

Commentary

By GROMATICUS

Treasure Hunting

THE ARRIVAL on my desk recently of a free copy of a new magazine, *Treasure Hunting*, was a sure sign that it was time to get my views on the subject sorted out.

The first need seems to be to establish a basic principle by which the activities of treasure-hunters (and indeed archaeologists) can be judged. Relying heavily on Peter Fowler's excellent new book, *Approaches to Archaeology*, it is "our past is a communal heritage. Any action that detracts from the communal appreciation of it is fundamentally anti-social".

How does treasure-hunting measure up to this principle? It seems to me to fall down on two accounts:

(i) it can diminish the total of archaeological evidence available to us, both by detaching objects from their context and by damaging other evidence *en route* to the object. In the case of surface finds from (e.g.) a plough-soil this loss can be minimal.

(ii) it can restrict access to evidence by removing objects into private collections. This is equally true whether the collection belongs to the hunter or to someone else who buys from him. Whether the motive is personal enjoyment or just profit, the effect is the same. This objection would, of course, not apply if treasure-hunted finds were published in the way that archaeological finds should be, and made freely available for study.

That severe damage can be done to archaeological sites by treasure hunters is beyond doubt (see *Kent Archaeol. Rev.* 48, 202-3). The hunter will claim that this is the work of an irresponsible minority and that the responsible majority do not search on archaeological sites. This misses the point completely — there are probably more undiscovered than discovered sites in the country, and it is unreasonable to expect even a responsible searcher to recognise the new sites into which he may be boring small holes.

On the other hand, we must remember that there have been cases of successful collaboration between archaeologists and treasure-hunters — for example, the help given to the Norfolk Unit on the route of the Caister by-pass, quoted by Tony Gregory in a recent BBC radio programme. Metal detectors can have a valid use in archaeology — it is their misuse which is the problem.

What are the lessons for archaeologists? Firstly, treasure-hunting and metal-detectors are here to stay. The BBC programme mentioned above estimated that there are about 250,000 detectors in Britain; prices vary but at an average of about £80 each this represents a capital investment of £20m, and is clearly "big business". We can no longer hide our heads in the sand and hope the problem will go away.

Secondly, treasure-hunting's success is archaeology's failure. Many people, whose interest in the past has been roused by TV programmes, books and perhaps even archaeological lectures, are turning to treasure-hunting rather than archaeology to express that interest. Why? Are we unfriendly to the beginner? Do we stifle individual initiative within our local societies? (part of the appeal of treasure-hunting appears to be that of 'doing one's own thing'). One reason may be the fallacy, not restricted to the general public, that archaeology is *primarily* about objects. It is not: it is primarily about relationships — between object and object, object and context, context and context — as a means of learning about human activity. But the searcher may well see little difference between himself and the archaeologist: in his eyes, both are looking for objects.

Thirdly, our basic principle places even more obligations on the archaeologist than on the searcher. If treasure-hunting is partial destruction, then excavation is total destruction and unless results are published the only difference is one of scale. The non-publishing excavator is a bigger villain than the small scale searcher (the professional looter of sites is another matter entirely). We must put our own house in order before we can condemn others.

And the lessons for the treasure-hunter? Firstly, searching must be confined to soil deposits that are demonstrably not of archaeological value, unless it is being done as part of an archaeological survey under proper management. The assumption must be that deposits *are* archaeological unless proved otherwise, and not the other way round. Secondly, all finds and their find-spot should be reported to the local museum or archaeological unit, and significant ones published. Thirdly, the irresponsible minority must be controlled, unless *all* treasure hunters want to face the wrath of outraged archaeologists, or even bureaucratic interference — licencing metal detectors could be a useful new source of government finance.