

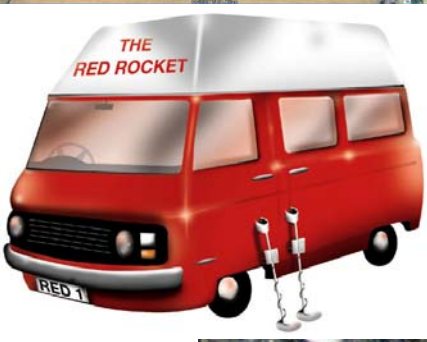
The UKDN

WORD



ISSUE 10 JUNE 2008

World Of Responsible Detecting



Featuring:

Finds of the month

Leigh Alston—Is it a medieval candlestick?

Key Woodward — Roman seal-boxes - your finds are changing the picture

Mugwamp — Helping in the community

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Red Rocket article — Brian Cross

ventaicenorum — A Roman Find

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Welcome.....

To the 10th edition of UK DETECTOR NET's very own newsletter.

The next four to six weeks are normally the quietest in the detecting calendar. Most crops are in and there will only be peas and such-like coming out during this period. You can't get out detecting but you can talk about it by visiting UKDN through the day or in the evening. There are always new threads and discussions taking place.

This is the perfect opportunity to thank those of you who have contributed to this, our tenth edition, and helped make this another informative and interesting issue. There are some excellent articles as per usual from our members and guest contributors – **Thank you!**

Question?

Do you have experience of working with PDF and Microsoft Publisher? Would you like to join the team that creates the UKDN Newsletter? If so, we would like to take you on-board. Drop any of the Team a quick pm and let's talk about how you can help us.

We hope that you enjoy the newsletter and will welcome your feedback on the forum.

Brian, Mo' and The Team

Many thanks to C Scope Skid for the use of his UKDN image on the front page

Have you taken part in the UKDN Summer competition: Design completion yet?

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ventaicenorum

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UKDN Rallies wanted in 2008

Hiya everyone,

It is hoped that, with the help of the membership, we can have one or two UKDN only rallies in 2008. It would be nice to have them, if only to enable most of us to put faces to forum names !! and the chance for us all to detect together.

Finding land on which to have rallies is not always easy, especially, if like myself, Mo' and other admin people, a lot of our spare time is spent helping run UKDN. What we need is some help from you, the membership.

Ideally, we need the rallies to take place anytime between August and October. And..this is where you can help. We don't want to hold BIG rallies, we want small get-togethers of no more than 100 members. So we need just 100 acres of good detecting land i.e. either stubble, flat ploughed or decent detecting land. No rough plough please !!

"How will it work?", you ask. OK, let's picture the scenario. You have a farm and have permission to detect say, 700 acres of arable land. You've done 200 acres but haven't a clue about what might be on the other 500 acres and probably haven't got enough hours in your life-time to survey those acres with an 8" search-head.

You decide to offer UKDN a 100 acre block to set aside for a UKDN rally. We don't like to charge more than £10 per head and so need to talk to you about monies. If your farmer wants the dosh, that's fine, if you want the dosh that's fine as long as its OK with the farmer. If you or the farmer wants the money to go to charity then that's fine also. All we ask is that UKDN gets £1 of the entrance fee so that we can put it towards the upkeep of the forum. So if the rally costs £10, you/the farmer/or the charity will get £9 per person, UKDN will get £1 per person.

UKDN will provide event insurance, marshals, radios, road signs and event literature. We will also take monies from members saving you the hassle of having to deal with this sort of stuff. We will also liaise with you in the event planning.

"What's the advantage to me?" I hear you asking. Simple, you/the farmer or your charity gets to earn some easy dosh and you, the detector user, get's to know what's on those 100 acres. You can't do it properly but invite some people on it for one day and you get to know straight away where the hammered or Roman are coming from!! Great news for next time it's ploughed.

Interested? Then pm any one of the Admin team with your phone number and we'll call you back straight away and discuss the possibilities with you.

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Find of the Month Coin

George II Guinea

Andy UK

I decided to go detecting recently but never realised what a day it would turn out to be. I thought I would get out for a few hours detecting on this Sunday morning, funny thing was, I couldn't really get into it so I decided to go home after a hour.

I went to my mother in laws for Sunday dinner but something kept on nagging me to go back out on the afternoon, well I am really glad I did because after only half hour I found this lovely gold guinea.

What a great feeling I can tell you.

