

# ON EXPEDITION TO RUSSELL SQUARE

July 29, 2011 Ian Richardson Community Archaeology, Day of Archaeology, Day of Archaeology 2011, Iron Age, Museum Archaeology, Roman Archaeology, Arundel Castle, British Museum, cameraman, Changing Museum, Dan Pett, Day of Archaeology; PAS; Treasure, History Channel, Hoard, Metal detector, Portable Antiquities Scheme, Russell Square, Sussex, Treasure, Treasure trove, United Kingdom, Wales, Yucatan

Archaeology is digging. Simple. It's one of those professions that makes for good dinner party conversation, easy banter in the pub and suitable fare for family reunions, because everyone knows what archaeologists do – they dig stuff up. Or do they? Archaeology and the people who get paid to do it may have a clearer (and more positive) brand image than bankers, consultants and CFOs, but the field is anything but one-dimensional. Sure, some of us dig or get our hands dirty in other ways, but archaeologists are involved in all manner of work in their pursuit of a greater understanding of human activity. I hope that in the course of viewing these blog posts, readers will get an appreciation of the vast scope of 'our' world.

My own day of archaeology began with a visit to our offices in Russell Square by a cameraman who was capturing footage of a colleague for the next instalment of the History Channel series 'Mud Men'. Our building is a converted Georgian terraced house facing on to Russell Square and is connected to the British Museum via our back garden. I set to work typing up the minutes of a recent meeting and watch my colleague reposition a few props to make the space seem more 'archaeological'. There isn't so much as a trowel in our office, but this space is the epicentre of the Portable Antiquities Scheme (PAS), the network of archaeologists (Finds Liaison Officers, or FLOs) across England and Wales who are working with the public to record their finds and help transform our understanding of the past.

Some days it can seem like we are sitting at the other end of the Bat Phone, where the next call could be one that informs us of a compelling discovery. This is one of those days – a hardworking FLO has just rung to let us know there has been an Iron Age hoard found in a northern county. We start a new file and enter the information into our treasure database, giving the case a very bureaucratic 'T' number.



I dash off to a meeting in a nearby building about the future display of 'Room 2', the 'Changing Museum' gallery here at the British Museum. As part of our role in administering the Treasure Act 1996, the British Museum takes in hundreds of finds of Treasure each year for study. Many of these are eventually acquired by regional museums, with others being returned to the people who found them. Until last year, these finds remained locked away in secure storage for the duration of their stay, but recently we've been offered the chance to display some of this material in the public galleries. We currently have a case in Room 41, but as this gallery is closing for redevelopment, our next 'home' will be Room 2. Even though we only have one case and one information panel, at a large museum like this there are a great number of people involved in making the project a success. Today

*Installing a selection from the Frome Hoard in the Treasure case* I've found out that the folks in exhibitions have sourced a new case for our use, one with interior lights and more space than a previous example, so I'm excited at the opportunities for display.

Back at my desk, my work takes me in the direction of the PAS Database, where I'm checking to make sure some specific finds have been recorded and recorded properly. The magnificent rebuild of the database by Dan Pett has made for a much more 'user-friendly' platform. In the past, as finds of Treasure were recorded as part of a legal process, they weren't always given an entry on the PAS database, so one of the tasks that we engage volunteers for is to go through historic Treasure reports and create a database record for the items in them. They've been doing a great job, but there is plenty more work to be done.

Its time to organise the logistics for a Finds Day that the PAS is running at Arundel Castle in Sussex on Saturday. There will be a team of us heading to the town from across Southeast England, and we are all bringing various supplies – among other things the British Museum has a good supply of latex gloves so I'll be taking those. We've also sourced an old banner to pack up. The Finds Day is the culmination of a busy two weeks of outreach organised under the banner of the Festival of British Archaeology by the CBA. Many of the PAS staff have been participating in or running events throughout the country since mid-July.

Most days I ask a colleague to return my museum keys for me, so that I can leave directly from our front door on to Russell Square. But today I have change of mind and walk along the 'East Road' behind our offices and the hotels on Montague Street, out into the forecourt of the British Museum. Tucked away behind a computer screen it is amazing how quickly the image of those massive columns disappears from the mind, but such is their presence that all it takes is one glance to instil one with a renewed sense of purpose. I may not be traipsing amongst Mayan ruins in the Yucatan but there is plenty of archaeology to be found here in Bloomsbury.