

The National Council for Metal Detecting (NCMD) Report on Metal Detecting in England and Wales.

This report is in response to the APPAG inquiry into metal detecting, issued in April 2024.

There is a wealth of detecting experience across the NCMD Committee and Board of Trustees, many of us have been metal detecting for more than 25 years, so we were extremely surprised at the comments suggesting that the relationship between archaeologists and detectorists has improved significantly over that time.

We would beg to differ and have highlighted a number of key points that we feel clearly demonstrates the reasons for this view.

We would also like to make you aware that we have had a flood of calls and emails from across our 38,000 membership that mirror this view and in particular, the consensus is one of concern that this inquiry is extremely one sided and that the detecting community is not being fairly represented in it.

Telling us that everything is fine, and that the inquiry is in our best interests doesn't make it so, and the suspicion that abounds tells its own story.

In general, detectorists feel that we are treated with a level of contempt by a large section of the archaeological community, particularly the hierarchy, and there is little or no acknowledgement of the significant contribution that we have made to the archaeological record over the past 40 years.

Academics sing the praises of the PAS database, yet the vast majority of the 1.7 million finds have come from detectorists and many hundreds of treasure items have added to the displays of museums across the country, including items of National and International significance, yet still detectorists are still branded as the bad guys.

The aim of this report is to reflect a much clearer picture from both sides.

OVERVIEW - ARCHAEOLOGY

To Archaeologists, context is extremely important so when carrying out an excavation, the plough soil is removed and placed in a pile to one side.

This is because anything in the plough soil is completely out of context, it has been churned together by ploughing over hundreds of years and there are numerous studies that show that artefacts can be tens if not hundreds of meters from the place they were originally dropped or deposited.

When carrying out surveys as part of planning applications, again the plough soil is of no consequence because it has no archaeological context and therefore anything in the plough soil is left to be destroyed and lost forever under construction sites across the country.

There is some debate about using metal detectors as part of archaeological excavations, but this is generally within the subsoil and in trenches themselves, which might require some level of training to comply with archaeological best practise but is not generally available to detectorists.

However, this level of training is not required when detecting the plough soil in the surrounding area of the field, or when detecting the trenches after the archaeologists have finished their work.

OVERVIEW - METAL DETECTING

The vast majority of detecting finds across the UK come from the plough soil, which tends to be between 8 and 10 inches in depth, whereas the average depth that metal detectors will locate a small metallic item is between 4 and 6 inches. Therefore, the vast majority of metal detecting does not conflict with archaeology because detecting finds come from the plough soil that archaeologists generally ignore.

It is true however, that many metal detectorists have helped to discover important archaeological sites across the country that would never have otherwise been found. This is from discovering 'hot spots' in areas with no previous archaeological record.

The majority of metal detectorists are in the hobby because they have a love of history and value the opportunity to find and record historic items for future generations.

Unfortunately, modern farming methods from the Victorian period onwards are slowly damaging and even destroying artefacts in the plough soil, and huge swathes of land are being built on across the country, so the items being retrieved by detectorists are being saved for posterity.

It would seem that between us, detectorists and archaeologists are the perfect partnership to ensure that our historic artefacts are saved for future generations, but despite the best efforts of the NCMD and detectorists to work together with archaeologists, a huge gap still exists.

FINDS RECORDING

The majority of finds come from plough soil and many detectorists record their finds via the Portable Antiquities Scheme (PAS) database, but the availability of Finds Liaison Officers is limited because the majority work part time in the role. Were they more accessible, many more finds would be recorded than the 1.7 million finds that are currently on the database.

Archaeologists on the other hand, don't record their finds on the PAS database, nor on any other similar database therefore their finds are not accessible to the public. They simply file a report that sits on file in their local museum archive along with the artefacts they recover.

They also find far fewer coins or artefacts because they don't investigate the plough soil surrounding their excavation sites.

TREASURE ITEMS

There are many hundreds of treasure items recorded each year by detectorists, many of these are claimed by museums across the country and include items of National and International importance. The majority of these items come from plough soil or from areas that would never be investigated by archaeologists.

Archaeologists do find treasure items, but far fewer as they search a much smaller area in their trenches during their excavations.

The treasure process has long been shrouded in mystery, as there was no transparency in the process. Finds can take many, many years to go through the system with no updated explanation or feedback whatsoever, and therefore many myths and theories on social media have been created as a result.

The NCMD has tried to dispel the myths and provide some transparency by asking for answers to the questions that are most frequently asked by detectorists. The PAS suggested that they would create a Q&A list for us to share with our members.

Unfortunately, they then decided to cut us out and have it published in The Searcher magazine, rather than provide us with a copy to share with our 38,000 members. I don't believe it was even offered to the Treasure Hunting magazine which seems rather one-sided? Why would you only want to share important information with a very small section of those it affects?