Treasure hunting

**BRITAIN'S BEST SELLING
METAL DETECTING MAGAZINE**



JUNE 2008

Find of the Month

Artefact

Roman Horse Head &
Dolphin 4th
Century Buckle

Slow n low



Treasure hunting

BRITAIN'S BEST SELLING
METAL DETECTING MAGAZINE



I was on a weekly dig organised by Advent and we were going on a field we had been on 3 weeks ago but Advent had only arranged said field as an extra for later in the day. I was only on it for about one and a half hours but pulled various roman bronze off, a silvered bronze and a Denarius before it got dark.

Three weeks later a dig was arranged for that field and we couldn't wait to get back on. When we arrived in the usual convoy the field was the same as we left it as in set aside with weeds and soft stubble and lots of bare patches.

I headed over to the area where the concentration of roman had come up and started detecting, within seconds I had a faint mid tone on my SE so new it were a deepy, two digs of the sandy soil and there it was lying on the surface and I knew instantly what it was but I couldn't believe how good a condition it was in so was gob smacked as too were the lil crowd that gathered. Was a great day and to get that beautiful find with my first signal made a welcome change and was followed by more bronzes and topped off with a nice hammered Elizabeth three half pence . Wow I love this hobby !!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!! Live it and breath it too lol.

Slow n low

JUNE 2008



Is It A Medieval Candlestick?

Leigh Alston

As a medieval historian I'm well aware of the importance of metal detectorists when it comes to pushing back the frontiers of knowledge. I spend most of my time crawling through the roofs of timber-framed houses in East Anglia, and occasionally digging up their floors, trying to understand how ordinary people lived their lives in the 14th and 15th centuries. It's a tough job, but somebody has to do it. The great advantage of specializing in early buildings is that I'm usually provided with tea, biscuits and central heating while my 'dirt archaeologist' colleagues are sitting in cold, wet trenches outside – sometimes surrounded by equally cold geophysicists and metal detectorists. I've learned over the years that it doesn't pay to invite the archaeologists in (they just make a mess on the carpets and rarely have anything to offer beyond the odd mutton bone or bit of broken pot) but the detectorists are always welcome. I never tire of pouring over their finds, and have learned a great deal from them about an amazing variety of subjects.

Take lighting for instance.

We know very little about the way houses were lit in the Middle Ages. Bronze and pewter candlesticks are rare museum pieces, and it's widely thought that until the 17th century only the very wealthy could afford them. Ordinary people are presumed to have used rushlights (i.e. the pithy centres of reeds dipped in cooking fat), and pottery candlesticks or oil lamps consisting of small dishes with wicks lodged on their rims. This accepted wisdom doesn't long survive the acquaintance of a detectorist or two. Anyone who has rummaged in more than a few finds trays quickly comes to realize that England is littered with bits of medieval bronze candlestick and they must have been among the most common of household objects. Despite the frequency with which they turn up, they're often not recognized for what they are, and this brief article is designed to spread the word. These things have a fascinating story to tell, and it's a pity that so many end their days as miscellaneous scrap on ebay. I'm trying to put together a study collection for a more detailed article on early candlesticks, and you'd be amazed at the numbers I find by trawling badly focused pictures of 'detecting finds'. Only last week I paid the princely sum of 99p for a group of 70 items which included a 15th century candlestick socket along with an impressive pile of bent Victorian pennies and broken buckles. The seller assured me he reported all his best discoveries to his local PAS officer, and was proud of his collection, but sold his 'scrap' and simply hadn't realized the socket was of any interest. Even PAS officers have been known to miss them, but to the specialist they're a mine of information.



Figure 1—The classic English candlestick of the 15th century, often known as a Bunsen burner



Is It A Medieval Candlestick?

Leigh Alston

The standard type of English candlestick seems to appear during the second half of the 14th century and probably continued in production with little change well into the 16th century (**fig.1**). It consists of a circular, hollow base with a cylindrical stem and socket and is often known as a 'Bunsen burner' as its shape is identical to the gas burners found in every school science lab (named after their German chemist inventor). The stems of these candlesticks, which usually have a decorative central ring or disc and can be solid or hollow cast, are common detector finds throughout the country, proving they were not high-status rarities but were produced in very large quantities. Continental candlesticks are sometimes found, but these are very different and can usually be distinguished from their English counterparts by the presence of round or square holes in their sockets to assist in the extraction of candle stubs. The base of each stems was provided with a projecting lug which fitted into the base and was then hammered or 'peened' over to secure the two separate castings. Strangely, while stems are common finds, bases seem to be very rare. Of approximately seventy bits of medieval candlestick on the newly created PAS website, for example, only one is a base. Is this because the bases become detached in the ground, or were discarded separately, or is it simply that bases are not recognized by detectorists and therefore not kept or reported? I'd be particularly interested to hear from anyone who might have found a base, or even a complete candlestick. In theory more bases than stems should be found, as the thin metal of a base would bend or break easily if dropped and be rendered useless, while the sturdy stem could be attached to a new base or simply stuck in a lump of wax or wood and was therefore less likely to be thrown away. I know of at least one medieval stem on a genuine turned wooden base of the 17th or 18th century.



