620-640), a small "Saxon" gold thrymsa, and an early medieval mount. These were all found in the same field along an ancient route passing through good farming land and just above the flood plain of a winding river – a prime location in early medieval England!

Figs.8-12. show a Celtic gold quarter stater, a silver penny of King Offa (AD 757-796), a short cross silver hammered coin, a long cross silver hammered coin, and a Venetian silver solidus.

More than a thousand years separates the oldest and the youngest coins but they were all found in the same small field. The water theme also occurred at this location. The field is bounded by a river on one of its sides and a modern road on another. The road is believed to follow the path of a Roman road. Given that the field is right next to the river, it is easy to imagine the role it carried out for thousands of years as a stopping off place for travellers to rest and water their horses.

Point 4.

My ARCHI database was created so I could record the locations of thousands upon thousands of UK ancient sites. Once the database could tell me where the known sites were, I had the information I needed to start to work out why they were there. TH



Fig.5. Merovingian gold tremissis (AD 620-640).



Fig.6. Small "Saxon" gold thrymsa.



Fig.9. Silver penny of King Offa (AD 757-796).



Fig.8. Celtic gold quarter stater.



Fig.7. Early medieval mount.



Fig.10. Short cross silver hammered penny.



Fig.11. Long cross silver hammered penny.



Fig.12. Venetian silver solidus.



Fig.13. Castleshaw Roman Fort. The first ancient site that inspired the realisation that my home town of Oldham's history went back much, much further than its cotton mills!