

DETECTING ON THE WEB

How I learned to love the Internet and improve my finds rate

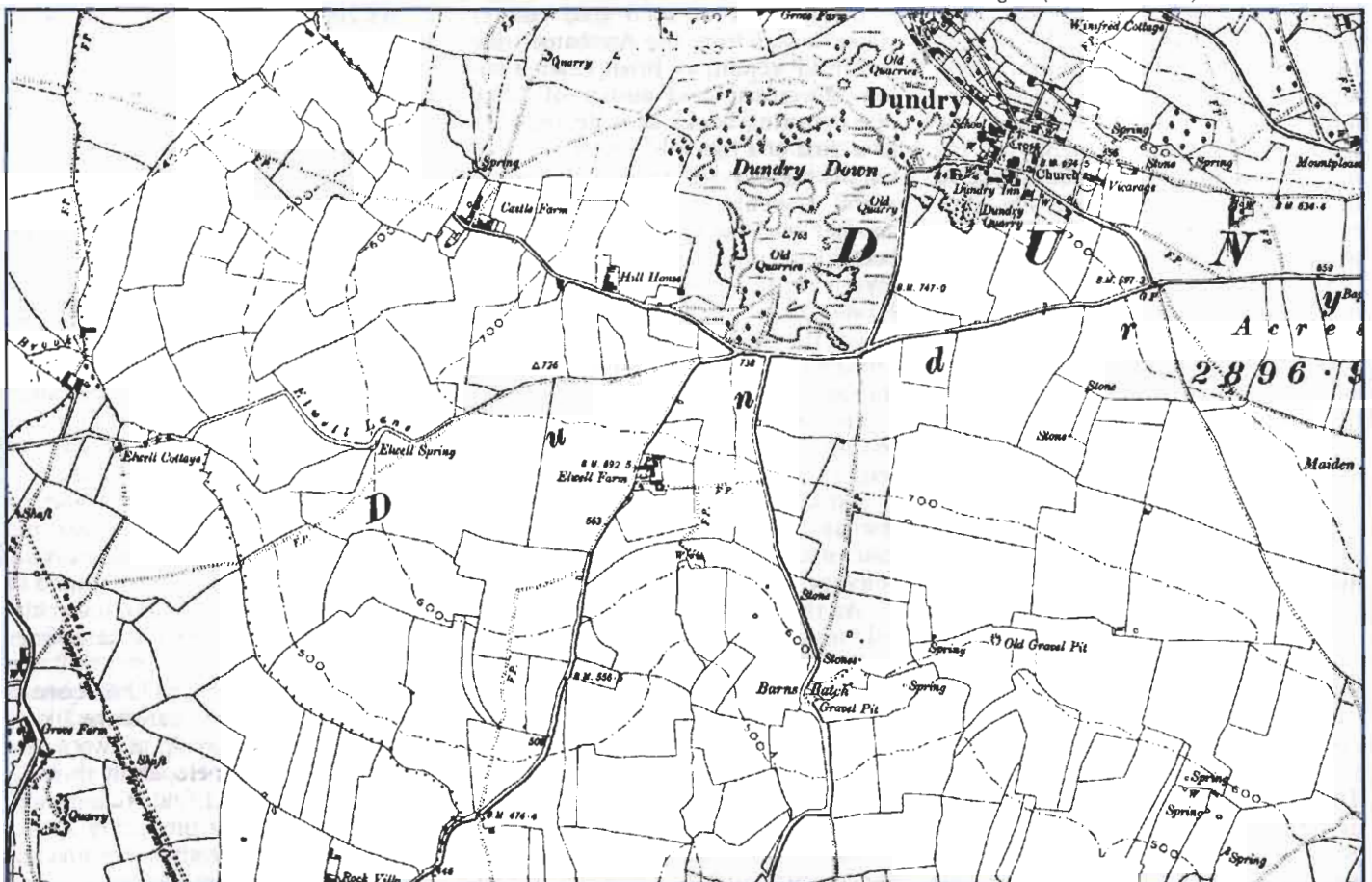
Ted Fletcher

I've called myself an outdoor historian for many a year. Offer me the chance to join a group of fellow enthusiasts sharing the expenses of a car journey to distant lands where dark soil has just come under plough, and I'll bite your knob-twiddling hand off. I'll even go alone by bike if prospects sound especially tasty. The nine-to-five job, the family, rash deadline promises made to editors, all fly from my mind when the temptation to get out there and make finds dances in my mind's eye. Inevitably I've had my share of disappointments when what sounded like a quest for the Golden Apples of the Hesperides turned out to be the fool's gold of a wild goose chase; but, by and large, I can't grumble too much about my outdoor detecting life so far. But there's the rub: life so far now leaves a shorter span between today and the day

