Ferguson, Natasha (2016) *Lost in translation: Discussing the positive contribution of hobbyist metal detecting*. Open Archaeology, 2 (1). pp. 115-126. ISSN 1475-5270

DOI: 10.1515/opar-2016-0008

http://repository.nms.ac.uk/2082

Deposited on: 30 August 2018
Lost in Translation: Discussing the Positive Contribution of Hobbyist Metal Detecting

Abstract: This paper will consider the positive contribution from hobbyist metal detecting from both the perspective of the archaeological and metal detecting community. Are we currently opting for a path of least resistance with a 'better than nothing' approach to encourage reporting and to maintain good working relationships, even if it risks the loss of valuable archaeological information? Using selected case studies, as well as the results of a recent research project, this paper will draw on the perspective of both archaeologists and hobbyist metal detectorists to further understand what it is to have a responsible and constructive non-professional interaction with the archaeological record.

Keywords: Archaeology, professional, non-professional, treasure trove system, hobbyist metal detectorist, heritage management, artefacts, positive contribution, responsible practice, recreation, engagement.

1 Introduction

Those who engage in ‘responsible hobbyist metal detecting’ are recognised in the UK and in several other European countries, not without a critical eye, for their contribution to our understanding of the past through the discovery of archaeological objects (Deckers 2013; Dobat 2013; Maaranen 2016; van der Schriek and van der Schriek 2014). However, the definition of what we understand to be a positive contribution from hobbyist metal detecting has become blurred. This became apparent when the author set out to outline the key characteristics of positively contributing and negatively impacting metal detecting activity to sites of conflict as part of her doctoral thesis. While it was relatively straightforward to highlight characteristics of negatively impacting activity (Ferguson 2013a; Ferguson 2013b), it was more challenging to pin down criteria that adequately defined positively contributing activity. This was not because the research was unable to observe examples of contributing activity, in fact far from it. The challenge, crucially, was identifying the boundaries of ‘contribution’ and recognising when this activity edges towards the territory of negative impact. Here an area of middle ground is formed where certain aspects of metal detecting activity, either by an individual or the metal detecting community as a whole, cannot ostensibly be described as irresponsible practice, yet under scrutiny appear to fall short of what is necessary to avoid loss of valuable data or damage to the archaeological record. For example, has a metal detectorist fulfilled their responsibility as a finder simply by reporting a medieval coin hoard? Should we still consider this a contribution to our knowledge of the archaeological record if information on spatial distribution or potentially related archaeological features has not been considered? Or if a metal detecting outing is organised on a known archaeological site for the purposes of recreational benefit, can that be considered responsible practice or a positive contribution even
when all finds are recorded and reported? Herein lies the challenge; how do we define the parameters of this middle ground and communicate this effectively and candidly without alienating the metal detecting community?

To further define and understand what we mean by a ‘positive contribution’ it is necessary not to restrict this to the view of the archaeologist, but to consider what the metal detecting community identifies as ‘making a contribution’. This process is in no way intended to diminish the potential contribution of metal detecting as a hobby, or represent their perspectives as misguided. Rather, understanding this perspective is important as it not only underpins certain actions, attitudes and expectations, but also serves to highlight misconceptions about archaeology and the role of the professional archaeologist or museum curator, which may appear to be at odds with the hobby.

This paper will focus on metal detecting on known archaeological sites e.g. battlefields, as well as previously unknown artefact distributions which form coherent archaeological patterns e.g. scattered hoards, rather than discoveries of single archaeological objects. With the use of selected case studies this paper will aim to explore the concept of ‘positive contribution’ from the perspective of both the archaeologist and hobbyist metal detectorist. Data and case studies will be drawn from the author’s experience of working within the Treasure Trove Unit (TTU), together with the initial results of a project co-directed by the TTU and Historic Environment Scotland (HES) to gather quantifiable data on metal detecting activity in Scotland (Bailie 2016). The overall aim of this paper is to address uncertainties regarding the definition of responsible non-professional interaction with the archaeological record as well as asking the question: when does it stop being a positive contribution and how do we communicate that message appropriately?