THE NATIONAL COUNCIL FOR METAL DETECTING (NCMD)

The NCMD was formed over 40 years ago by a group of Metal Detectorists who came together to fight the STOP campaign, which was a move by archaeologists to ban metal detecting in the UK.

Had they succeeded, millions of finds would be still underground, the Crosby Garrett Helmet, Ryedale Hoard, Hoxne Hoard and the Frome Hoard to name but a few. Also, the PAS database wouldn't exist, so this world class academic resource would also not be available.

Interestingly, one of the most vocal of those fighting to ban detecting is now the Chair of the PAS Advisory Group and is, I believe, a member of the APPAG Group that is carrying out the inquiry into detecting? Is this not another conflict of interest?

Since this current NCMD committee was formed in 2021, we have worked tirelessly to improve relations with the PAS and others, we have also invested heavily in technology to support our members and to promote responsible detecting in the UK.

- We provide a wide range of information for detectorists, including training videos to promote responsible detecting and best practise in the UK.
- We have provided a range of country specific information, video's, and search agreements. We are currently producing additional videos to include recent changes in the law, and to explain and demystify the treasure process.

- We have developed an extremely successful mobile app for accurately recording finds and findspots.
- We are currently developing a finds reporting portal that will allow for the recording of current finds but also to record previous finds to allow members to create a full digital record of their finds collection.
- We will be producing a training video to highlight best practise for ensuring that wherever possible, weights and dimensions are included in the record, and we will be including tips on how to get the best photo's using mobile phones.
- This information will be available for FLO's to access, and we have made the PAS fully aware of what we are creating. We have offered to include the PAS and their technical team in that development so that our technology can potentially integrate into their new website, but we've been given nothing but negatives and reasons why this isn't a good idea, and nothing constructive to help make it work.
- We have created a 'Hoard Fund' to contribute towards the cost of correctly excavating hoards or significant finds, for a speedy recovery. We also provide a 'hotline' number for our members to call when they find something significant, and we connect them with the relevant FLO as well as notifying the PAS.

Sadly, this doesn't seem to be promoted by the PAS to their FLO's, which seems bizarre given the importance placed on items being retrieved by archaeologists so that all contextual information can be recorded. Why is this?

- The NCMD are currently working with Rally and Detecting Event organisers to create a 'Code of Conduct for Detecting Events', so that we can ensure that 'Best Practise' is being carried out by correctly managing the event and encouraging the recording of finds.

The main focus of the PAS now seems to be on self-recording, which after 27 years stands at 70 detectorists out of potentially 50 /60,000 detectorists, which can hardly be classed as a success.

Conversely, archaeologists have never needed to record their finds on the National database and so add to the academic resource for fellow archaeologists, which means that members of the public never get to see them either. Instead, they end up in a written file which gathers dust in some museum rather than being recorded on a national database for the benefit of everyone. Why is this?

PAS NATIONAL CONFERENCE

The PAS National Conference in 2023 was held in York Museum and the theme was the benefits of archaeologists working with detectorists. The NCMD wasn't formally invited, but we were made aware of it at a late stage by one of our Trustees whose wife is an archaeologist.

A delegation of 5 NCMD committee members attended the conference, we met the Head of the PAS and others when we arrived. During the opening speech, there was a formal welcome for the teams of delegates from the DCMS, Natural England, NFU, English Heritage and the National Trust, but there was no mention of the delegation from the NCMD, there was no welcome and no acknowledgement at all which was very pointed, especially given that the day was about working with detectorists.

Given that the NCMD represents some 75% of the detecting community, this is extremely disrespectful and is indicative of their attitude towards us.

There were some good presentations, but none were from detectorists and indeed, there was not one speaker from the detecting community, nor was the NCMD invited to speak.

A member of the DCMS who was present at the conference, expressed their surprise that there were no detectorists involved in a conference whose theme was working with detectorists!

Following the conference, I asked the organisers if the NCMD could have copies of the presentations to share with our 38,000 members, but this was not forthcoming.

ISSUES FOR DISCUSSION

1. Detectorists complain constantly at the lack of communication from members of the PAS, both when recording finds and especially when going through the treasure process. What can be done to improve this?
2. The general feedback from the PAS and from certain FLO's is that we have a duty to record finds, we have a duty to comply with the law, therefore we have no right to complain about the process.

Interestingly, archaeologists don't record their finds on the national database yet don't seem to have that same duty, except for potential Treasure. Why is this?