I first switched-on a BFO detector, than the span between today and the day I'll make the last journey to the big gold mine in the sky. I can no longer afford profligacy with time. No more speculative trips to distant parts on a lick and a prayer and an optimistic hope that there'll be arable land and a farmer who might turn out friendly. No more jaunts to spots about which I've heard only a vague rumour that prospects might glitter a little. Nowadays, I've got to aim to get it right every time. Fortunately I've recently discovered that the Internet lets me do precisely that 99 times out of 100. It's information worth sharing, not only with long-in-the-tooth (or even no teeth at all) buffers like myself, but also with younger hobbyists who have very little precious free time to devote to detecting in the hectic 21st century.

I've been a computer enthusiast for more than a decade, but for most of those years I used keyboards and monitors as little more than very efficient typewriters. Put it down to the fact that my first hardback publisher, Blandford Press, who handled such titles of mine as **Bottle Collecting** and **Treasure Hunting For All**, was founded in the Victorian era and still used antiquated book production methods as late as the swinging 1970s. Even **Treasure Hunting** magazine, in its pre-Greenlight

Map.1. This map, picked at random from the Somerset editions of 19th century 6in Ordnance Survey maps, shows the mouth-watering potential of on-line map resources. I can see an old green lane... (Where does it lead?)... several standing stones... (What did they mark?)... the outlines of pre-Victorian field boundaries... (What was lost under those hedges?)... several nodal points where three and more footpaths converge... (Who met there?)



Publishing days, preferred manuscripts to arrive at its editorial offices as typed sheets of A4 paper accompanied by glossy photographic prints. If that sounds somewhat antiquated let me add that the syndicated features publisher I presently work for in my 9-5 weekday job - a company that supplies copy to three national newspapers and more than 100 regional titles - still has DOS-based computers, with no mouse to move the cursor, in the department (mine!) where most of the creative writing gets done. Embarrassment more than an urge to move with the times, thrust me reluctantly into the www world. Some text I had supplied to the printer of a detector manufacturer's catalogue went missing in the post. With a deadline looming, the printer telephoned begging me to send replacement copy as soon as possible. "Can you transmit it by Email?" he asked. Not wishing to sound like an outdated old geezer, I replied, "I'll have it with you in a few minutes." Then I peddled as swiftly as my legs could turn bike wheels to a local stationery wholesaler who had just begun offering an emailing service. It cost so much to send four pages of text that I decided on the spot to update to a computer described by the salesman in my neighbourhood cut-price electronics store as "Internet ready". The trouble was, my readiness failed to match that of the computer. It took the combined patience and resources of TH editor Greg Payne and a copy of *The Internet For Dummies* to teach me how to add attachments to Emails and how to send illustrations down the wires. The really big breakthrough in my Internet education occurred during a confinement at home with a chest infection. I couldn't visit my favourite London libraries to undertake what I call fundamental bookshelf research, so I began to nose around in the virtual library shelves of Google, Lycos and the other famous names in the bigga-byte world of search engines. What an eye-opener! Almost every book I itched to read would appear on my monitor screen for no more effort than a few mouse-clicks....followed by some very long waits. So long, in fact, that frustration pointed me in the direction of Broadband. It's costlier, but quicker by far; a must-have for anyone hoping to see old documents and maps on his/her screen in less time than it takes to obtain original papers from dusty storerooms in academic libraries. That brings the history of my Internet education up-to-date. Let me now offer you a practical demonstration to compare old-fash-



Map.2. You can bring useful snippets from modern Ordnance Survey maps to your screen when doing on-line research. Good for general orientations, etc, but no substitute for your own marked-up Explorers.

ioned map reading and library bookshelf research with doing the same investigations via a modern PC with Broadband. The example will probably ring bells with many northern readers - the renowned medieval cattle fair site at Stagshaw Bank in Northumberland. I claim (and can back my claim with numerous witnesses) to have discovered Stagshaw Bank as a detecting site. I located the hammered-rich areas of this vast stretch of grassland in the 1970s when I operated a detector retailing business in Darlington, Co Durham. Among the purchasing perks offered to my customers I included invitations to accompany me on detecting forays with their new machines. So many people took up my offer that finding fresh sites became an almost full-time job. The shop opened on very few days each week ... but I had lots of satisfied customers. In those days the Holy Grail for most (northern) detectorists amounted to finding a Roman coin. With that necessity in mind, I read numerous books about the Roman occupation of northern England, chasing up all kinds of leads hinting at lost Roman roads, ploughed-out villa sites and, especially, the modern arable fields around what had once been major Roman forts and towns. Corbridge (Roman *Corstopitum*) soon attracted my roving eye; its flanking arable fields and nearby riverside produced numerous Roman coins for customers toiled-up with Compass 77B machines, the recommended detector for difficult plough soils in those days. Talking to old folk in Corbridge village, I learned that many octogenarian residents could still recall their grandparents telling of a place even more famous in Victorian times than the Roman ruins: a vast

