

Wargrave Local History Society

Latest News - September 2006

History beneath our Feet

The Wargrave Local History Society meeting in September was an illustrated talk on "History Beneath Our Feet" by Colin Hennell, in which he shared his experiences as a metal detectorist.

Colin began by describing the metal detector itself. Instruments are available from about £75 to £1500 - the more expensive ones purport, said Colin, to say at what depth an object is, the nature of the find, or even what it is. The essential features, however, are included in the less expensive machines - they can discriminate between ferrous and non-ferrous metals, and the strength of the signal indicates the size and/or depth.

It is best to carry out research before going out to a site. Useful sources of information are the Berkshire Record Office, local history societies or the Berkshire Archaeological Society library and old maps, although those pre 1801 are insufficiently accurate to help. Clues can also be found from 'field walking' - remains of oyster shells being a clue to a roman settlement for example. Before conducting a search, it is also necessary to obtain the permission of the land owner.

Colin then showed us pictures of many of the items he had discovered, mostly in the local area. These included silver Roman coins - one, for example, dating from AD130 had been minted in London (one of 8 mints in the country at the time) and was found on the bank of the Loddon near Sindlesham Mill, and others on Sheeplands farm. In the 17th and 18th centuries there was a shortage of small coinage in circulation, and so many traders produced their own tokens - a local example being from a Newbury gunmaker called Huggins. Many such tokens were made from copper, mined in Anglesey.

Brooches were another category of item found in the ground. These may be of bronze, silver, etc. Often the pin will be damaged or missing, as happens with buckles. These come in a variety of metals - iron, silver, bronze etc. Buttons are also found in large numbers - those with a 'twisted rope' motif indicating that they are livery buttons.

Amongst other 'miscellaneous' finds were crotal bells, worn by small animals so they could be located; gunpowder measures, and musket balls (both made of lead - the older ones tending to go white with time); thimbles - occasionally of silver, the earliest ones being of a beehive style; military ware - ranging from cartridge cases to badges; old keys, pipe tamps, etc etc.

Identification of the items found can be done using some of the many catalogues available now-a-days, or the British Museum coins department can assist, as can local metal detecting clubs. Some items are easy to recognise - a George III "d coin, for example, has a distinctive feel to it. It is important that items are kept 'as found', and not cleaned - especially if potentially 'treasure'.

Colin then explained the legal position regarding 'finds'. Under the Treasure Act (which

replaced the Treasure Trove Act in 1997) an item that is made of at least 10% silver or gold must be reported to the coroner within two weeks of being identified as such. The coroner will then conduct an inquest - possibly before a jury -and if it is considered 'treasure', then a valuation committee will assess it, and a museum who wishes to acquire it then pays this sum, split equally between the finder and the land owner. An item has to be over 300 years old to be considered treasure. A single coin is not, but two or more are considered to be so.

Colin then showed us pictures of such an item he had found - on his sixth visit to a farm near Wantage. In a field of wheat was a 3500 year old solid gold torc (neck ring). The condition was so good that the original hammer marks made by the goldsmith can still be seen. He took it to the Ashmolean Museum for identification, - they were 'enthralled', and it then went to the British Museum for valuation, as only 5 others are known in the country. In due course, it was obtained by Reading Museum, for display alongside another found in the same field in 1960.

Colin also brought a display of many items he had found, including a 'mystery object' for members to identify!

Post meeting note: There is a vast amount of information about found items to be discovered on the Portable Antiquities Scheme website.
