

Connecting With Our Ancestors



Pic.1. My initial finds.
We've all been there!

While writing my previous article, memories floated back to me of my childhood love of science fiction films. The one that really started me thinking about ancient civilisations was the 1960 version of H.G. Wells' "Time Machine". I'm sure many of you have seen the film where Rod Taylor travels far into the future to the land of the Eloi, a people who do not appear to have a government nor laws.

Even though H.G. Wells' had taken us into the future it was clear that he was, in a way, taking us full circle back to our roots. I had read in countless books and journals about the people who had once inhabited our land. However, my scientific training at university had taught me to be aware that sometimes theories and claims are no more than fantastic imaginations dressed as science. As a scientist, I needed evidence. I could not accept all the views I had read until I had the chance to see the evidence with my own eyes.

My minimal understanding of physics and engineering would not be enough to build a time machine like the one in H.G. Wells' novel. However, I knew that if I was given the chance to touch and feel a real object from the ancient past, then there was a chance I could connect with the object. Once connected, the object could whisk me back in time and through it I could see for myself a vision of who I was and where I had come from.

I reasoned that releasing these objects from the ground might help me connect to the past. My aim was to bring reality to a view that I was a product of people who at one point or another had struggled with – and survived – all kinds of hard times. Throughout time we have relied on the goodwill of nature for our existence. However, it can turn against us and as recent events have shown, natural catastrophes, and food shortages resulting from poor harvests, can devastate communities.

We are alive in present times because our ancestors won those battles against adversity; now I wanted to get to know

these survivors better and somehow release their memories from the "underworld".

However, as time went by I began to wonder whether I was ever going to find any of their amazing artefacts, many of which I had seen in this magazine. All I had for my efforts when I became involved in metal detecting were modern buttons, ring pulls and bottle tops.

I had read and heard many times of the out-of-body experience, which propels the finder back in time as they proceed to unearth an object which had been lying quietly and patiently in the soil for hundreds and often thousands of years. An object lost to the earth, living in darkness but still witness to the constant human cycle of prosperity, poverty, famine, war and back to peace, prosperity and happiness – all taking place just inches above it.

This poor creature longed to be found, and I longed to find it and bring it from the darkness into the light. It needed just one swing above and my detector would give it the voice it needed to alert me of its existence and moments later it would see the sunshine again.

The trouble, though, was that I was in the wrong field and I was miles away. Actually, that's an exaggeration – I was just across the road tramping about aimlessly. But for or all my efforts I might as well have been detecting on the moon.

It was on one of these fruitless days that I decided to try and find out whether my local library might contain any information which could point me in the direction of the fourth dimension – time! At first, there didn't seem to be much; but then I stumbled upon the **Victoria County History** for that county. I took one volume down from the shelf and right there in the contents was a list of all the sites and finds reported at the time of publication.

Even though the book was published many years ago, it was a mine of information. In their wisdom the authors had summarised the archaeology and history of the particular county in a list with map references. Without delay I copied down all the sites in the list and, as soon as I

got home, I entered them into my computer. The sites listed became the nuts and bolts of my own time machine – my ARCHI database.

As the winter started to draw in and after the seeds in most of my fields had come to life and germinated, my attention turned to gathering together the sites detailed in all the other copies of the **Victoria County History**. Before long my list of where our ancient ancestors had chosen to live and work had run into thousands.

However, even though my portal to the past was taking form, the view was still covered by a kind of mist which obscured the detail I needed in order to see for myself the world our ancestors inhabited.

I had thought that things would be clearer as I learned more about the past. But this "information overload" actually made it even more difficult. I had to find some way of filtering out the sites near to where I was fieldwalking from the many thousands of sites I had listed in my database. To try and find order in the chaos, I started to draw diagrams of the way the sites were scattered and draw and measure lines between the towns and villages I had permission to detect and the particular sites.

It was then that I had my Eureka moment. Maybe I was overtired or maybe my eyes were playing tricks on me, but amongst those lines triangles seemed to be forming. Why was I now thinking back to my schooldays? I could see myself sitting in yet another boring and dull maths lesson. In my mind's eye I was sitting there twiddling my thumbs and wondering why my time was being wasted on useless symbols and formula.

How wrong I was. Pythagoras had seen those triangles 2,500 years ago and now I understood the significance of his discovery. He, or rather my maths teacher, had shown me the answer to my problem. I could program Pythagoras' theorem into my computer and within an instant the computer could work out which sites were near to me, and only give me a list of those sites! In doing so, I was now able to focus on just those

Pic.2.
Neolithic
arrowhead
found by
ARCHI
subscriber.



sites in the area I was fieldwalking. I knew the landscape well, and now that I knew where my ancestors had settled I could begin to see the world through their eyes.