tract of common land to the north of the village that had provided the location for England's greatest one-day fair; this was not only in Victorian times, but also in Georgian, Tudor, perhaps even as far back as Anglo-Saxon days. I sussed out this new location - Stagshaw Bank Common - the very next day and gave it five hours of non-stop arm swinging without producing a positive signal. Then I went back to the Tyne riverbanks and found a few worn Roman coins by way of consolation. Those grots restored my faith in the 77B. A few days later a London detector wholesaler telephoned to ask if I'd be interested in stocking a new machine, the Arado 120B, reputed to have exceptional depth on unploughed grass. That bleak moorland sprang to mind at once, prompting me to place a small order for three machines. A week later I switched on the first of them as I stepped once again onto the rough grass of Stagshaw Common. I don't think I'd taken more than 10 paces before the Arado's needle nudged into the green, indicating a non-ferrous target. I made a mess when extracting the find because my digging tool was the small trowel I invariably used when finding Roman coins on arable land. Eventually, after much hacking and hole widening, I held in my hand a delightful Philip and Mary shilling dated 1554. The portrait side of the coin was better than F grade and I felt thrilled to have confirmed Stagshaw Bank Common as a place where Tudor cash transactions took place ... and the Arado 120B as a superb tool for winking hammered money from great depths. God knows how many lost hammered coins my customers recovered from the common during the rest



Fig.1. A worn George III one-third guinea dated 1797 recovered from the edge of a pond where Scottish drovers watered their cattle.

Fig.2. The artist positioned himself close to a pond then waited for the drovers and their animals to approach.



of that memorable year - hundreds certainly, thousands perhaps. One man, a diligent and dedicated searcher who, despite ill health, put in long stints with his heavy and cumbersome Arado, achieved a grand total of 19 hammered gold coins in a single year. I became obsessed with Stagshaw and its history, investing more than £50 in Victorian 6in OS maps and topographical books on Northumbria. I pestered archivists in major northern libraries and public records offices, often receiving a cold shoulder when I mentioned that I owned a metal detector. But research paid off to some extent, leaving me richer in knowledge about likely hot spots, and guiding my future search efforts.

Here's a précis that combines information gathered from three eye-witness accounts of the great fair in the early 19th century when it was probably past its best in terms of numbers of visitors and money transactions: "This, the largest one-day fair in England, takes place twice each year, on the day before Whit Sunday, and on July 4th. The land on which most of the livestock is sold lies just south of the Roman Wall and straddles the parishes of Corbridge and of St John Lee. Trades people attend from all parts of England and Scotland. The main business derives from sales of cattle, horses, sheep and pigs. Much jewellery also changes hands, including a large number of watches sold at

auktion by Newcastle pawnbrokers. Substantial quantities of cloth are displayed by vendors who spread out their bales on the grass around the pond. Beyond the south side of the Horse Fair a pleasure fair attracts huge crowds. Visitors may see Wombwells Famous Menagerie of wild beasts, or buy gingerbread, oranges, cherries, nuts and spices. The fun of the fair on that side of the road also includes many drinking and gambling booths. Scottish drovers who bring cattle to the livestock fair frequently dissipate their profits on drink and betting. The more sober among these hardy men keep to themselves before and after the cattle sales." It was (and remains) thoughts of those sober drovers and the money they must have had about their persons when the sales finished that fuelled my attempts to investigate locations just beyond the cattle fair site. I wondered where the drovers camped...and where they kept their cattle before fair day...and what routes they took when approaching Stagshaw. Water must have played a crucial role because livestock can't look its best if thirsty. The trouble was, every time I tried to extend the search I needed fresh research material. It didn't

