

The Portable Antiquities (Voluntary Recording) Scheme: its impact in Kent and the future for London

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The Voluntary Scheme for the Recording of Archaeological Objects

EVERY YEAR many thousands of archaeological objects are discovered, mostly by metal detectorists but also by people out walking, gardening or going about their daily work. These objects offer an important source for understanding our past, yet only a small proportion are actually seen and recorded by museum finds specialists or archaeologists, and therefore much potentially significant information about our past is being lost.

The government recognised that there was an urgent need to improve arrangements for record-

ing all 'portable antiquities' which fell outside the scope of The Treasure Act 1996, and as a result the Portable Antiquities Scheme was established.¹ In 1997 the Department for Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) provided funding to institute pilot schemes for the voluntary recording of archaeological objects in Kent, Norfolk, North Lincolnshire, the North West, the West Midlands and Yorkshire.² Another five pilot schemes (Dorset & Somerset, Hampshire, Northamptonshire, Suffolk and Wales) were established two years later, funded by the Heritage Lottery Fund.³ An application to the Heritage Lottery Fund to extend the scheme to the whole of England and Wales, including Greater London, was submitted in August 2001.⁴ At the time of writing the result of the application is still pending.

From the outset the aims of the Portable Antiquities Scheme were: 1) to advance our knowledge of the history and archaeology of England and Wales, 2) to initiate a system of recording archaeological finds and to encourage and promote better recording practice by finders, 3) to strengthen links between detector users and archaeologists, and 4) to estimate how many objects are being found across England and Wales and what resources would be needed to record them.⁵

On a national level the Portable Antiquities Scheme is co-ordinated by the Head of Portable Antiquities, an Outreach Officer, main partners (national

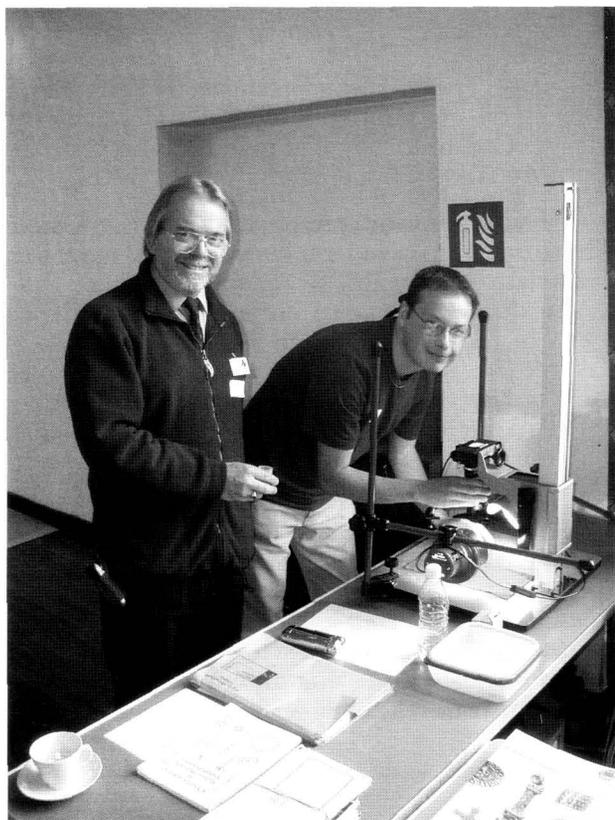


Fig. 1: Phil Talbot (Swale Search & Recovery Club) records finds with Michael Lewis (FLO)

1. Department of National Heritage *Portable Antiquities – A Discussion Document* (1996) 8.
2. The West Midlands post was initially funded by the British Museum.
3. Heritage Lottery Funding for the second tranche of posts expired at the end of March 2001, with the DCMS now funding all the pilot schemes.
4. Portable Antiquities Scheme *Finding our Past: The Portable Antiquities Scheme, Phase 2: England and Wales* Outline bid to the Heritage Lottery Fund (2001).
5. Department of Culture, Media and Sport *Finding our Past* (July 1999) leaflet.

museums and heritage agencies) and observers (interested archaeological, museum and detectorist organisations). Locally the scheme operates through a network of Finds Liaison Officers (FLOs), who are managed and supported by local partners (which encompass local government, museum and archaeological representatives).