2 Contribution in the Context of Heritage Law in Scotland

With much of the data gathered for this paper based on the Scottish experience of metal detecting it is necessary to provide a brief background to the legal framework in relation to finds of archaeological objects in Scotland, although this has been considered in more detail in several other works with the most relevant being Campbell (2013). The roots of Treasure Trove lie in the medieval period as a mechanism to gain revenue for the Crown under the legal premise ‘bona vacantia’ – property that no longer has a traceable owner (Curtis 2007, 343). There is a reasonable assumption that archaeological material fits within this category. Therefore if an object or assemblage is discovered by chance through agriculture or activities such as metal detecting, or professionally in the course of archaeological investigation, this material comes into the ownership of the Crown. Here the Crown, or more accurately the Crown’s representative in Scotland for property, the Queen’s and Lord Treasurer’s Remembrancer (QLTR), acts for the benefit of the nation by ‘claiming’ objects considered to be of archaeological significance, which are then allocated to museums across Scotland. Finders are entitled to an ex-gratia award based on the current market value of the object which is financed by the museum applying for allocation. This process provides a legal mechanism to ensure archaeologically significant objects and assemblages are made accessible for research and public display rather than languishing unseen in private collections.

The Treasure Trove Unit (TTU) operates on behalf of the QLTR providing the frontline archaeological expertise when assessing material through the Treasure Trove system. The Unit liaises with members of the public reporting finds of archaeological objects, including metal detectorists, as well as archaeologists, museum curators and other heritage professionals. As specialists in material culture it is the responsibility of the TTU to assess and research material passing through the Treasure Trove system, ultimately identifying which objects or assemblages are appropriate for ‘claiming’. As there is no restriction on the age or composition there is great flexibility in what can be considered ‘archaeologically significant’ and therefore ‘claimable’ as Treasure Trove. Although it is the legal responsibility of a finder to report an archaeological find we primarily rely on a more robust system of outreach and regular engagement to encourage reporting and provide further context on how this contributes to our knowledge of Scotland’s past. Outreach includes public events such as Treasure Trove Finds Days (Ferguson 2016), holding workshops on recording, visiting clubs and attending rallies, as well as producing leaflets and information posters including the ‘Guide to
reporting’ series (Fig.1). Treasure Trove law in Scotland is strikingly similar to some Scandinavian treasure laws, in particular the Danish *danefæ*. As Dobat has observed within a Danish context (2013, 713), metal detecting in Scotland has evolved within a legal framework in which reporting archaeological finds is regarded as a normal part of the metal detecting experience. As will be demonstrated in a later section this can have an interesting influence on how metal detectorists view their contribution to the archaeological record.
3 Considering the ‘Positive Contribution’ and that Place Inbetween

It is important to stress again that the intention of outlining ‘positive contribution’ from the perspective of the metal detecting community is not patronise or belittle the opinions of individuals or the hobby in general. There is also no suggestion that any of the perspectives highlighted here are in anyway wrong or misguided, it is simply giving them a voice so that they may be understood. The purpose of understanding this perspective is vital to breaking down barriers in communication and to remodel consistently arising assumptions and misconceptions about the role and motivations of either group. As previously mentioned a range of perspectives from metal detectorists on their hobby’s contribution to heritage has primarily been drawn from responses to a recent questionnaire issued to the metal detecting community in January 2016. This was part of a joint research project to assess the extent and character of hobbyist metal detecting in Scotland with a view to producing reflective guidance policies which met the needs of both the metal detecting community and the heritage sector. Rather than simply gathering quantitative data on population sizes, reporting levels, etc, it was also felt necessary to understand further how metal detectorists viewed themselves and what they felt was their contribution to the archaeological record in Scotland. In a similar vein to the research of Thomas in England and Wales (2012), Rasmussen in Norway (2014), and Maareen in Finland (2016) metal detectorists were asked in a questionnaire, conducted both in person and anonymously online, about their motivations to participate in the hobby. Individuals were invited to reflect on this more specifically with the question: ‘Does hobbyist metal detecting contribute positively or negatively to the safeguarding of Scotland’s heritage?’ (Bailie 2016).