Now that I had seen and felt my first ancient settlement, I wanted to understand how the people of this place interacted with the people of other nearby settlements. How did they communicate with each other? Did they trade in the way we do? Did they see each other as a threat or did they live in harmony? Even though I was now getting somewhere, I was well aware that more sites had been found since the **Victoria County Histories** were published, and hence I reasoned that more sites lists could have been published in more recent books and journals.

It wasn't long before I had found a second-hand book shop that had a full set of *Britannia the Journal of Roman Studies*. Reading through the references at the end of many very interesting and informative articles I noticed other journals such as the *Proceedings of the Prehistoric Society*. Reading through this journal I found out the most counties have their own journals dedicated to the archaeology and history of that particular county.

After five years' worth of weekends and evenings spent collecting information from many, many books and archaeology journals and entering it into my ARCHI database, I was now able to find out in seconds where exactly I needed to go to realise my dream of not only finding treasure, but also making that personal connection with the past which we all know does not have a price.

Now that I had a more "intelligent" approach to metal detecting, it wasn't long before I was able to use the sites in my database (e.g. crop marks, habitation sites and find spots) to build up a picture of the past. Through place name studies, I began to learn more about the origins of our language. Place names became a particular fascination for me and so I added any place names which suggested antiquity to my ARCHI database. My favourite is Chipping. It is derived from

Search ARCHI for sites near a town or village

If you haven't used ARCHI before click here

Password:

Place Name:

Area to search within: 10 km 5 km 3 km

Site Period: All Roman

Larger Results Font: No Yes

Search ARCHI by UK NGR Co-ordinate

Password:

NGR Letter Pair (eg TQ):

NGR X Axis (eg 12):

NGR Y Axis (eg 34):

Area to search within: 10 km 5 km 3 km

Fig.1. Screenshot of what I like to think of as my Portal to the Past. Building my ARCHI database has allowed me to instantly generate a snapshot of the kind of the ancient sites within 10km of any place in the UK. The links to the maps in the lists of results show the precise location of the site on the ground. This makes it very easy to locate the site and go and visit it. Once at the site, it is always worth taking the time to view the site in the context of the landscape around the site and try to work out why that particular position was chosen. This is an invaluable exercise which can help us gain a deeper insight into how our ancestors viewed the world.

Search by Type of Site

This search will enable you to find sites according to their generic type or classification.

For example, to locate 'banjo enclosures' in Hampshire, enter 'banjo' into the 'Site Type Keyword' box below (without the quotes).

Note: Not all of the records within ARCHI have been indexed so far by their generic type or classification.

Sitetype keyword:

County Name:

Fig.2. Screenshot of the ARCHI "Site Type" search box. I added this feature to my site to address a problem I had while I was studying Field Archaeology. We were asked to write an essay to explain the "Distribution of Iron Age Hill forts". I'm sure if I had easily available locational information at the time, my essay would have gained higher marks!

Search by Name of Site

This search will enable you to find sites by their commonly known name(s) or word elements.

For example, to find the site commonly known as **carnelet**, simply enter this name into the 'Site Name Keyword' box below.

Site Name keyword:

Fig.3. Screenshot of the ARCHI "Site Name" search box. I added this feature to make it easier for me to generate maps showing the locations of sites I knew of by name.

roman	Coin of Vespasian found , Starsted Mountfitchet, TL 4** 2**, essex	info	Road Map	19th C. Map
roman	Denarius found, Roman coin found, Roman find found , Asheldham, TQ 9** 9**, essex	info	Road Map	19th C. Map
roman	Findspot of Roman coin(s) , Rivenhall End, TL 8** 1**, essex	info	Road Map	19th C. Map
roman	Findspot of Roman coin(s) , Saint Osyth, TM 1** 1**, essex	info	Road Map	19th C. Map
roman	Findspot of Roman coin(s) , Old Harlow, TL 4** 1**, essex	info	Road Map	19th C. Map
roman	Gold Roman coin found , Little Bromley, TL 0** 2**, essex	info	Road Map	19th C. Map
roman	Gold coin found , Maldon, TL 8** 0**, essex	info	Road Map	19th C. Map

Fig.4. Screenshot of a portion of the results list generated by ARCHI. This particular ARCHI search was for Roman coins in a particular area. An appreciation of the distribution of findspots and the concentration of particular finds can help us build a picture of the economic status of an area in ancient times. Analysis of the findspots of Iron Age coins for example has enabled researchers to work out the extent of the regions controlled by particular Iron Age tribes. It is generally accepted that the finds reported by metal detectorists have been the main source of data for such analysis.