Local liaison (the Portable Antiquities Scheme in Kent)

In Kent the FLO works as part of Kent County Council's Heritage Conservation Group, under the direction of the County Archaeologist. The work of the FLO is guided by the Kent Archaeologists & Detectorists Liaison Group (KADLG), which was formed over ten years ago. Twice yearly meetings of the KADLG provide a forum in which local archaeologists, detectorists and local museum curators can come together to discuss common issues and concerns. The Kent FLO also attends meetings of the National Council of Metal Detecting Southern Region (NCMD SR) and the Kent Archaeological Society (KAS) Fieldwork Committee, and liaises with the Kent Museums Group (KMG).

Metal Detecting Clubs

Metal detecting clubs provide the primary point of contact for the FLO, since detectorists recover most hitherto unrecorded portable antiquities. Regular contact in the form of club visits and correspondence has been maintained with ten metal detecting clubs in Kent (all members of the NCMD SR). Of these, three meet within the M25: the Dartford Area Relic Recovery Club (Dartford), the South-East London Metal Detecting Club (Sidcup), and the West Kent Detecting Club (West Wickham).

Most detectorists meet at least once a month. Meetings are normally well organised, with formal proceedings and minutes taken. Members are informed of issues affecting the club and the wider detecting community, as well as forthcoming events. Meetings also have a social element, with a raffle, and from time to time a guest speaker will give a slide lecture, normally on an aspect of archaeology of general interest to the audience. Most clubs also hold a 'find of the month competition' where a selection of objects discovered are displayed. Points are awarded to finders with the 'best finds', and at the end of the year the detectorist with the most points is given a prize in recognition of his or her efforts.

The finds entered into the competition are sometimes recorded by the club's Finds Recording Officer,⁶ but in-house recording is an issue of concern amongst some finds specialists, as such records often merely list objects and give little description. It is therefore usually preferable that finds are recorded by the FLO, either at the meeting or 'taken away' and examined in good light with reference books on hand. Some detectorists produce excellent finds records, and in Kent this has been encouraged, with detectorists developing better recording techniques and best practice.

When in attendance at club meetings the FLO will take a camera, lights, plenty of film, finds recording forms, magnifying glass, maps and a digital-weighing machine. Since there is limited workspace at County Hall (Maidstone) it is preferable that common items are recorded at the clubs, whilst finds needing specialist attention are taken away. The post in Kent does not benefit from other in-house small finds specialists or a large reference library, although the FLO does receive much support from local finds experts -- some of whom are detectorists.

Finds recording in Kent

Between 1st October 2000 and 31st September 2001, 1331 objects were recorded in Kent: a total of 4241 objects since the scheme was established.⁷ Even so, many objects are still not shown to the FLO, and much work still needs to be done to encourage finders to record their finds.

Nowadays metal detectors are sophisticated (and expensive) machines, which can discriminate against iron objects, most of which tend to be 19th or 20th century farm machinery and modern industrial matter. Consequently, most detector finds are copper alloy, accounting for 728 of the 1331 objects found in 2000-1. Silver was used for much coinage, especially in medieval times, and accounts for 307 of the 337 silver items recorded last year. 126 objects were made of lead, 54 of stone or flint, 46 of gold, 18 of pottery, 12 of pewter, 8 of iron and 2 unassigned.

There is almost an even split between coins (691) and artefacts (640) now being recorded; dress accessories (189), jewellery (69), seals and communication (66), weapons (64) and harness fittings (64) account for a good proportion of artefacts found in the last year. Most finds recovered in Kent are medieval (451) or later (305), with high quantities of Iron Age

6. The club's Finds Recording Officer is a metal detectorist elected to the post to record finds made by club members and to assist the FLO.

7. M Lewis *Voluntary Scheme for the Recording of Archaeological Objects in Kent*, Fourth Annual Report 2000-2001 (2000) 22-6.