The next section will reflect on analysis of perspectives drawn from the metal detecting community and what they have identified as the contributions of the hobby to heritage. A short case study based on a metal detecting outing on a post-medieval battlefield in Scotland will aim to illustrate some of these perspectives on contribution and draw them together in a discussion. The case study also provides an opportunity for the archaeologist to respond to some of these perspectives within a more constructive framework of an existing site.

3.1 Contribution from the Perspective of Hobbyist Metal Detectorists

From the 166 responses provided, 141 respondents (85%) felt that hobbyist metal detecting contributed positively to safeguarding Scotland’s heritage, with only one respondent (>1%) feeling that metal detecting contributed negatively. This was due to various factors including finds not being recorded or reported properly and not taking full account of potential artefact distributions.

Interestingly, 19 respondents (11%) suggested that metal detecting could contribute both positively and negatively depending on the circumstances, and as one respondent stated, ‘it depends on the motive’. The majority of these respondents stressed that knowledge and responsible practice, including proper recording and reporting, was key in making a positive contribution. Some respondents highlighted that a lack of experience of newcomers and an unfamiliarity with the law resulted in negatively impacting activities. A small number raised concern that some ‘bad guys’ tarnished the reputation of responsible metal detectorists, with three references to individuals damaging land or gaining access to land without the permission of the landowner.

Overall analysis of the responses has identified three main themes reflecting what individuals felt was the positive contribution of metal detecting to Scotland’s heritage. They included ‘Saving Artefacts’, ‘Contributing to museum collections’, and ‘Leading archaeologists to archaeology’.

3.2 Saving Artefacts

A significant number of responses either exclusively referred to, or at least made mention of, metal detecting contributing to Scotland’s heritage by ‘saving artefacts’. This was either because the objects would remain undiscovered, or potentially be destroyed by factors such as ploughing or fertilisers in the soil. A range of terminology was used to describe this process but key phrases included, ‘unearthing finds that would otherwise be lost’; ‘many artefacts would remain undiscovered’; ‘saving artefacts from being destroyed’, and ‘[objects would be] lost in the future with the damage done by the plough and fertiliser’.

Brought to you by | National Museums of Scotland
Authenticated
Download Date | 8/30/18 2:15 PM
3.3 Contributing to Museum Collections

Building on the previous section, once the artefacts had been saved from the ground another important element identified by the respondents was how these discoveries contributed to museum collections, a process a number of them will have experienced when reporting finds through the Treasure Trove system. An interesting factor here is that contributing to museum collections is regarded as part of the positive experience of their hobby and in some respects is considered a natural conclusion to the process, emphasised by the relative absence of references to archaeologists ‘taking their artefacts’ or a ‘finders keepers’ attitude. In fact one respondent stated that their ‘goal is to find something that is able to be displayed in a museum for all people of Scotland to enjoy’. Another interesting factor though is their perspective on the scale of their contribution and how this compares to the picture across the heritage sector in Scotland. There is a sense from the responses that metal detectorists regard themselves as one of the few sources of archaeological objects for museum collections, with phrases such as, ‘most local and national museums are full of artefacts found by detectorists’ and ‘approx. 90% of museum finds are made by detectorists’. The latter has been reflected elsewhere, including a post on the Treasure Trove Facebook page which stated that metal detectorists find ‘95% of the archaeology in Scotland’ (Anon 2013). It is highly likely this statistic is a misinterpretation of data drawn from the a review of Treasure Trove in 2003 which highlighted that on average each year 95% of the archaeological objects reported by members of the public were found by metal detectorists (Scottish Government 2003). This is an impressive statistic, but it is exclusively related to finds by members of the public and does not reflect archaeological discoveries as a whole in Scotland, including the professional sector. Furthermore, the statement reflects an object-focused perspective in which archaeology is driven entirely by discoveries of artefacts. This perspective highlights unfamiliarity not only with diverse nature of the archaeological record and complex processes of shaping museum collections, but importantly where metal detecting fits within a broader network of archaeological information that contributes to our knowledge of the past.

