Lost and Found

Elizabeth Lewis

In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, a number of significant changes in the physical quality of the British landscape took place as a result of the enclosure movement, the building of infrastructure for a transport network and increasing industrialisation. The Enclosure Acts, the majority of which were passed between 1750 and 1860, effectively privatised large tracts of what had hitherto been common land. Landlords saw financial incentive in making agricultural improvements such as land drainage, hedgerow plantation, fence construction, peat and marl extraction, and the removal of trees and old boundaries. The intensification of agriculture was further driven by the need to provide for mushrooming populations in the industrial urban centres.

Railway building, canal digging and river dredging, in addition to the widening of existing routeways, brought about landscape restructuring on a grand scale. One of the results was to make large parts of the countryside accessible for the first time. The long years of the Napoleonic wars made the Continent inaccessible to gentlemen wishing to undertake the Grand Tour, and instead they turned their attention to their own, domestic antiquities. Touring was undertaken in the summer months, with visits to ancient sites and private collections, and active enquiries were made into local finds.

One of the consequences of agricultural or mineral exploitation was the frequent, if random, discovery of archaeological structures and objects. Peat extraction accounted for the discovery of the Bronze Age shield in Ayrshire, Scotland, which was found in a deposit with five or six others around 1779 (cat. 74). Quarrying for sand and gravel revealed rich grave deposits at Ash in Kent, which became a focus of early archaeological activity from the 1750s, and the source of important Anglo-Saxon artefacts; Bryan Faussett, James Douglas and the late C. Roach Smith all excavated here[1]. The construction of canals, dredging of rivers and other excavation works in hitherto marshy land led to discoveries of well-preserved organic items, besides spectacular finds of weapons of bronze and iron of all periods. Some of these chance finds went to furnish local antiquarian collections, including that of the Society of Antiquaries of London, but many made of precious metals were sold for bullion.

The Society received numerous communications about newly found antiquities from the landed gentry, some of whom made careful observations of the situation in which finds were made on their estates. Philip Rashleigh noted of the Trewhiddle hoard, found during tin-working

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[1] Meaney 1964, pp. 121–2.

on his brother's estate, that 'the quantity of earth and stone which had accumulated over the cup since it was deposited in the stream works shows it had remained there a number of years'[2].

Robert Shafto surveyed the Roman fort near his house at Benwell on Hadrian's Wall during the construction of the Newcastle to Carlisle road from 1751 to 1752, in the course of which some fine altars were discovered (cat. 76). Shafto also made a detailed study of the bathhouse uncovered just outside the fort. Urban developments, such as the laying of sewers, led to such discoveries as the Roman pavement and pottery finds at Lombard Street in London in 1786[3]. The construction of the Basingstoke canal basin yielded a medieval bronze aeolipile, which was rescued from a scrap-metal merchant and presented to the Society by the typesetter Edmund Fry in 1799[4].

The Society had always promoted the exhibition and discussion of antiquities, including those recently discovered and others in private collections. Through the growing network of antiquaries and supporting local correspondents, newly discovered objects were regularly made available to the Society at their weekly meetings. William Stukeley, the Society's first Secretary, looking back through the minutes of meetings for a report of 1762, emphasised how important this role was to the Society, and remarked on the wide variety of exhibits that were 'worthy to be produced' at the round table at the Mitre Tavern (one of the Society's earliest meeting places), 'whereby every person present had a proper opportunity of viewing, considering and speaking upon each particular'[5]. In this manner, by discussion and appraisal, a consensus was reached on the function and dating of artefacts. Stukeley also saw the importance of noting the objects brought in, and the pages of the first Minute Book (1718–24) and 'the great Folio drawing book' are filled with his drawings of antiquities. However, it was not until 26 February 1784 that the president recognised the need for a more formal and detailed record, intended for publication; he brought in a motion to appoint a draughtsman to attend meetings to draw the objects exhibited[6]. A succession of draughtsmen, professional artists in their own right, were responsible for bringing to public attention some of the most outstanding archaeological discoveries of the age, published in the pages of *Archaeologia* or *Vetusta Monumenta*, such as the Ribchester helmet (cats 77, 78), the Bronze Age Mold Cape and the early medieval Lewis chessmen, all now in the British Museum in London.