Figure 2—A complete Bunsen burner with two stems, showing a range of sizes. All three were found by detectorists in East Anglia



Is It A Medieval Candlestick?

Leigh Alston

A possible explanation of the relative rarity of bases is suggested by the fact that many stems seem never to have been attached to bases. Their lugs lack any evidence of hammering, and many appear to be casting failures with a variety of imperfections. Some contain holes or 'splits' where the molten metal failed to flow properly in the mould. As they are usually found in isolated fields rather than urban industrial centres it seems unlikely they were discarded by the founders, but may have been sold to travelling tinkers as scrap. In a make-do-and-mend society the enormous demand for repairs to bronze pans and vessels was enormous, and many old cauldrons display an amazing variety of patches and replaced parts. The demand was met by an army of travelling tinkers who gathered at markets and fairs, and would have required a handy supply of raw material. Small, compact 'lumps' of bronze in the form of foundry rejects would have represented an ideal means of transporting metal, particularly as small hoards could be hidden at strategic intervals along the travellers' regular routes. This may explain the presence of so many candlestick stems, cauldron feet, zoomorphic pouring spouts and similar items in detectorists' collections, and I would very much like to hear from anyone with an object that appears to have been a casting failure rather than simply damaged 'by the plough'.



Figure 3—The underside of the base shown in figure 2, showing its thin section which has been damaged in the ground. How many of these go unnoticed for what they are?



Is It A Medieval Candlestick?

Leigh Alston

A second type of medieval candlestick is found even more often than the first. These consist of detached sockets that were not cast with a stem but were attached directly to a base or to the branches of chandeliers and 'double-arm' candlesticks (**fig.4**). Once again, such items are traditionally thought to have been rare, high-status possessions, but are shown by the sheer number of metal detecting finds to have been common objects in the medieval home. A well-known dealer in Roman artifacts once assured me that he almost invariably found an example, unloved and unrecognized, in the bottom of every detectorist's finds box.

Sockets of this kind fall into two categories: they are either plain like those of Bunsen burners, with simple banded decoration and a lug projecting from a flared base, or pierced with extraction holes, often resembling the shape of a Gothic window, with attachment lugs that project from ring-like bases. 'Ring-base' sockets of the latter type are thought to have been intended primarily for multi-branched chandeliers, for which they are ideally suited as the candle wax flows out of its own accord when the wick burns down (for which I can vouch after a little 'experimental archaeology' of my own). The unpierced sockets were usually hammered to small ring-fittings on the ends of 'swan-neck' arms radiating from a central ring which fitted in turn over a spike with a round base (**fig.7**). In some cases the sockets and arms were cast as one piece. Of the eight candlesticks currently published on the UKDFD Finds database three are ring sockets, three 'swan-neck' fittings, and one a folding portable candlestick of a separate type which also turns up on a regular basis.

Whether they're Bunsen stems, ring-sockets or swan-neck fittings, no two of these candlestick fragments are the same, and all are worth recording. They vary enormously in length, diameter and decoration, and shed vital light (if you'll forgive the pun) on the nature of everyday life and the metalware trade in the Middle Ages. They may be less spectacular and valuable than hammered silver coins or enameled harness pendants but they're just as important historically. I'd very much like to hear from anyone who may have any examples, whether or not they've been professionally recorded, and you may be assured of my discretion. While these things don't fetch fortunes it's only fair to note that some have commercial value to dealers, particularly complete Bunsen stems, and I'd be happy to pay a fair price to anyone who might be prepared to add to my study collection! I'm just as interested in damaged fragments, however, and would at least hope that nobody reading this will be tempted to sell one as part of a scrap lot – frankly I'm getting tired of scouring ebay and it's not doing my marriage any good at all.

Leigh Alston

leigh.alston@virgin.net

(Leigh Alston is a medieval building historian who lectures in the Department of Archaeology at Cambridge and lives in Suffolk)

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Is It A Medieval Candlestick?

Leigh Alston



Figure 4—A typical ring socket (bottom) and unpierced double-arm socket, both with base lugs



Figure 5—Three possible casting failures, where smooth, rounded edges suggest the metal was not broken but failed to flow in the mould. Ring sockets are particularly prone to this, as their moulds were extremely narrow. The right-hand piece is a swan-neck attachment from a double-arm candlestick which lacks its socket attachment rings.

Is It A Medieval Candlestick?