come cheap, and some could not be bought or borrowed. Frustrated mainly by lack of large-scale maps, and aware that the numbers of coins found on the main site had diminished after the first great bonanza, I gradually lost interest in the Corbridge area. And when I moved to the south-east of England not long afterwards, Stagshaw Bank became a spot only occasionally revisited. Things changed when Broadband entered my life. I'm grateful to TH reader Tony Stone for introducing me to Somerset County Council's on-line archive of old 6in Ordnance Survey maps. (Check them out at www.somerset.gov.uk/archives). Taking Tony's advice, I investigated other county archives on-line, including Northumberland. My desktop searches soon led to www.old-maps.co.uk where I gazed open-mouthed at 1860s 6in maps of Stagshaw Bank and the Corbridge area. To my amazement I now had the ability to click at the edges of the maps and watch the image move north, south, east, or west of the cattle fair. I could trace drovers' lanes beyond Hadrian's Wall. I could also pinpoint the locations of ponds and small square fields flanking water sources a day's driving distance from the fair site. Drovers probably encamped at such places for centuries. I fought bravely against the urge to dash northward and put my

Fig.4. This James II threepence, dated 1687, was bent double when located at more than 8in; proof that my ancient Arado 120B has not lost its poke.

Fig.3. Two brass tokens found in the space of a few yards. What a pity the punters weren't playing for higher stakes.



Fig.5. My oldest find of the trip - a 1580s Elizabeth I half-groat. It has a CIVITAS LONDON reverse, attesting that money from far afield came to the great fair.



Fig.6. A George I 1720s Irish coin found in a muddy ditch on the main road leading to Stagshaw. I've read somewhere that crowds were often so vast on the fairground for weeks before the sales began that people had to sleep in local ditches.



Fig.7. Late Victorian shilling, probably among the last coins to be lost on the cattle fair site. Railways eventually superseded droving as a means of transporting fresh meat.



Fig.8. Detail from a silver spoon that might have been sold at the fair.

indoors findings to some in-the-field tests. I decided to subject Stagshaw Bank to some electronic investigations first and, via the Google search engine, clicked my way to a net page titled www.genuki.co.uk where more surprises awaited. It took less than 15 minutes to find and read those 19th century eyewitness accounts of the ancient fair. But an even bigger surprise came when I realized that this Web site, the brainchild of a group of dedicated genealogists, offers hundreds upon hundreds of village and parish histories, free of charge to private researchers. Check out your own favourite country village and prepare for a pleasant surprise! I've subscribed to the service offered by digital-documents.co.uk for several years and often consulted the CD version of their Archaeological Site Index. It is an excellent research source in its own right, but even more exciting when used in conjunction with the information I've described above. My latest indoor site research method now works thus: I spread out the appropriate modern Ordnance Survey Explorer map on a small table next to my computer. I then delve into genuki, and old-maps, and ARCHI, transferring all useful information as pencilled notes onto the Explorer map. I've begun to

think of these resources as four golden rings with the power that Tolkien's rings had when Gandalf got his hands on them. A fifth "gold ring" has just come to my attention. If you're a regular TH buyer you'll know that back in 2001 I reviewed a fascinating book titled **London - The Photographic Atlas**. It provides an aerial view of London photographed from 5,000 feet. Every street, every tree, even every London bus is on view, as well as the banks of Old Father Thames. Well, an even better treat now lies in store for detectorists. Harper Collins and getmapping.com have recently published **England - The Photographic Atlas**. A copy of this amazing work, which I hope to review shortly in TH, will set you back £99. Use it in conjunction with the information I've provided in this article and you will never feel starved of exciting places to take your detector. You will also know at a glance the location of every arable field in England! On my next free weekend I dashed northwards with my detector and my marked-up Explorer maps, and followed the ghosts of those old drovers. Only a single gold coin - a worn George III one-third guinea - came to light around a pond site north

of Hadrian's Wall. But when I checked locations closer to the fair site (still using my antique Arado 120B) I confirmed with an Elizabeth I silver coin that pickings remain in an area that has witnessed more than 30 years of detecting effort. For one exciting moment I thought I had stumbled on the site of a rich gamblers' den when two gold-coloured objects came to light within a few minutes. Alas, they turned out to be 18th century brass tokens rather than the noble metal. Still, they look smart after a dip in my favourite cleaning fluid. I'm certain that more of the real stuff still awaits discovery in the Corbridge locality. My five magical gold rings have the power to guide me to the right spots one of these days. In a future article I plan to use methods described this month to track down some sites with Anglo-Saxon potential. Meanwhile, I'm so confident I (and you will be if you follow my advice on your favourite magazine's pages) that I can now find productive sites anywhere in England, that I'm giving serious consideration to a re-launch of my Outdoor Historians' Group. I'd like to hear from readers anywhere in England interested in forming small groups to share the costs of getting to sites and paying landowners for search permissions. Drop me an electronic line at fletcher-news@aol.com **TH**

Mike R. Vosper



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