3.4 Leading Archaeologists to the Archaeology

The third theme follows on from this idea of contribution with responses highlighting that many metal detectorists view themselves and the hobby in general to be acting as the vanguard of heritage, with their activities consistently leading archaeologists to the archaeology. For example one respondent commented that metal detectorists contributed by, ‘identifying possible areas for further investigation’, with another suggesting that metal detectorists were, ‘the pathfinders working free, locating important finds/sites for the professionals to follow up if they are important’. The latter statement is revealing with the use of words like ‘pathfinder’, which also has an interesting military connotation, depicting an image of an uncharted frontier in which they have the power to explore and guide others, in this case the professionals, through it. The core principal of this perspective is not in dispute as it is widely recognised that in a number of cases artefacts reported by metal detectorists have highlighted the existence of previously unknown archaeological sites. This may either be in the form of artefact distributions, such as sites of conflict as addressed by the author in her research (Ferguson 2013b), or by indicating the presence of underlying archaeology, for example the Viking camp at Torksey, Lincolnshire (Richards 2009), or the high-status settlement site at Clarkly Hill, Moray (Hunter 2011). There are many positive features of this perspective as the idea of contribution is closely linked with a working relationship with archaeologists. Within this perspective there is the potential to strengthen the link and for actions such as accurate recording and the mapping of distributions to be considered as beneficial to their own enjoyment of metal detecting.

However, there is another dimension to the perspective of metal detectorists as the vanguard of heritage as expressed by a number of respondents who, as with the theme relating to museum collections, regard metal detecting as an almost exclusive source of archaeological information. This is illustrated by one respondent who believes that metal detecting does have a positive contribution because ‘the amount of discoveries that have been made over the last few years would demonstrate that as fact, as they vastly outnumber finds made through any other method of historical discovery’. The first part of the statement is...
a reasonable perspective, but why would this individual feel that is vastly more than any other method of historical discovery? Why do some metal detectorists feel that, as one respondent phrased it, ‘if we didn’t spend our money and time doing md [metal detecting] there wouldn’t be anything to put in your museums’ (note the ‘your museums’ in this statement)? There appears to be a sense from the metal detecting community that professional archaeologists are in some way restricted in their ability to take an active approach in the search for archaeology. As one respondent described, ‘there are far more detectorists on the ground than archaeologists every week so by sheer weight of numbers, they will uncover more’. Furthermore, another responded states that, ‘the professionals are too few and would never actually have time to find the amount that detectorists do’. Financial resources also appear to be a key concern and a number of respondents stress that metal detectorists, ‘cover a lot more ground, than any officially funded organisation could do, and they do it for free’. These statements highlight a perspective that the professionals are unable, or perhaps unwilling if the funding is not there, to go out and search for archaeology due to a lack of resources. Archaeologists may even be regarded as an unnecessary middleman in the process between initial discovery and allocation to a museum. In this sense metal detectorists see themselves as playing an important role in plugging this gap of archaeological discovery as resources become tighter, because ultimately, as one respondent stresses, ‘if nobody is looking, it’s not going to be found’.

3.5 Case Study: Metal Detecting Club Outing on a Scottish Battlefield

This case study illustrates many of the perspectives of hobbyist metal detectorists highlighted in the previous section. The battlefield as a platform for this case study is useful as it is an important example of an archaeological site which is characterized by coherent distributions of metallic objects suspended in the ploughzone and is therefore potentially at risk from activities such as metal detecting. The decision has been taken not to disclose the location of this site has been taken to safeguard the identity of the individuals involved. What can be said is that it is a post-medieval battlefield and has been designated as a site of national importance within the Historic Environment Scotland Inventory of Historic Battlefields (HES 2016).