Leigh Alston



Figure 6 (above)—A complete 16th century candlestick found in Kent, proving that 'double-arm' type sockets were sometimes attached directly to bases

Figure 7—A Flemish double-arm candlestick, with distinctively Continental square-shaped extraction holes. The arms and sockets are cast as one piece



Luck on my side today

by Mugwamp



Had a frantic phone call from one of my Farmers just before lunch today. Mobile phone belonging to a relative lost in field this morning whilst helping him with the power harrowing, could I help? Owner of phone runs his own business and most of that done via the phone, no back-up for his sim card.

An hour later I was at the field with a worried farmer - 45 acres at least - one big big field when you need to find a certain item, talk about needle in a haystack. The field was beautifully flat having been ploughed, harrowed, flattened and sown all in one morning. My Farmer told me with a gesture, "somewhere over in that area we think." By this time the heavens had opened up and water was running down the gentle slope of the field even on top of the freshly turned soil, gradually turning it into a quagmire.

Not wanting to appear too much of a 'townie', I climbed into my waterproof leggings and arctic style Parka and mounted my 15 inch WOT coil on the Explorer and waded off in the general direction I had been shown. Five minutes later and the second large signal turned up the missing phone - 19 missed calls recorded - still working fine albeit a bit muddy. A test call from my farmer proved it to be in working order still, so a good result.

To say I was pleased would be an understatement..... I have on quite a few occasions been asked to search for rings and farming implements for other Farmers and generally finding them is not always successful unless they have a good idea of the area lost in. I think to date I have found about half of what I've been searching for over the years, so for me, a great result and it keeps me in the Farmer's good books for the foreseeable future.

Someone suggested I tried ringing the phone but that had been tried by the Farmer and his son with no luck. The phone was at about 5 inches deep and once found, when the number was rung to test it whilst I held it, the ring tone was so quiet I could hardly hear it in the windy conditions, so no chance at that depth in wet soil.

I did get to speak with the loser who was amazed that it had been found and promptly offered remuneration which was as quickly turned down. He had organized a new phone in the meantime but of course all his contacts had been on the lost phone's sim card, so he was absolutely delighted.

So for the rest of today I get to feel good about myself, lovely feeling aint it? 😊

Mugwamp



Spotlight on..... andyk



My name is Andy Kibbey (forum name **andyk**).

I live in Bitterne, which is just outside Southampton, and work in Gosport as a civilian Project Office Manager at HMS Sultan.

I grew up in Wolvercote, a small village not far from Oxford, where I would spend many happy hours rummaging around in the sludge heaps dredged up from the canal in the hope of finding old bottles, clay pipes and pot lids. I still have a box full lurking up in the loft thirty years later.


My first detecting experience was in the 1970's when my father built a detector out of a broom handle, a wooden coil with wire wrapped around it and a battery, based on a design from one of the popular electrical magazines that were around at the time. I don't actually remember finding much wandering around our local meadow, but I have never forgotten the experience.

Due to life happening (two ex-wives, one great daughter, sixteen years service in the RAF and illness) I didn't take up detecting properly until four years ago, when I bought my first 'real' detector, a Whites DFX, which I have used and abused ever since.

It has been drowned in salty sea water, crushed by my own car and dropped more times than I can remember, but still works as good as the day I bought it and I don't think I would ever part with it. I have recently bought a T2, which I now use in tandem with the DFX. I am still getting to grips with it, but I can feel that it is a good machine and will be giving it plenty of outings on rallies this year to 'get my ear in'.

Being a total detecting nut I have joined a number of clubs, including The South Coast Searchers, our local club formed by Dean (brothereidos) based in Fareham, the Sunday Club (Leisure Promotions), Weekend Wanderers, Cov Moles and 3 Counties Detecting Club. I also like to get to Central Searchers and NEWS rallies when I get the chance.

I have detected on all sorts of land, from the beach, deep rough ploughed clay, pasture and stubble etc. But my favourite has to be, disced and rolled sandy soil, which doesn't turn up very often, but I am sure a lot of you would agree, can't be beaten



Spotlight on..... andyk

Summer is definitely my favorite time of year, because this means weekend long rallies and camping. A few of the more memorable events I have attended include Firle (Saxon finds, beautiful scenery and great social scene), Castle Heddingham (barbecued deer anybody?), The King Alfred Rally (bullets, bullets and more bullets) and Little Kimble (slightly damp is a bit of an understatement), to name but a few. There is one common denominator with all of the rallies I have been on, whether I found anything or not, and this is that I have always had a great time and you can be sure that I will be popping up at a few weekends this year too.

