

# Commentary

by Gromaticus

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## Finding Our Past

THE PORTABLE Antiquities Scheme, informally known as *Finding Our Past*, seems to be rapidly establishing itself since it was set up in 1997. Already, the pilot scheme employs eleven Finds Liaison Officers, covering over half of England and all of Wales, who record thousands of finds reported voluntarily by members of the public. The Scheme is aimed primarily, but not exclusively, at metal-detector users and amateur field-walkers, and seems to be breaking down the barriers of mistrust and misunderstanding that have sometimes existed in the past.

The earliest results are now being published, in the *Annual Report 1998-99* of the Portable Antiquities Scheme (available from the Outreach Officer, c/o Dept. of Coins and Medals, British Museum, London WC1B 3DG, tel. (020) 7323 8611, first come first served), and in the first *Treasure Annual Report* for 1997-98 (available from The Stationery Office Ltd, tel. 08457 023 474, price £12.50. Highlights are in the *Finding Our Past Newsletter*, no. 2 of which was published in Summer 2000. They report that 2000 members of the public have so far volunteered their finds for recording, and that 9000 finds (and 600 images) have been put on the Scheme's website at [www.finds.org.uk](http://www.finds.org.uk), together with the facility to search them by type of find, county and date.

As with the vast increase in small-scale excavation under PPG16, the question is how archaeology can make use of all this new information. Until the whole country is covered, the results are bound to be patchy, but extra funds are being sought to remedy this. It's impossible to judge what proportion of finds are actually being reported; if estimates of 400,000 or more finds per year are even remotely accurate, the 6000 on the web are only a very small percentage, with no way of the user knowing how representative they are. Nevertheless, it's not just about the 'gee-whiz goodies' -- studies of Viking period finds from North Lincolnshire appear to show a real influx of Danish peasant families at this time, and not just a change of rulers, as had previously been thought. It is just this sort of 'extensive' coverage of rural areas that may prove valuable elsewhere, if backed up by the resources to synthesise the data as well as collect them.

I had the opportunity to see the 'intensive' use of metal detectors this summer, on my excavation in Ewell. A local metal detectorist club was contacted via Surrey Archaeological Society, and members kindly searched the spoil heap for us, revealing rather more coins than we had found in the excavation itself. Fortunately, we had built the spoil heap in such a way that we could plot the original location of objects found in it (more, it must be admitted, by luck than by planning). I shall be very interested to see if there are any differences between the 'excavated' and the 'detected' coins; if so, it may tell us something about the differences between assemblages found in different ways. The club members shared our enthusiasm for coins, but were puzzled by our interest in other sorts of metal objects, especially rather anonymous iron lumps. Perhaps they were right; we now have a few hundred of them to try to identify.

## Images of England

IT'S NOT ONLY in the recording of finds that help is being sought from members of the public. Over 500 volunteers, all members of the Royal Photographic Society, are recording the listed buildings of England for the National Monuments Record between now and 2002. The aim is to take a photograph of each of England's 360,000 listed buildings, and to link them with existing information, so that by 2002 they will constitute one of the world's largest image-based websites. The first 15,000 or so will go onto a prototype website this autumn. They will be found at [www.imagesofengland.org.uk](http://www.imagesofengland.org.uk).

## Notes for Contributors

IN RESPONSE to several requests, we have produced a new version of our *Notes for Contributors*, brought up to date to include the possibility of colour illustrations, and explaining our policy for the selection of articles for publication. Please contact the Editor if you would like a copy.

## Fieldwork Round-up

THE FIELDWORK and Publication Round-up for 1999 is being circulated with this issue. Please contact the Subscriptions Secretary if you have not received your copy. Our thanks go to Cath Maloney for the Fieldwork Round-up, and Isabel Holroyd for the Publication section. If there are any omissions, we shall be very glad to hear of them, so that the record can be as complete as possible.