(215) and Roman (194) items, mostly coins, also being recorded. Most detectorists seem happy to give grid references accurate to at least six figures, with nearly two-thirds of findspots given at this level of accuracy, or greater, in 2000-1.

Confidentiality of findspots

Detectorists are sensitive about the sites they search, and tend not to divulge findspot information to other detectorists: this often includes the club Finds Recording Officer. In general detectorists do not have the same inhibitions when providing findspot information to the FLO, museum curators, archaeologists or researchers. The explanation is relatively simple: first, detectorists fear findspot information falling into 'the wrong hands'; that is to say 'nighthawks' (illicit detectorists), who search without the landowner's permission. Second, detectorists are concerned that others will use findspot information to pester the landowners of the sites they search, and that subsequently this will lead to a prohibition of detecting on that site. Since the relationship between detectorist and landowner very much depends on the approach of the landowner, this can influence the extents to which detectorists are willing to record finds and liaise with the archaeological community in general.

Finds recorded by the FLOS are entered on to a regional database and also collated nationally. All finds records created by the Portable Antiquities Scheme are forwarded to the Sites and Monuments Record.

Search and recovery

Search and recovery is more tranquil than many people, not accustomed to metal detecting, might expect. A majority of detectorists search by gently sweeping the head of their machines across the soil surface, slowly walk forward, carefully dig up the occasional discovery (more of ten post-medieval in date) and then religiously backfill the hole. Most detectorists in Kent search on plough soil or beaches, and rarely are finds recovered more than a few inches deep.

Organised searches on club land (where permission to search is restricted to members of one club) can provide circumstances where discoveries are properly recorded, as at the West Kent Detecting Club. 'Conscientious detectorists' will take care when searching not to damage underlying archaeology, and will report any noticeable concentrations of finds which might indicate occupation.

More vexed is the question of detector rallies, which offer detector users the opportunity to

search on land, subject to a fee. Several hundred detectorists might attend such events, which are normally organised for financial profit. Rallies also provide the ideal circumstances for 'planting' objects found elsewhere, thereby claiming a legitimate provenance. Dealers often attend, so new discoveries can be traded with ease, with more limited opportunity for finds to be recorded. Some rallies are, however, well organised and provide mechanisms for a more conscientious attitude towards the objects recovered. Detectorists are persuaded to record finds, and members of the archaeological community may be invited to help. Such surveys can provide circumstances for local archaeologists to gain an idea of the spatial distribution of a good number of metal finds in one day, although, of course, it would be preferable to most that the site archive found its way to a museum.

It is widely recognised that much archaeological material is subject to plough damage, chemical and natural corrosion processes, and that controlled, systematic, detector surveys offer the opportunity to rescue such material. In recent years discoveries made by metal detectorists have made an important contribution to archaeological research and the study of artefact typology. The role of the FLO has been fundamental in ensuring good liaison and encouraging detectorists to record their finds.

'Conscientious detecting'

The NCMD SR actively promotes a conscientious attitude towards metal detecting. At its core is the belief that anyone who recovers archaeological material from the ground has a moral responsibility to ensure that it is properly recorded. Consequently, the Portable Antiquities Scheme in Kent has worked closely with the NCMD SR to produce recording forms to help detectorists develop best practice whilst in the field and ensure better recording techniques. Detectorists have been asked to complete Field Assemblage Forms during every search. On this form finders provide basic details of the finds they make, including brief description, metal composition and findspot. For more unusual or interesting objects finders are requested to complete Finds Recording Forms, which require more specific information, including dimensions, weight and a photograph or drawing. Increasingly detectorists are purchasing hand-held GPS (Global Positioning System) devices which can give accurate 8 figure (accurate to 10 metres square) and 10 figure (accurate to 1 metre square) national grid references for findspots. It is preferable that detectorists record the location of finds, with GPS

or conventionally, whilst in the field, since there must be some doubt as to the accuracy of findspots recorded retrospectively.