I detect with a number of good friends, but I can mainly be seen sharing a lift with Mark (detector dog) and Gypsy the Plummer Terrier, well known in detecting circles for having a crotal bell around her neck, fetching rocks and chasing torch lights.



Spotlight on..... andyk

I have been lucky enough to find a few nice items, including a couple of Saxon brooches, one with ring and dot design which I donated to the Barbican House Museum Lewes and the second being a gilded chip carved button brooch that sits in pride of place in my small collection



Spotlight on..... andyk



I love finding 'hammered' and my tally currently stands at 20, with just the one, a Charles 1st shilling, popping up this year so far. My favorite coin has got to be a silver unit of Cunobelin, which I found on a 3 Counties dig last year. I have always wanted to find a Celtic coin, so when this one popped out of the ground I was over the moon and is still one of my happiest detecting moments.



In March this year I was lucky enough to find my first piece of potential treasure, a posy ring with the inscription 'in love abide till death divide'. To date this is my favorite find as it is a very personal item has real meaning. It is currently with the British Museum waiting to go through the treasure process, which I have been told, could take several months. So only time will tell whether will end up on display in a museum, tucked away in a dusty archive, or disclaimed and returned. Whatever the result I will post the outcome on UKDN as soon as I know it.

My advice to anyone new to the hobby is; join a club, never be afraid to ask for advice, buy the best equipment you can afford, but most of all enjoy yourself.

Andyk (Andy Kibbey).



Roman seal-boxes - your finds are changing the picture

By Kev Woodward

Those of you that regularly use forums such as UKDN will know that at the bottom of each post there is usually a witty saying or lifestyle motto that the member feels reflects their personality.

Some, like myself, use the opportunity to ask for information on various finds we are interested in; in my case Roman seal-boxes.

Now some of you may not have seen a Roman seal-box let alone found one as even experienced detectorists still haven't had one fall to their coil. Excavated items are even more rare making dating on contextual grounds minimal at best.



So what is a seal-box? Usually they are around 20-40mm in size, of various shapes, consist of a lid (usually decorated with enamel) and a base which has a number of holes placed on the bottom face and a slot on opposite sides to each other on the edges.

The traditional view is that they were for the protection of the seal used to seal up documents; the cord used to tie the document securely was passed through the holes in the base of the seal box, then around the document back to the seal box where the knot would be tied inside the body of the seal box. A wax was then poured into the seal-box thus covering the knot, an impression from an intaglio ring may then have been made to authenticate the sender to the receiver; the hinged lid was then closed to protect the seal as the dried wax was brittle. In this way it should be very evident by the recipient of the package if it had been tampered with on its journey to them.

There is only one problem with this theory - no seal-boxes have ever been found attached to documents! There have been a few found with remains of the wax or some cord so that isn't in doubt; other uses must surely need to be considered. Most of the excavated examples have come from Roman forts and Colonia as sites such as these are important in trying to understand Roman culture and the military so were high on the excavation list in the past and may have biased research so far. Shrines have had less attention from archaeologists but have still added to the excavated seal-box numbers. Over the last decade the number of seal-boxes recorded by detectorists has added a third **more to the record** and from a much broader perspective. Patterns are emerging for different types and I would like to illustrate one such pattern.

Roman seal-boxes - your finds are changing the picture

By Kev Woodward

The seal-box lid illustrated has the design known as the Celtic Swash N applied in enamel. It was this design that set me on the road to researching seal-boxes as I was intrigued as to why a native symbol would have survived on this object classified as second to fourth century when it wasn't on anything else of that age; was it possibly older?

If it was did that mean that late Iron Age people used them to correspond with the Roman Empire before the Romans came to Britain? This opened up questions on Iron Age literacy and culture. Was this pattern seal-box used only in client kingdoms? If these are dated to the first/second centuries did this design represent 'the good old days' before the Romans came? After all this design had been popular for a couple of hundred years before the Romans came to Britain.

I set about trying to find out more and was surprised to find very little work had been carried out on seal-boxes. What was available amounted to small snippets in archaeological reports and a couple of undergraduate dissertations which seemed concerned with classification of the various types and little more.

I dug deeper (excuse the pun) and found that there is a lot of symbolism attached to many of the designs, especially the round seal-boxes with various animal motifs riveted onto them. These animals are linked to various gods such as the goat or cockerel representing Mercury. Many of this type have eagles or boars on them which leads easily to military connections and many have been found at fort sites.