After drawing and publication, some objects were presented to the Society, such as the Anglo-Saxon brooch found when a ditch was dug at Rothley Temple from 1784 to 1785, which was given by Thomas Babington and the Viking silver torc and penannular brooch from Orton Scar,

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[2] Rashleigh 1789, p. 187.
[3] Gough 1787, pp. 116–19
[4] Anon. 1800, p. 410, pl. 27
[5] Evans 1956, p. 41
[6] Evans 1956, p. 182

discovered in 1847 (cat. 81). Today they form a significant part of the Society's collections. Other objects in private hands eventually found their way, by gift or later purchase, to the British Museum and other institutions. The Trewhiddle hoard of ninth-century silver fragments (cat. 79), exhibited first in 1788, remained in the possession of the Rashleigh family until they presented it to the British Museum in 1880 in appreciation of the work of Sir Augustus Wollaston Franks in forming the national collection there[7]. In 1870 Franks, Keeper of the Department of British and Medieval Antiquities and Ethnography at the British Museum and, for a time, Director of the Society of Antiquaries, exhibited an Iron Age sword in its scabbard, which had been picked up on the moors near Cotterdale, North Yorkshire; it was donated to the Society by Lord Wharncliffe. Franks's account in *Archaeologia*, the Society's journal, united all other examples then 'brought down to our present state of knowledge' for comparison and dating, and noted the similarity between the handle and that of a Roman sword in the British Museum. The Society later deposited the sword in the British Museum on loan (cat. 75)[8]. The lack of information about the discovery of chance finds made it difficult to identify them and to compare them with other objects. Provenance was generally poorly recorded, if at all, and there was a lack of reliable dating methods and appreciation of the importance of context. Antiquities were, in the main, unearthed by unsupervised labourers, and associated groups of objects, especially valuable ones such as coins (on which dating heavily depended), were often dispersed before they could be adequately recorded. The association of coins with otherwise undatable objects such as the Trewhiddle silver added greatly to the study both of archaeology and numismatics.

Even after discovery and recording, objects were often subject to damage or loss; Jacob Schnebbelie's drawing of the Trewhiddle hoard (cat. 80), and the sketch in the Minutes include some objects, notably the gold pendant, which had disappeared before the hoard came into the possession of the British Museum. The Society's drawings may thus be the only surviving records of many pieces that have since been lost or melted down. Some important objects have not been seen since their appearance at meetings, and the Society's written and drawn records have been the only sources for later scholars to assess their significance. The drawings of the ninth century silver bowl found in the River Witham (cat. 84), made perhaps at the time of its exhibition in London in 1850 or in Leeds in 1868, but not recognised or published until 1941, are the only surviving record of this extraordinary treasure, which has in its base the tiny figure of a sea-monster[9].

In some cases the recorded context cast a whole new light on an object, especially where a link could be made with historical sources. In 1810 the Earl of Mansfield sent a drawing of a gold and enamel ring which, he said, had been presented to one of his ancestors by Mary, Queen of

[7] Wilson and Blunt 1961, pp. 75–122
[8] Franks 1880, pp. 251–66
[9] Graham-Campbell 2004, pp. 358–71

Scots (cat. 86); the similarity of the Darnley badge to the winged heart depicted inside the little compartment on the ring tends to support his case, but the ring itself has long since been lost. Finds from known battlefield sites acquired a special aura; the late medieval processional cross (cat. 83) found on Bosworth Field was associated with Richard III, while the silver-gilt spur found at the battlefield at Towton contributed to the development of the chronology of arms and armour, primarily based on tombs, which were always of interest to the Society.

Towards the end of the eighteenth century the number of casual finds being reported increased, stimulated by the publication of comparable discoveries in *Archaeologia*, and, by extension, of a web of active county members with good contacts, such as the local clergy. Governor Pownall and Dr Pococke in Ireland and Robert Riddell on the Scottish Borders sent detailed accounts with sketches of discoveries of interest. As the interest in British antiquities grew, so too did the number of organisations and events, both local and national, concerned with their study. The Archaeological Institute and the British Archaeological Association, both of which had members in common with each other and the Society from which they sprang, held (and reported on) annual congresses in county towns from 1844 onwards, with successful exhibitions of local antiquities. They acted as a stimulus to local interest that gave rise to the foundation of county archaeological societies and local museums.

In London the antiquary Charles Roach Smith, a chemist with a pharmacy business in the City from 1834, became a most active and vociferous investigator and recorder of finds made during building works in the capital. He fully recognised that chance discoveries were important in building up a body of reference and could lead to a more intensive investigation or excavation of a site. During the nineteenth century the principles of stratigraphy were better appreciated as an aid to developing chronological frameworks for artefacts, instead of relying on stylistic comparisons. Along with the advancement in techniques of investigation and recording, this knowledge led to a fuller understanding of the unstratified objects in existing collections. The interest and debate that has attended, and continues to illuminate, the discovery of antiquities affirms Frederick Ouvry's 1852 vision of the Society as 'the best, as it is the proper channel through which Antiquarian discoveries are brought forward for discussion and investigation, through which the results of these discussions and of that learning may be communicated to the public through the pages of *Archaeologia* and otherwise'[10].

Selected References:

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[10] Evans 1956, p. 270

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