Archaeological Work

Since detectorists are most prolific in the recovery of metal objects it never ceases to amaze that the archaeological community does not make better use of them. When used during archaeological excavation, metal detectors can enormously increase the volume of metallic items recovered.⁸ Detectorists are particularly useful in pre-excavation surveys; as with field walking, such discoveries give an indication of the spatial deposition of artefacts and underlying areas of activity.

Most archaeologists use detectorists only to search spoil. Whilst a good proportion of finds recovered in such circumstances come from the plough-soil and hence do not have an archaeological context, many objects are also missed during the excavation of stratified layers. Detector searches during excavation would have located most of these objects, and need not be invasive. Indeed metal detectorists could be used to mark signals, whilst archaeologists could recover the finds.

8. C Dobinson & S Denison *Metal Detecting and Archaeology in England* (1995) 37.

9. C Thackray, 'Metal Detectors, Plague or Blessing?' *National*

Co-operation between archaeologists and metal detectorists is increasingly common practice in Kent. Many professional and amateur archaeological groups are now identifying the potential of detectorists in excavation and survey work. Since the scheme has been established local detectorists have been involved in a number of projects across the county, including the first ever metal-detector survey of land owned by the National Trust.⁹ Also, in Kent metal detectorists may be involved on sites which are investigated as a result of development control. It is apparent that most detectorists working on archaeological sites find the experience rewarding, as do many archaeologists. When working within the archaeological process detectorists gain a better understanding of best practice and the significance of single finds within the archaeological landscape. Further, techniques used by archaeologists, particularly field-walkers, can then be adopted whilst metal detecting.

Outreach, Finds Days and education

Not all detectorists are members of clubs, and liaison with independents is problematic since they are largely unknown. Similarly, chance finds made

Trust Annual Archaeological Review 9 (2000-1) 21-3. M Lewis, 'A Controlled Metal Detector Survey in Kent' *National Trust Annual Archaeological Review* 9 (2000-1) 24-6.



Fig. 2: Kent archaeologist Keith Parfitt organises detectorists on a site in east Kent

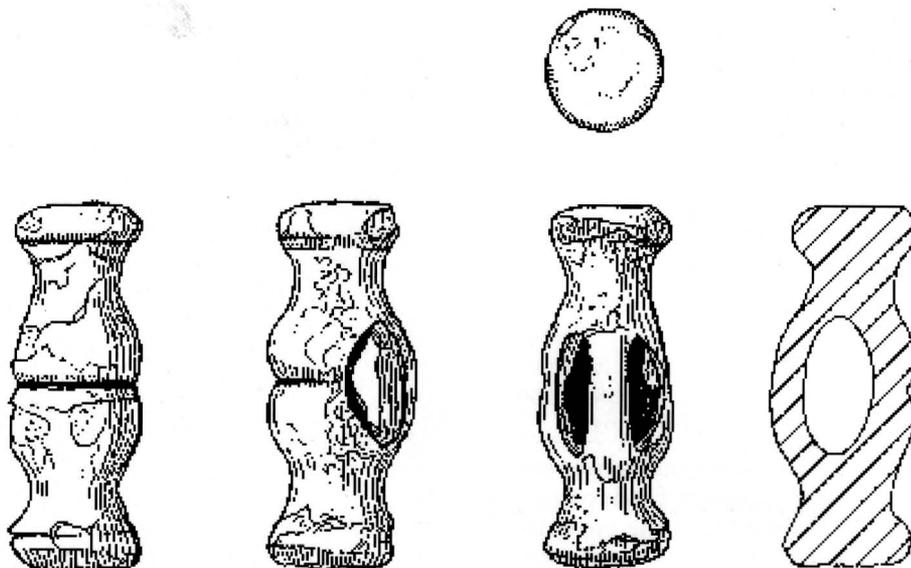


Fig. 3: the Iron Age looped toggle found by Keith Smallwood

by members of the public must account for a large amount of archaeological material which is never recorded. Hence outreach is essential.

The work of the Portable Antiquities Scheme is promoted nationally by the Outreach Officer in the press and media, newsletters, articles in metal detecting magazines and through the Portable Antiquities website (www.finds.org.uk), and this all helps finders to come forward with objects for recording.