3. The criterion for recording finds with the PAS has been changed, but without any discussion or debate. The PAS management are now insisting on an 8 figure grid reference, otherwise they will refuse to record finds. Given that this is a voluntary scheme, and this was never previously a condition, who agreed and sanctioned this change?
4. The PAS insist that the majority of finds on the database are accurate to an 8 figure grid reference, yet they also know that this isn't the case at all because 90 % of all the 1.7 million finds recorded were complete guesstimates.
 - a. For the first 20 years of the scheme, findspots were generally created by finders pointing to a rough area of an OS map where the artefact was found, and the grid reference was created by the FLO from that approximate area.
 - b. It may be 8 figures, but is based on the rough area the item was found, not the exact findspot. Why isn't this being acknowledged?

- c. Archaeologists are fully aware that the spot that an artefact has been located today bears no resemblance to where it was originally dropped or deposited, because it has been moved around by the action of ploughing as well as the effects of weather. Again, why isn't this being acknowledged and why are they now insisting on an 8-figure grid reference? Is this just to reduce the number of general finds shown to them?
5. At a recent Pas Advisory Group meeting, it was stated that they wanted to contact landowners and when asked why, stated that they were aware that many landowners didn't want detectorists to record to 8 figures, therefore the PAS wanted to ask them to not allow detecting on their land at all, so that artefacts can be saved for future generations.

This is despite knowing that finds are constantly deteriorating because of farming methods and are also being buried under construction projects all across the country. This therefore feels like a back door attempt to reduce and control metal detecting with no real justification. Who sanctioned this?

6. At a recent PAS Advisory Group meeting, the NCMD raised the question of the Archi subscription service, where subscribers have access to a huge database of the UK findspots of metal detecting finds that are also on the PAS database. After much debate, it was acknowledged that the PAS database is being 'scraped' of its data, but there is nothing that can be done to stop this. Why is the PAS data not being better protected? Why is it being allowed to help populate a subscription service?
7. The NCMD Communications Officer sent an FOI request to the British Museum to ask about items from detectorists that may have been lost, damaged or stolen when going through the finds recording or treasure processes. He was advised that they don't have that information, so he should instead write to each individual museum and each individual FLO for that information.
 - a. How can it be that the body overseeing the PAS processes has no idea of what is going on within the PAS organisation.
 - b. How can the BM or the PAS not know if items they are ultimately responsible for are being lost, damaged or stolen?
8. During a meeting of the PAS Advisory Group, we raised this subject and were told categorically that it is not possible for finds to be lost, damaged or stolen because all museums use the "SPECTRUM" process for the secure storage and management of finds.

This statement was not questioned by the Chair of the meeting, yet we know from our own experience that this is certainly not the case for every location that handles detecting finds, so what are the other processes being used? What are the safeguards?

9. When it became clear that a large number of potential treasure items were missing in Cumbria, we were kept in the dark about it. When we later asked about it in an Advisory Group meeting, we were told that due to a recent office move and a new FLO taking over, a number of items had been mislaid and were no doubt in a box at the back of a cupboard. It later transpired that there was no office move, no change of FLO and it was already known that they had been stolen by a PAS officer.

It transpired that all the detectorists who had items stolen by the FLO were NCMD members, so we were asking for information on their behalf but were given none. We arranged a zoom meeting with the victims of the thefts to give them a voice, collect the facts and try to reassure them that justice would be served. We invited the head of the PAS to attend the meeting, but sadly felt that he had to decline our offer.

When the theft of artifacts was discovered at the British museum, it made front page news, and a statement was issued by the Chair of Trustees to reassure the public that those responsible would be brought to justice and that all steps would be taken to ensure that it can never happen again.

Yet when the theft of detecting finds was made by a FLO, there was no such statement, no reassurance to detectorists that their finds would be safe in future. Why was that? Do detectorists not matter? Are we not also tax-paying members of the public?

What we actually received from the PAS was a statement that "As these were potential treasure items, they don't actually belong to the finder, they belong to the state, so we don't understand why you are complaining". Well not all the stolen items were potential treasure, but even if they were, surely that would still have been a crime. Is that acceptable?

Why did the Trustees of the BM not get involved with the PAS stolen items? Having 45 odd FLOs working for PAS, but all having a different boss must be a recipe for disaster, but ultimately, the BM is responsible.

After pushing for an update, the NCMD was told in early January that all the information had been collated and that a decision on potential charges would be made at the end of the month or certainly by early February. It is now May and still no news. What has now changed?

This has fuelled rumours of a cover up and certainly undermines the confidence of detectorists in the PAS processes as it stands now.

Can we reassure our members and the landowners that all the finds that they hand in will be kept secure, because new measures have been put in place by PAS to ensure their safety?

What is being done to restore the confidence of detectorists and the general public?

10. Our question and answers are regularly being excluded from the PAAG meeting minutes. These excluded items are presumably being sanctioned by the Chair of the meetings.

- a. For instance, when questioned why both the question and the answer given about items stolen while in the care of the PAS were deliberately excluded from the minutes, they blamed the delegates for not checking.