Pic.5. Iron age boar's head and trefoil.

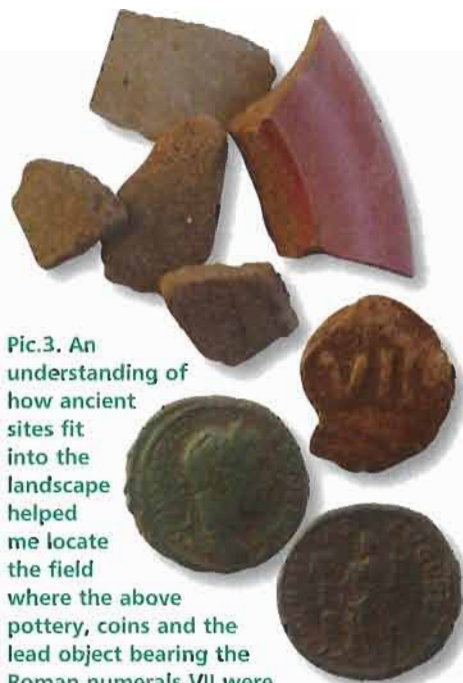


Pic.6. Roman clasp.

Pic.7. Saxon brooch.



Pics.5-7 were found by ARCHI subscribers.



Pic.3. An understanding of how ancient sites fit into the landscape helped me locate the field where the above pottery, coins and the lead object bearing the Roman numerals VII were found. The field was at the top of a hill with good views over the surrounding countryside overlooking a Roman road. I like to think that maybe the 7th Roman Legion was stationed there!



Pic.4. Finds from a field called Blacklands. Nearly all fields have names and sometimes the names can indicate historical activity. The field name element "black" has a strong association with Roman activity and these two lovely pieces came up from a field called Blacklands. I will be talking about fieldnames and how they can help you locate new sites in a forthcoming article.



increase the chances of finding those metallic historical records our ancestors gave to the ground many generations before I came to tread in their footsteps.

By this point my ARCHI database had more than 100,000 sites listed. However, it had become apparent to me that I would never find the time to walk over a fraction of the numerous sites listed. This is when I decided that the least I could do was to give my many years' work the light of day by making my research available via my ARCHI database on my Digital Documents (www.digital-documents.co.uk) website.

It was now left to others to make the discoveries I could not possibly make on my own. I had my critics, though. Some in the archaeological establishment suggested that I had opened up our heritage to hoards of marauders. I stuck to my view that these artefacts have a right to be found and that although there will be losses, these will be insignificant compared to the benefits. Since then, many beautiful objects have been found and reported with the help of ARCHI. However, for many others and myself, the real beauty is not in the material properties of the artefact, but how the artefact can remind us of our place in time.

I don't know whether the object I talked about at the start of this article is still lying in the ground waiting to be discovered. I hope not. Maybe you the reader has found it this very day. If it is official "Treasure", remember that before you declare your find and it enters a showcase in the British Museum, put it in a place of pride in your home and cherish it. For the short time that you are its guardian, show it to your family and friends so that they may also experience the magic you felt when lifted it from the darkness and brought back into existence. It has a story to tell and it has been waiting for you to give it a voice. Allow it to speak. Give it the chance to tell us of all it has witnessed while waiting mute all those years until the swing of your detector gave it a voice for you to hear and release it from the ground. TH

the early word "ceap" which means market, and is often associated with Saxon market towns. Ever wondered why you get cheap stuff at the market?

I don't know whether it was wishful thinking or sound reasoning, but I searched my database for all places called "Chipping" and set about getting permission for some fields around a village I knew that had Chipping in its name.

It took me two years, but my research was finally rewarded when I opened up that clump of earth from a field nearby one of those towns and saw a beautiful gold thrymsa – a coin dating back to about AD 620-640. These were the beginnings of the Dark Ages, the historically dark time which followed the

exodus of the Romans and preceded the time when particular tribal regions of this island were grouped together to form what we now know as the British Isles.

Finding this golden time capsule confirmed my view that it was more than wise to spend some of my limited amount of time seeking out the records of what had been found previously – and where it was found.

Now when I went out I would be searching in areas that were much likely to be fruitful. It was clear to me now that if our ancient ancestors chose a certain spot to live, work, grow their crops, keep their animals and form settlements and markets, then these would be the features in the land I should be searching for. This approach would infinitely