The voluntary recording scheme is also promoted on a local level in Kent, through a local newsletter (FLO). This is also published on the NCMD SR website (www.southernregion.pwp.blueyonder.co.uk).

Finds days have also proven to be an effective way of promoting the Portable Antiquities Scheme and encouraging members of the public to show their finds for recording. Finds days have been held in a number of museums throughout Kent over the past year. A regular finds identification and recording clinic takes place at Dartford Borough Museum on the first Thursday of every month, although finders are welcome to take objects into the museum any time it is open.

Education

Talks and lectures provide a valuable point of outreach, with local archaeological and historical groups eager to learn more about liaison between archaeologists and detectorists. In Kent there has also been a series of talks dedicated to the investigation of the landscape, titled 'landscape investigators'.

Increasingly archaeologists are recognising the benefits of liaison, and the academic value of detector finds. However it has also been important to talk to the next generation of archaeologists, so that fruitful liaison continues. Last year (2001) the FLO and local detectorists helped with a series of undergraduate seminar presentations at the University of Kent at Canterbury. These seminars explored the benefits of liaison, and students were given the opportunity to ask questions and handle small finds.

Recent discoveries

Over the past year many interesting discoveries have been recorded with the Portable Antiquities Scheme in Kent. A few, more recent, examples include:

A very unusual insular La Tène toggle, of a previously unrecorded type, was recovered by Keith Smallwood (South East London Metal Detecting Club) on farmland in the parish of Wrotham. This object is the subject of a short note for *Archaeologia Cantiana*.¹⁰

A silver penny of Cynethrith, wife of Offa (757-96), in almost immaculate condition was found by Ray Barker (Dartford Area Relic Recovery Club) in the parish of Cobham and recorded with the Portable Antiquities Scheme. The obverse of the coin shows the queen's name around a stylised 'm', and the reverse depicts the moneyer's name 'Eoba' on the leaves of a quatrefoil.¹¹

10. M Lewis, P Macdonald & K Smallwood 'An insular La Tène toggle from Wrotham, Kent' *Archaeologia Cantiana* 122 (2002) 397-9.

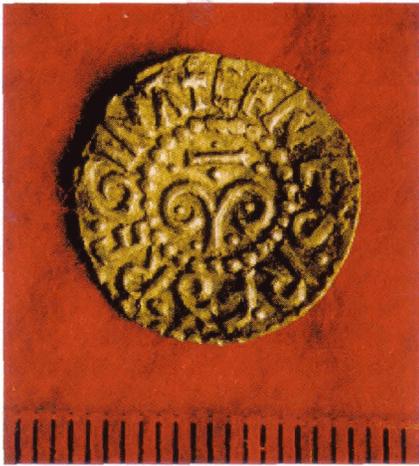


Fig. 4: the silver *Cynethrith* penny found by Ray Barker

Neil Allen (Romney Marshland Detecting Club) found a class 11a stirrup strap mount in the parish of New Romney. This was the first of this type discovered in south Kent until Bernie Nutbrown (also Romney Marshland Detecting Club) recently found another in the parish of Warehorne. Further to the eight Kentish mounts of this class known before 1997, another four examples from Kent have now been recorded with the Portable Antiquities Scheme, and it seems certain more will follow.¹²

A 13th or 14th-century copper-alloy mount in the form of a crowned head, with a rivet hole through the forehead, was found by Jon Williams (South East London Detecting Club) in the parish of Southfleet. Intriguingly, Bob Hesmer (Dartford Area Relic Recovery Club) found another rather similar example, in the neighbouring parish of Swanscombe: this was recorded with the Portable Antiquities Scheme back in 1998.

Treasure

Under the 1996 Treasure Act any object, and all coins from the same find (that is to say if there is more than one), containing at least 10% of gold or silver and at least 300 years old when found, are potential treasure. In addition base metal hoards of more than 10 coins, and any associated artefacts are potential treasure. It is the finders responsibility (archaeologists are not exempt) to report any items

of potential treasure to the local coroner within 14 days.