No answer or apology ever given. Similarly, the topic of exact findspots was completely omitted and we had to push for their inclusion. Does the Chair and minute taker of a DCMS meeting have the right to exclude and change what they disagree with?

- b. It will be interesting to see if the discussions around the scraping of the PAS Database is included in the next minutes, or the PAS asking farmers not to allow metal detecting so that finds can be left in the ground for future generations.
- c. This treatment generates a feeling that we are not seen as an equal partner in the process, especially when we discover that the Chair of the PAAG is involved in other groups and is apparently holding secret meetings with others about the future of metal detecting.

11. Are the ministers and the DCMS aware of the Institute of Detectorists and the £50,000 public funds that were allocated to this project? Are they aware of how the money has been spent, who has benefitted? and whether it represented value for money?

The funding was supposed to be for the setting up of an organisation to provide training to those detectorists that would like to assist in archaeological excavations, by learning the correct techniques for working in and around trenches. It seems that after much public money and 7 years, this project has gone nowhere, so why is that? and is it being done again?

QUESTIONS ABOUT THE INQUIRY.

- Why are the APPAG meetings being held behind closed doors? Why are there no agendas or meeting minutes being published? Where are the minutes of the previous meetings?
- Are the members of these secret groups deciding what information the Ministers get to see as part of this inquiry?

How can a Minister form a fair and considered judgment if he is only told one side of the story?

Where is the democracy or fairness in that process?

- Why wasn't the NCMD involved in any of the discussions leading up to the Inquiry?

- Why isn't the NCMD being represented in the Inquiry itself, given that we represent around 75% of the detecting community?
- Why does the APPAG have discussions with members of the PAS but not members of the detecting community or the largest official body that represents it?
- Would the Inquiry look into the possibility of bringing in legislation to make it compulsory for future construction projects, to require a metal detecting survey to be carried out across all the land that is being built on, so that some of the artefacts and coins contained in the plough soil can be saved from being lost forever?

How many thousands of important artifacts would this help to save for the nation?
How many Crosby Garret Helmets, Ryedale Hoards or Frome hoards would this help to save for the benefit of future generations?

I was recently informed that a large hoard had been discovered on a building site by a digger driver. He had no idea of the law and his company had no protocols in place for such an event, or if they did, he was unaware of it.

He ended up dishing the contents of the hoard out to his mates at his local pub, but fortunately the local FLO was made aware and at least some of the items had been recovered.

I have numerous examples of similar events, of items being scattered across construction sites and lost to the nation forever. These items would all have been saved and recorded had a metal detecting survey taken place before construction began. Doing it as part of the planning process would make sense, would cause no delays, and would incur no additional cost.

Local detecting clubs would provide the service for free but would be required to record their finds using the NCMD portal and would be allowed to keep what they find unless deemed to be treasure. All potential treasure items would go through the normal process and be divided equally between the finder and landowner as at present.

CONCLUSION

It is unfortunate that after more than two years of trying to work more closely with PAS and PAAG we feel we are still being kept at arm's length.

We have been constantly striving to provide solutions to help solve current problems to the benefit of all parties, yet our efforts are being ignored. It genuinely feels that the PAS don't actually want to find solutions, therefore our only conclusion can be is that they are working to a different agenda.

The fact that this inquiry is so one-sided, and yet again we are being excluded from the debate means we therefore have no choice but to push back.

Hopefully, this report will go some way to providing the detectorists side of the story because unless it is recognised and agreed that there is a problem, there can be no solution.

Ultimately, the preservation of our history is at stake here, there is still a huge number of artefacts in the ground, left to us by our forebears. Whether it remains there to be destroyed and lost forever or is recovered and recorded for posterity is what this debate is really about.

The NCMD and the detecting community we represent are very clear that we have a duty to ensure the retrieval and preservation of our nations heritage. In order to achieve this, we are happy to work with any and all agencies to create a cohesive solution that benefits all parties.

In my very first meeting with Michael Lewis, Head of the PAS I stated that I could never understand why there is such a gulf between archaeologists and detectorists, because we both share a love of history, we are both passionate about the preservation of our history and it's therefore in our mutual interest to be working together to achieve this because both sides have a part to play.

I believed that statement to be true then, and after almost three years in my role, I believe it more than ever and will continue to strive for an effective solution to this issue.

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For and on behalf of;
The NCMD Policy Committee
The NCMD Board of Trustees
The NCMD Membership of 38,000 members
The Metal Detecting Community and everyone involved in the hobby.

Addendum – In our discussions with Michael Lewis, we have mutually agreed the importance of working closer together and to this end, we recently met for an informal meeting on Monday 20th May 2024, to discuss how we can best achieve this. It was an extremely positive and productive meeting that will hopefully form the basis of a way forward.

That said, there is a much bigger debate that needs to be held if we are to protect and preserve our national heritage for future generations.