To provide some background, the author was contacted by a representative of a metal detecting club to report a small assemblage of artefacts recovered during a club outing on the battlefield. Approximately ten individuals were involved, with at least 7 lead projectiles recovered, including musket balls and pistol balls. The majority of these lead projectiles were recorded using a hand-held GPS device providing a 10 figure grid reference1 which should be accurate to 1 metre, but in reality accuracy is inconsistent and will normally range from 2 metres to 10 metres depending on satellite cover. Crucially, there was also an assemblage of unrecorded objects which had either been bagged as modern debris or had not been logged with the organiser and subsequently taken home. Within this assemblage were several unrecognised battle-related objects, including 6 more lead projectiles and a distinctive fragment of musket furniture (DeWitt-Bailey 1997). The objects taken home were only reported to Treasure Trove after the author had requested that everyone attending the outing report everything they had found on the day, including anything initially disregarded as ‘scrap’. It should be noted here that the outing organiser was very helpful in this process as he was himself frustrated that individuals had not followed the guidelines he had purportedly put in place that day. The remaining objects have been formally reported and at the time of writing are currently being assessed by the Treasure Trove Unit so that they may be ‘claimed’ and allocated to an appropriate museum collection.

When the author highlighted in email correspondence with the organiser the archaeological sensitivity of the site and asked why they had chosen to hold an outing there, the organiser replied with the following:

‘...we take the view that what we find is better than nothing at all’
‘If this site is so iconic then why doesn’t a professional archaeologist dig there?’

1 National Grid References (NGR) relate to readings taken from the National Grid, a mapping system devised by the Ordnance Survey providing UK coverage. In terms of accuracy a 6 figure grid reference is accurate to 100 meters on the ground, whereas a 10 figure national grid reference is accurate to 1 metre.
Both statements are interesting and not only provide some insight into the perceived role of the professional archaeologist from the perspective of the non-professional, but also highlight the contrasting motivations each group has when interacting, or preparing to interact, with the archaeological record. One can argue that with a hand-held GPS available, participants briefed, landowner permission granted, and the reporting of these objects to the Treasure Trove system, the outing organiser has fulfilled, if not exceeded, the basic requirements of what can be recognised as responsible metal detecting and therefore contributed to our knowledge of the site. The author would not disagree in principle with elements of this statement, however, the issue here is not solely with the practical aspects of the outing, but the decision-making process involved in selecting this place as a suitable location for an outing, as well as their perspective that they had contributed positively to our knowledge of the battlefield despite loss of archaeological information by not recording battle-related objects.

### 3.6 Discussion

The discussion will aim to explore this case study further, and draw in the responses from the questionnaire touched on earlier. As a recreational activity hobbyist metal detecting is defined by the discovery of archaeological objects in the topsoil. This object-focused approach may be driven by other factors, such as an interest in history, outdoor exercise, and social contact, but the fundamental aspect of this activity and its non-professional interaction with the archaeological record is underpinned by the deliberate process of searching, finding, and recovering artefacts. On the other hand, the motivation of the professional archaeologist is to encounter the archaeological record with a targeted approach and limited within the bounds of an approved research framework. The primary aim therefore is to gather relevant data, not exclusive to archaeological objects, for the purposes of research and interpretation, and additionally ensuring preservation through record. Crucially, the chief role of the majority of professional archaeologists is more likely to be concerned with the conservation, management and curation of the historic environment either within heritage bodies, as part of the planning process, or through museums. Although the controlled recovery of archaeological objects is certainly a part of the archaeological process, and granted it may be the most visible and tangible aspect from a public perspective, it does not define it.

This is perhaps the point where the two perspectives of what it is to contribute to an understanding of the archaeological record diverge and we begin to see two different experiences and motivations appear. Within this case study and the analysis of the questionnaire responses above, particularly in reference to the 'museum collections' and 'leading archaeologists to archaeology' there is a perception of the professional archaeologist as passive and the metal detectorist being active. In the previous case study this notion is conveyed in the statements ‘if the site is so iconic’, in other words, what is your purpose as an archaeologist if you are going to ignore it by not digging there and finding something? Furthermore, as suggested in an earlier section there appears to be a perspective from the metal detecting community that they are actively contributing by filling the gap in our limited knowledge and museum collections left by the passive archaeologist, restricted in resources, numbers, and even interest. Again, as with the questionnaire responses, this viewpoint is further supported by a further statement expressed by the outing organiser in correspondence:

> ‘bearing in mind that we do all this for free. It’s most unlikely you would have ever got these finds otherwise’.