Roman seal-boxes - your finds are changing the picture

By Kev Woodward

As I have continued with my researches I am of the belief that seal-boxes were not used exclusively for mailing documents but were mainly used at shrines for the practice of the votum. This contract between man and deity consisted of a formal ritual act, the first part being called the nuncupatio where a favour was asked of the deity in return for a pledge that the man would give or do certain things if the favour was granted. The second part of the votum is called the solutio where hopefully the deity granted the favour and the petitioner was happy enough to say thank you by recording it with an inscription. The nuncupatio would only need a small inscription, say on a wooden tablet, but sealed from prying eyes; these are the so called 'curse tablets' and it is these that I believe a lot of seal-boxes were attached.

These could have been placed at major shrines such as Great Walsingham or Uley where several seal-boxes have been found or at private shrines in homes and farmsteads which may account for individual finds that detectorists are finding in ever greater numbers. There are plenty of surviving stone inscriptions thanking various deities for granting favours on the person who paid for it to be recorded, thereby completing the contract.

There is an intriguing piece in Lucian's Alexander in which he describes how dishonest cult operators had various methods of opening sealed requests without breaking the seal. That way appropriate answers could be supplied (at a price) to gullible 'customers' who would then be highly impressed at the deity's perceptiveness, therefore repeat 'business' would be almost guaranteed!

The distribution pattern for the Swash N type shows an east coast bias with 11 out of 15 recorded examples found in Lincolnshire, Yorkshire, Norfolk, Suffolk and London. Strays have been recorded from Buckinghamshire, Hertfordshire, Shropshire and Wales, all except one of these strays were from Roman forts or Colonia. This may imply that these are amongst the first seal-boxes to appear in Britain due to their location close to the North Sea where contact with the Roman Empire before the 'invasion' could be easily maintained. The custom of the votum will have taken a huge leap forward with the arrival of the Roman Army as they brought with them new gods and customs as well as adapting native deities to suit their needs.

It will be interesting to see if this pattern is maintained or has to be modified in light of new discoveries. Your finds of these artefacts and others are changing the way people view not just the Romans but the people they came to rule as culturally they may not have been so far removed in certain areas as previously thought.

Roman seal-boxes - your finds are changing the picture

By Kev Woodward

The use of seal-boxes hit its peak during the second and third centuries and many designs were created, some closely resembling disc brooch designs and were without doubt made by the same craftsmen. With the rise of Christianity the practice of the votum declined in the fourth century and the excavated record shows that seal-boxes declined with it. If they were used for sending documents something else must have replaced them or they were not used for this traditionally held belief. I would welcome comments from newsletter readers on this subject or anything to do with seal-boxes.

If anyone finds a seal-box please get it recorded so that further study can be made into these delightful little artefacts. I would also be very interested in any written references that anyone may know of so that I can have the most comprehensive reference possible; please PM me with any details you may have.

Kev Woodward



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We have been asked to feature some of the old Red Rocket articles written by Brian Cross and published in The Searcher magazine.

We will publish an article every two issues and hope that you enjoy this series of articles that began way back in June 1990.

Please excuse the quality of the photographs as these have been taken of the originals printed in the magazines. Brian tells us that each article was written in such a way that the reader would gain one lesson in metal detecting from each article. This is the second Red Rocket article and hope you enjoy the series.

the
searcher

Originally reproduced in The Searcher magazine

Issue 66 – February 1991

<http://www.thesearcher.co.uk/>

Looking for the Romans Some time last Summer



The last month or so has been rather eventful for a variety of reasons. Brian enjoyed his first spell on NHS Bed and Breakfast and for his trouble gained a couple of weeks off work. He still reckons the pain was worth it for it gave us the chance to get three trips away in the Red Rocket in the space of six weeks!!

Realising that at this time of the year most fields are under crop we toyed with exploring some beaches along the Welsh coast. But with the weather so glorious (at the time), we decided that we'd probably spend most of every day waiting for the sun-worshippers to move off.

Instead we decided to meet up with our mate Eddie Bolton and join him at his caravan in Cumbria. Eddie has had his fair share of success, and jammy luck, since emigrating to these parts each weekend, and we were invited to join him for "a slice of the action".

We felt that one field in particular deserved attention, mainly because Eddie had found Roman coins and artefacts and partly because we'd never been able to join Eddie detecting there. Within ten minutes of the Red Rocket's arrival, Eddie had changed his plans and agreed to take us to this rather special field. The grass had just been cut we were told. We could hardly contain ourselves. The thought of finding Roman objects in the month of May, when most such fields are under crop, was thrilling in itself.

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Imagine our dismay when, on arrival at the field, we found the grass long enough to hide elephants in! We don't know what they put in the grass feed in Cumbria but feel it must be steroids or something similar. Eddie couldn't believe how quickly the grass had grown.