In the last Treasure Annual Report the government noted that 86.9% of treasure items were discovered by metal detectorists, whilst finds recovered archaeologically only account for 5.1%.¹³ It was also apparent that FLOS play an increasingly important role in the Treasure process, helping finders report discoveries and ensuring a smooth running of the system -- and Kent is no exception. Since the Act became law Kent has had the third highest number of Treasure items in England and Wales. As a result of the high number of items of potential treasure reported through the FLOS it has been recommended in the current review of the



Fig. 5: the copper-alloy class 11a stirrup strap mount found by Bernie Nutbrown

11. See J North *English Hammered Coinage* Vol. 1 (1994) North. 340.

12. D Williams *Late Saxon Stirrup-Strap Mounts* (1997) recorded eight class 11a mounts in Kent, of which a total of 85 examples were known nationally.

13. DCMS *Treasure Annual Report 1998-1999*, 6.

Treasure Act that the Portable Antiquities Scheme should be extended to all parts of England and Wales.¹⁴

Portable Antiquities in London

The historical context for recording portable antiquities in London and the provisions for recording that currently exist at the Museum of London were the subject of an article for *London Archaeologist*.¹⁵ Curators at the Museum of London have recorded objects found by amateur searchers since the 1970s, creating an archive of over 14,000 items. However, it should be noted that the Museum records all objects made before 1960, whereas most objects recorded by the Portable Antiquities Scheme are at least 300 years old.

In the 1980s the Port of London Authority (PLA), which owns most of the Thames foreshore, introduced a licensing scheme to enable stricter conditions over searching and removing objects from the foreshore. The PLA also set in place a mandatory system for recording: it is a requirement of the licence that objects are recorded with the Museum of London, either directly or *via* another museum. In response to licensing the Society of Thames Mudlarks was formed. This society has a limited membership and polices its own members, particularly as regards reporting portable antiquities.

The Museum of London is not only interested in recording finds made by mudlarks, but all finds found within the Greater London area, including

those by metal detectorists and chance finds by the general public. Information about these finds could also be added to the Museum's database, providing useful clues about London's past. However, London's detectorists are largely unknown, and since there is no proactive mechanism to liaise with the detecting community in London much information about the capital's past is being lost.

Until recently all objects brought into the Museum of London were listed in a central register, with more interesting objects deserving a higher level of recording. Now objects recorded with the museum are catalogued on a computerised database (on lines similar to those of the Portable Antiquities Scheme), with the provenance of each find plotted on a digital map of London.

With the range of objects brought into the museum it has been beneficial that the museum employs a wide range of artefact specialists, and also has substantial resources in terms of reference material and archaeological support.

The future for London

As part of the current Heritage Lottery Fund bid London is seeking funding for a half-time post based in the Museum of London.¹⁶ The Museum hopes to provide additional funding from its own resources (making the post full-time) extending the remit of the post to community archaeology projects. This person will fulfil the portable antiq-

14. DCMS *Report on the Operation of the Treasure Act 1996: Review and Recommendations* (October 2001) 6 & 24.

15. N Burdon, A Green, C Smith 'Portable Antiquities From the

Thames Foreshore' *London Archaeol* 9 no 5 (2000) 123-8.

16. *Op. cit.* fn 4.

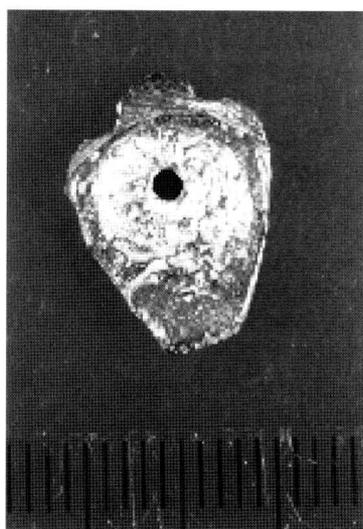


Fig. 6: the copper-alloy mount in the form of a head found by Jon Williams

unities role, and also support and encourage amateur archaeological work in the capital.