In many circumstances this is a valid point, but in the context of a sensitive archaeological site where the priority for the archaeologist is conservation management, their potential to contribute to our understanding of the battlefield is limited without negatively impacting the integrity of underlying artefact distributions despite efforts to record their finds. This area of the battlefield falls within the boundary of the inventory and therefore was recognised as archaeologically significant. This heritage management decision is made within the context of other archaeological investigations on the site, together with historical and topographical evidence. In short, not conducting archaeological investigations here is not a failure on the part of the archaeologist or due to a lack of resources; there is simply no requirement to ‘dig’ there to recognise it as a
significant part of the battlefield. From the perspective of the archaeologist the artefacts are best left in the
ground unless accurately recovered as part of a systematic archaeological survey. In this respect a passive
response, as identified by the outing organiser, is the best approach for the future conservation of the site.
This in turn may appear unnecessary from the perspective of the metal detectorist, particularly as they
have expressed a willingness to go out and do it for free. As referred to in an earlier section, the link formed
between recovering objects and contributing to the archaeological record is positive and should not be
discouraged. It should, however, be redirected if it results in a negative impact on the archaeological record
and it is the responsibility of the heritage managers to voice this concern in an appropriate and engaging
manner. Here guidance is essential in redirecting their interest in the battlefield and demonstrating there
are other ways to contribute to the protection and management of this site.

4 Identifying the Middle Ground: Moving from a Positive Contribution to Negative Impact

As reflected in an earlier section, a breakdown of the responses discussed highlighted the perception that
professional archaeology is passive in comparison to the active nature of hobbyist metal detecting, with
the hobby seeing itself as taking on a role as the primary generator of archaeological information. In some
respects this perspective has been encouraged in areas of the heritage sector who are acutely aware of
difficult past relationships and therefore are perhaps overly anxious to avoid making the same mistakes
(Thomas 2009; Thomas 2012), and not to present themselves as unapproachable or anti-metal detecting.
This position is further perpetuated in the media, for example, the well-known statement from the then
Culture Secretary David Lammy who identified metal detectorists as the ‘Unsung heroes of heritage’
(Kennedy 2007).

More problematic for the public perception of archaeologists is a statement in a more recent BBC
News article which identified metal detecting as the most productive source of artefacts in England and
Wales with the claim that ‘of all the treasures found in the ground, fewer than 5% are discovered by
professional archaeologists’ (Cawley 2016). While the contribution of responsible metal detectorists should
be recognised, they have served to over-emphasise the role of metal detecting by positioning it outside the
context of a wider contributing heritage network formed of both professionals and non-professionals. This
risks greater confusion as it becomes increasingly difficult to communicate valid concerns regarding some
current modes of practice within metal detecting, potentially resulting in the loss of valuable archaeological
data by not insisting on some level of minimal requirements.

When posing difficult questions we must also be clear that hobbyist metal detecting is primarily a
recreational activity which interacts at a non-professional level with the archaeological record. Therefore
we must also ask what demands can we effectively make of the metal detecting community out-with a
legal framework? However, in the same breath we must also ask what demands can metal detecting as a
recreational activity make of the heritage sector? Here we again return to earlier themes of contribution, in
particular ‘metal detecting leading archaeologists to the archaeology’. At what point does the discovery of
a hoard or any other complex archaeological find begin to migrate away from what may be considered a
‘positive contribution’ in archaeological terms? Are we willing to ignore events that may have occurred during
the search and recovery, just as long as it is reported? Furthermore, what may be regarded as a contribution
by the metal detecting community may in turn place considerable pressure on already strained heritage
resources. For example, requesting an archaeological presence at weekend metal detecting rallies to record
and identify finds, or as is occurring more frequently, the excavation of complex in-situ discoveries such as
substantial hoards. In both cases, which again are the result of recreational activity, there is an expectation
by metal detectorists for archaeologists to respond, and respond quickly, and in the latter case this is often
necessary in order to avoid the loss of important contextual information. There is no question that reporting
the presence of a hoard, or any other complex find, is a responsible action and metal detectorists would
be encouraged to do this as soon as possible. It can often lead to opportunities for positive engagement,
especially if the finder is involved in the process of recovery (Fig. 2). However, it is out-with a professional
context where problems can occur. For instance, at what point during the process of initial discovery by a non-professional metal detectorist is the complexity of an archaeological find recognised and at what point are decisions taken to either make an attempt to recover it or leave it alone to be professionally investigated. This point requires more focus and will be illustrated in the following case study.