Still, not to be deterred, we got toggged up and set off across the field towards a distant hedge and the most productive part of the field. It appeared to be shorter grass from our vantage point at the roadside... it wasn't. Within an hour or two we had completed the weary slog back to our vehicles.

Walkabout

For the remainder of the day we wandered from field to field in a desperate effort to extract something decent, anything at all, from the ground. By late evening we had extracted very little indeed save for a few unidentifiable bits of scrap and dross.

Late that evening, snug in the Red Rocket, warming glass of whisky at our sides, we got our research books out and poured over the local maps. We'd just finished a final snatched hour's detecting on land owned by the farmer on whose field we'd camped. It looked promising; we had to agree, before we set off. Once again, we found nowt !

Cumbria, in our research books, looked exciting and full of potential. In reality, in the middle of May, it is very unexciting, for, like most of the country, any land that is available is full of crop. We decided that the following day we'd look at a few Roman military camps in the hope that some of the surrounding fields might contain grass which had just been cut.

We were lucky in that the first site we investigated had one field in which a crop had just been lifted. The field was flat ready for seeding of the next crop. It took us an hour or two to find the farm but alas no farmer. However we were lucky in that his wife, good lady she was, gave us permission to search. The Red Rocket almost flew back to the field and we were walking towards the field almost before you could say "Loads of denarii". Here we were, with four days to kill, on a beautifully flat field on the edge of a Roman camp. Some good finds would be in our pockets soon, we thought.

Eight hours later we could hardly believe our bad fortune. Our total finds must have numbered something like 75 shotgun cartridges, several pieces of soft, lead dross and very little else. "How could it be?" we kept asking ourselves. "Were we detecting on what might have been the back of the camp, hardly ventured on by soldier or native alike?" or had our sources been wrong and the camp been placed elsewhere? We decided that a few hours detecting on the field the next day would prove whether or not we were truly wasting our time there. We never give up too quickly on any field now!



The tenant on the farm kindly allowed us to park the Red Rocket on site. Great, you would think, except that the farm was a PIG FARM holding at least 2,000 animals. The stink was diabolical and the noise unbearable, especially at feeding times and at 4 am when the piggies were moved about whilst their stalls were mucked out. But we had to admit we were so knackered after finding nowt for 2 whole days that we slept like bricks.

For later harvest

The next day was glorious and hot as had been the previous two. We spent the first few hours looking for a gold ring lost by a farm hand on the edge of a field of corn. We had no joy and presume that it is there, within the crop somewhere. A job for another day.

A couple of hundred yards from this site was a beautiful river complete with medieval bridge crossing. An ideal fording point and spot for casual losses through the ages we thought. It was worth a look. We were soon foraging about in the shingle below the bridge.

Then Mo' spotted it, shining in the silt on the foreshore. A ring, and recently lost too judging by its position. With a cry of joy and thankfulness she picked it up only to discover it was a cheap woolies example of an engagement ring. Our hearts had been lifted if only for a second. The joys of detecting eh, such moments of disappointment you can keep, say us!

For a few hours that evening we walked up and down the field next to the Roman camp. Our finds of interest totalled zero. We could hardly believe such a field could produce nothing but had learnt last year that finds can be hard to obtain once we venture even yards away from an area of occupation. The reason for this could be that in Roman times the land on which this field now stands may have been thick with forest or been uncultivated.

Much of the next day was spent stuck on the lawn of the farm. A Roman road runs directly under this lawn. We'd been shown by way of a rod how the road surface was only inches below the turf. We'd been allowed to park there the previous evening to get away from the noise of the pigs. On arising the next day we discovered that the farmer's wife had been busy and had pegged out about 16 lines of washing!

The Red Rocket was completely surrounded! We prayed for rain but it was some time in coming. We got off there in the early afternoon.

The rest of this third day was spent roaming around looking at land further afield. We found some worth investigating the following day and ventured on a few local grass fields for the remainder of the day with no success. Our total number of coins found so far ... was ... nil! This was getting to be rather frustrating and more than a little embarrassing for someone who writes books on research. But, at this time of the year it always proves difficult to get on the land that you want.



Making do

The next day saw us, once again, gaining permission to detect an area rich in Roman history. But again, we were denied access to the fields closest to the site and had to make do with others a short distance away. But after eight or nine hours of roaming about here in the sweltering heat we had been rewarded with the finding of only a handful of coins, one or two of which were early Georgian coppers in excellent condition.

These were given to the farmer's wife who had almost refused us permission on the grounds that detector users had been on the land before but had always disappeared without showing her anything of what they had found. How long will it take to educate some people? Can't they understand that by not showing finds or returning to the landowner after a search they instil suspicions in the minds of farmers and landowners, even if unqualified?