A detailed work programme for the London FLO has not yet been formulated, but experiences in Kent might provide a framework of responsibilities for the post in London.

Already London has a huge database, which has enormous potential to archaeologists, finds specialists and other researchers. Nonetheless, there is a large backlog of data still to be entered on to the museum's new database, and hence management of this, as well as the entry of new records, could well be a key task of the London FLO.

The London FLO will concentrate on recording objects found in Greater London, and is likely to be keen to liaise with mudlarks, metal detectorists and members of the public. As in Kent, the London FLO will probably wish to travel to detecting clubs which meet in the suburbs, and work closely with local museums. Currently we are unsure of the exact number of detecting clubs in London, and the extent to which members would readily co-operate with the Portable Antiquities Scheme. However, as with club members in Dartford, Sidcup and West Wickham who liaise with the Kent FLO, it is likely that most detectorists who live in Greater London will also detect in the neighbouring counties. This might present problems of duplicating data unless the remit of each FLO is firmly established.

The topographical context of most finds made in London is still likely to be from the Thames

foreshore, as this is where most detectorists search, although farmland in the suburbs could account for a significant number of discoveries. Members of the public are likely to make chance discoveries whilst out walking in parks or digging in their gardens. However, these are unlikely to make a great contribution in terms of numbers, though quite possibly in archaeological significance, as unrecognisable non-ferrous objects and pottery shards are often dismissed by inexperienced finders, unaware of their importance for understanding our past. It could therefore be a useful role of the FLO to educate the general public on the contribution they can make towards the understanding of London's heritage.

From the experiences in Kent it is clear that London would benefit from a more proactive system for recording portable antiquities than hitherto exists. Surely London, with its wealth of heritage and our nation's capital, needs an FLO, a dedicated person who could facilitate finds recording, publicise the benefits of liaison between archaeologists, detectorists and the public at large, and give general advice on best practice, finds recording and the Treasure Act.

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Excavations and post-excavation work

City of London. Museum of London Archaeology Service, Mortimer Wheeler House, 46 Eagle Wharf Road, London N1 7ED (020 7410 2200).

Croydon & District, processing and cataloguing of excavated and museum collections every Tuesday throughout the year. Archaeological reference collection of fabric types, domestic animal bones, clay tobacco pipes and glass ware also available for comparative work. Enquiries to Jim Davison, 28 Blenheim Park Road, South Croydon, CR2 6BB.

Greater London, by Museum of London Archaeology Service. Excavations and processing in all areas. General enquiries to MOLAS, Mortimer Wheeler House, 46 Eagle Wharf Road, London, N1 7ED (020 7410 2200).

Borough of Greenwich. Cataloguing of excavated and other archaeological material, the majority from sites in the borough. For further information contact Greenwich Borough Museum, 232 Plumstead High Street, SE18 1JT (020 8855 3240).

Hammersmith & Fulham, by Fulham Archaeological Rescue

Group. Processing of material from the Borough. Tuesdays, 8.00 p.m.-10 p.m. at Fulham Palace, Bishop's Avenue, Fulham Palace Road, SW6. Contact Keith Whitehouse, 85 Rannoeh Road, W6 9SX (020 7385 3723).

Kingston, by Kingston upon Thames Archaeological Society (KUTAS). Processing and cataloguing of excavated and museum collections every Thursday (10 a.m.) at the North Kingston Centre, Richmond Road, Kingston upon Thames KT2 5PE. Enquiries 020 8546 5386.

Surrey, by Surrey County Archaeological Unit. Enquiries to Rob Poulton, Archaeological Unit Manager, Surrey History Centre, 130 Goldsworth Road, Woking, GU21 1ND (01483 594 634).

Individual membership of the Council for British Archaeology includes 10 issues a year of British Archaeology, as well as the supplement CBA Briefing, which gives details of conferences, extra-mural courses, summer schools, training excavations and sites where volunteers are needed. The individual subscription rate of £24 p.a. includes postage; payment should be sent to C.B.A., Bowes Morrell House, 111 Walmgate, York, YO1 2UA (01904 671417).