4.1 Case Study: An Late Prehistoric Silver Hoard in the East of Scotland

During the summer of 2015 the discovery of a large volume of silver fragments, ranging in size and originating from various vessels, was reported to TTU. The silver fragments, which were clearly part of a hoard, had been recovered during a metal detecting rally organised in the east of Scotland. When reported to TTU only one finder had come forward to report the hoard. However, when enquiries were made by TTU staff to recover more information about the method of recovery it was revealed that approximately 70 individuals had been involved in the recovery of the hoard, with each person reportedly finding at least 1 piece of silver each. In the first stages of enquiry the information provided suggested that the silver had been found as part of a scattered hoard, with finders recovering silver fragments in a wide distribution. The TTU was then made aware of a video on YouTube showing a small group digging a large hole which looks to be approximately 1m x 1m and 0.30m – 0.50m deep. In the video several individuals are seen to be digging down with hands, hunting knives and trowels, and at times indiscriminately pulling out large fragments of silver. The fragments are clearly situated in large clumps and do not appear to have been previously disturbed. After several minutes of intensive digging one individual is heard to say, ‘there’s still stuff in it. Now we have to decide what we’re going to do’. Another individual replies, ‘we’d better phone somebody’. Other individuals were keen to assist with the recovery of other smaller fragments and so continued to metal detect the surrounding area; as referred to earlier this process involved a significant number of people and individual findspots were on the whole not recorded. As it was a weekend archaeological support was not
available until the following Monday when the hoard was reported. The assemblage was recognised as a hoard with either extant remains, and/or a strong potential to be associated with underlying archaeology. An excavation supported by TTU and led by NMS curators was initiated two days later. The excavation also closely involved individuals who had participated in the rally to locate and record remaining silver fragments within a systematic metal detecting survey of the area. It should be noted that they did volunteer their time to assist with the excavation. Excavation of the site revealed some surviving contextual elements of the original hoard deposit, the majority of which had already been severely impacted through uncontrolled digging by the group, as well as other features placing it within a wider prehistoric and medieval landscape context. The hoard is currently being assessed through the Treasure Trove system and will be claimed and allocated to an appropriate museum.

In the aftermath of the hoard’s discovery some unease had been expressed by participants about the method of recovery, in particular the excavation of a hole over the concentration of silver. One participant in email correspondence with the author said, ‘I did think when they were digging the big hole (I didn't dig it) that they were going to get in trouble….but was too late they done it so quick. Metal detectorists when will we learn...[sic]’ (Anon personal communication 2015). As reflected in the questionnaire responses a major element of contribution as perceived by the metal detecting community is to feed into our knowledge of the archaeological record. Therefore this concern to follow good practice is not unexpected and should be encouraged. The rally organisers have also accepted that certain decisions taken on the day, in particular not to cordon off the area to restrict numbers, and to excavate the hole, were not conducive to ensuring the safe recovery of the hoard. There had been a loss of control as excitement grew over the discovery. There was an impulse to search and discover more, not for personal gain, but to share in the experience. In this situation it can be easy to forget previous experience, guidance, or any sense of procedure. In balance one should also ask that if an archaeologist had been available that weekend would it have gone this far? Here we address the expectations of the heritage professionals and how much support, including out-of-hour support, they can and should be expected to provide when metal detectorists ‘lead archaeologists to the archaeology’ and why an inability to do so may be regarded as a failure of the system rather than an unrealistic expectation. For example, in an article about the recent discovery of a medieval coin hoard near Lanark, South Lanarkshire, the finder reported that he wanted to seek advice about how to recover the hoard, but ‘as it was the weekend, they [TTU] were not available...[sic]’. He then went on to ask the advice of a fellow metal detectorist instead (Walker 2016, 15). Realistically archaeology cannot be expected to be a 24/7 response service, or to attended recreational events out-with what may be regarded as normal outreach and engagement.