That was the result of our first trip to Cumbria. Our lack of success was due entirely to not being able to get on the fields that we wanted. We shall have better success there in the autumn. It is worth mentioning that a week or two earlier we had a day trip to a North Wales beach. It was here that we learnt a vital lesson of interest to all detector users.

We had gained access to a beach not frequented often by detectorists. Here we couldn't wait to get onto the beach, made up of pebbles. We were sorely dismayed for after detecting for an hour or two neither of us had found a single coin.

Hard at work

We were using our Tesoro Silver Sabre Plus machines at the time and, as usual, were using them on zero discrimination. We found the Tesoro a good machine to use on this sort of level because of its in-built discrimination of iron. Then around some rocks, Mo' got a signal and unearthed a 50 pence piece. After extracting this, for some reason she put her machine into the all-metal mode (something we don't normally do on a contaminated beach). Lo and behold she got a clear signal and extracted another coin, this time a George V sixpence. Within ten minutes she had extracted 11 coins from this one hole.

For the next few hours in the blistering heat, from an area no bigger than the area covered by the average-sized saloon car, we extracted 109 coins, mostly of pre-decimal date with a large proportion of them being sixpences.

We had discovered that because of the pebbles, our machines could not quite reach the coins in discrimination mode, even on a zero setting. The use of all-metal allowed us to penetrate just that little bit further and extract the goodies. How many other detector users had been there before us, using their machines on discrimination level 3, 4 or 5 or higher and gone away disgruntled? We imagine that it was probably quite a few!

JUNE 2008

Venta Icenorum – A Roman Find.

In the light of the recent 'discoveries', using geophysical surveys, at the Roman town of Venta Icenorum, Corinne suggested that I should explain why on UKDN I use the user-name "ventaicenorum".

My childhood was spent in the 1940's on the outskirts of the City of Norwich. When not at school, from the age of about 7 years, we were to be found fishing in our nearest river, the River Tas, near to the village of Caistor St Edmunds.

On this particular day, for me the fish had not been biting, so I went exploring and came upon a large field, surrounded by banks, flint walls and with a church (St Edmunds) in one corner.

Although I didn't know it, I had found the Roman town of Venta Icenorum, "The Market Place of the Iceni".



JUNE 2008

Venta Icenorum – A Roman Find.

After many visits to the library, the following summer, whilst collecting potsherds, etc. (I was now hooked on all things Roman), I looked down into the Tas valley, from some surrounding high ground and I could just see a grid system of streets, which was so clearly defined in a 1929 RAF aerial photo and published in The Times newspaper at the time. This photo not only highlighted the pattern of streets; but also the many buildings of the town.



This RAF aerial survey led to archaeological digs being carried out from 1929 to 1935, which unearthed the forum, basilica, bath complex, two temples, amphitheatre, grid street layout, the south gate and some pottery kilns!



JUNE 2008

Venta Icenorum – A Roman Find.

Venta Icenorum was most likely founded during the AD 60's, probably as an aftermath of Boudicca's Revolt and became the largest and most important Roman centre of northern East Anglia; the administrative base for Norfolk, northern Suffolk and eastern Cambridgeshire. Fortunately, it has not been destroyed by medieval or modern towns or cities. The sites upper levels have been eroded by ploughing and some degradation of the stone defences has been recorded in recent centuries; but it has otherwise escaped serious harm. I am sure that provided funding can be found, this could become one of the top tourist attractions and educational centres, in the UK, rivalling the likes of Bath and even, Hadrian's Wall!



In conclusion can you imagine my joy when my sister-in-law informed me that her cousin had acquired the farm containing Venta Icenorum and yes, detecting permission was granted! My brother and I, both having started detecting in 1972, spent many happy and fruitful hours detecting on the fields surrounding the ancient monument, (honestly!) our finds being recorded and some retained, by the Norwich Museum. The land was eventually acquired by the Norfolk Archaeological Trust, in 1993. Since then the Roman town has been opened to the public; a self-guided walk, with interpretation panels having been made around the walls. I have to say that I still love to visit Venta Icenorum, a place which is so peaceful and atmospheric and to dream of the life and times of all who lived there, all those centuries ago.

On my birthday, last month, I visited the Norwich Castle Museum and whilst viewing many of the finds from the Roman town, some presented to the museum by me and my brother, I was thrilled when the curator of the Roman section allowed me to hold some complete pots, actually discovered in the early 1930's excavations!

Finally, I have recently applied to be a volunteer, when the new archaeological dig takes place, by The University of Nottingham, later this year and so, hopefully the dream, created by probably my greatest ever find, lives on!

Tom Thompson "ventaicenorum".