There can be a thin line between positive contribution and negative impact, and with regards to the recovery of the silver hoard this came extremely close to being an overwhelming negative impact with all archaeological context potentially being lost in a matter of minutes. Part of the positive contribution is recognising when to stop, particularly when coming into contact with more consolidated archaeology. It did take some time, and after a considerable amount of digging, before the question ‘should we call someone?’ was voiced, therefore despite an archaeologist not being on call at the weekend would it have really made a difference? However, rather than writing this event off as a case study of bad practice we should instead reflect on the perspective of the metal detectorists involved as outlined previously and attempt to translate more effectively what it is to make a positive contribution to the archaeological record. This event has highlighted the need for more comprehensive guidance for rally organisers and metal detectorists if such situations arise again. Encouraging responsible practice is therefore essential and it is ultimately the responsibility of the heritage professional to outline what constitutes a responsible non-professional interaction with the archaeological record. As a sector we must therefore be clear and consistent in our approach when identifying certain activities that do not reflect a positive contribution, but in turn recognise when a degree of translation may be essential in effectively communicating this guidance.
5 Conclusion

The analysis of the metal detecting community’s perspective on making a positive contribution has been important in understanding certain approaches to the archaeological record and their expectations of the role of the professional archaeologist or museum curator. As suggested by the author in a previous paper, ‘essentially, both archaeologists and metal detectorists are interacting with the same resource, but often with contrasting aims, motivations and methods’ (Ferguson 2013b). We are at times speaking a different language, that of the professional and non-professional. Therefore without an understanding or appreciation of their perspective towards contributing to the archaeological record, any message communicated by the heritage sector will inevitably be lost in translation. This understanding therefore allows the archaeologist to say, “I see where you are coming from, let me explain myself better”. Even with this knowledge it can still be a difficult process and the UK heritage sector has become increasingly discordant about what it means to have a responsible non-professional interaction with the archaeological record. They may either fail or refuse to engage with hobbyist metal detectorists, or at the other end of the spectrum, feel under pressure to negotiate the terms of responsible interaction in order to maintain at least some level of constructive and mutual cooperation. We therefore need to communicate a consistent message that moves away from the object-focused approach and instead recognises that the topsoil is not a homogenous layer inundated with isolated archaeological objects but a complex and entangled element of the archaeological record. The core of this message must be to encourage accurate recording of findspots i.e. 10-figure grid reference as a minimum standard, as well as ensuring metal detectorists have access to key information so they may develop the skills and knowledge to make good decisions about where to metal detect, and to recognise coherent artefact distributions or undisturbed archaeological features when encountered in the field. Without these skills to interact responsibly with the archaeological record we risk adversely impacting the long term survival of important and sensitive heritage sites such as battlefields. We must also, as a sector, have the confidence to identify negatively impacting activities and communicate more effectively the damage that can occur through indiscriminate metal detecting activity. In short we should not be satisfied with an approach that settles on the attitude ‘it’s good enough and better than nothing’.

In terms of understanding the perspectives of the metal detecting community in making a positive contribution it is clear that in Scotland at least this concept is tightly interwoven with adding to our knowledge of the past and working closely with heritage professionals. This is overwhelmingly positive, but to ensure it is sustainable it is important to encourage metal detectorists not to consider themselves as isolated generators of archaeological information, but as part of a wider interconnected network of contributors across the heritage sector including both professional and non-professionals. Within this more constructive network of shared goals and perspectives we are less likely to be lost in translation.

References


