

A Bloody Good Time in England

By Ed Stewart

This is not a story about privy digging, or even about bottle digging, but about metal detecting. But after all, this is a bottle *AND* relic club. I think that many bottle diggers have detected at one time or another anyway. If you have never picked up a detector, perhaps this story may motivate you to give it a try.

I actually started out bottle digging with my dad when I was nine years old. When I was in high school, though, I became fascinated with metal detectors and finally mowed enough lawns to buy my first machine when I was a junior. Since then, I have upgraded my detector several times. About ten years ago I learned of a metal detecting tour to England where detectorists could find coins and relics dating back to Roman times...and keep them! I was also aware that I had two kids getting very close to college and that any international treasure hunting trips would have to wait.

With two college degrees and one wedding behind me, 2007 would be the year that my much anticipated England trip would finally become a reality. One nice feature of the tour, operated by Discovery Tours International, is that it provides sightseeing trips for any non-detectorists that come. This meant that my wife, Kelly, could come and enjoy herself, even though she does not detect. For the detectorists, there are eight full days of detecting. The tour operators have agreements worked out with a large number of landowners that provide access for detecting. This year we would be on some fields that had been detected in previous years, and some that had never been hunted before. Even the fields that have been detected continue to produce finds as they are deep-plowed every year, bringing new relics into detector range.



Arriving at the farm.

On Sunday, August 12, we boarded a plane and left the 100 degree heat of Kansas behind. I knew that I wasn't going to miss out on any bottle digging. We flew from Kansas City to Cleveland and then to London on an overnight flight. The second leg of our trip took just under seven hours, making it by far the longest flight I had ever been on. We had hoped that we could sleep for a good part of the flight, but neither of us were able to. It finally got light just in time to see the English coast. Another 45 minutes and we touched down in London.

The best way to beat jet-lag is to get in sync with the local time zone as quickly as possible. After a short shuttle ride to the hotel, we hit the showers. Feeling a little refreshed, we explored around the hotel grounds which were formerly a farm, and some of the local neighborhoods. The toughest part was remembering to look right before crossing a street instead of left. We were picked up at 8:00 a.m. Tuesday morning in a large tour bus for our trip to Norwich where we would be staying for the next nine days. This was the same bus that would take us out into the field each day to detect. There were 17 detectorists and three non-detectorists on the tour. Only five of us were first-timers.

We stopped for lunch in Colchester and visited a medieval castle that has been turned into a museum. The museum had lots of coins and artifacts from pre-Roman, Roman, Dark Ages, and medieval England. The museum had a few Roman bottles, which were crude and beautiful. I was amazed though, that except for the lack of a pontil scar, these bottles did not look that much different from those made into the 1850s. Seeing all the relics really got my juices going and I was ready for the hunt.



Hunting in the fields.

That evening, we were given a preview of the days ahead and an introduction to English laws regarding metal detecting.

In England, the Treasure Act of 1996 and the Portable Antiquities Scheme cover the recovery of artifacts with a metal detector. Both of these were hammered out with representation from the archeological and metal detecting communities, and were constructed to benefit both groups. Any non-coin artifact over 300 years old that is at least 10% precious metal is considered treasure. Groups of multiple relics or coins over 300 years old, from the same find, are also considered treasure regardless of the type of metal. If treasure is found, it must be reported and the British Museum will be notified. If a museum is interested in acquiring the find, a Treasure Valuation Committee will determine a fair market



My first find, a coin (both sides illustrated below) from the reign of Constantine 1st and dated from 306 to 337 A.D.





(L-R) Tudor button. Henry III penny (1216-1272) cut to make change. An early milled silver William III shilling dated 1696.

value for the item. The museum must pay this price or return the item. If the museum buys the find, the finder and the landowner split the proceeds. The valuation committee actually builds in a little premium above fair market value. Hence, the finder will receive a much higher payment following the law than selling illegally to a dealer at a deep discount. This incentive provides an economic motivation to follow the law that is stronger than the threat of fine or jail that can be imposed by failure to comply. Pretty good thinking.

The Portable Antiquities Scheme is a voluntary program to record archaeological objects found by the public. The objects still belong to the finder, unless they are treasure. This program has proven to be extremely beneficial to metal detectorists and archaeologists alike. As part of the program, each museum designates an archaeologist or other staff member as a Find Liaison Officer (FLO). Since there are museums scattered all over the country, no one is very far from an FLO. Metal detectorists benefit by getting expert identification of their finds as well as a better appreciation for the historical and educational value of their finds. Many FLOs actually attend metal detector club meetings to identify and record finds. The archaeologists are reaping great benefits from this voluntary plan. The finds that metal detectorists have reported since the plan began have actually altered early English history. One prominent English archaeologist will not perform an excavation without the assistance of metal detectors. English archaeologists understand that the use of modern fertilizers and land development are destroying important relics at an increasing rate. They are actually encouraging the metal detectorists to find the artifacts as quickly as possible before they, and the unique information they can provide, are destroyed forever.

It is such a shame that many American archaeologists have chosen to create an

adversarial relationship with the collecting public instead of a cooperative one. Whether motivated by academic arrogance or something else, these archaeologists have created a hostile atmosphere in which neither group benefits from the vast amount of information that the other has to offer. If American archeologists would consider metal detectorists and bottle diggers as extended members of their team as the English do, instead of as the enemy, they would greatly enhance their own studies. I would bet that much Revolutionary War and Civil War period history would be revised if American archaeologists had a mechanism like the Portable Antiquities Scheme.

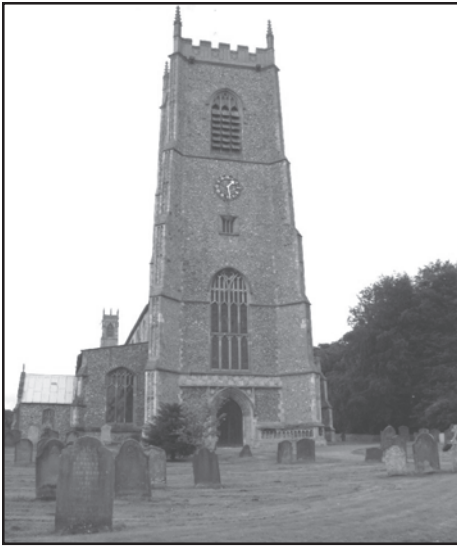
Several of the sites we would be hunting had settlements that dated back to before the Roman occupation of England which lasted from 43 to 450 A.D. All of the sites had seen further occupation into medieval times. We were told that many of these villages were burned down after their inhabitants were killed by the plague. The stone churches from these villages usually survived and would be watching over us as we detected; silent reminders of a long ago age.

Our first day of hunting was Wednesday, August 14. It was overcast with temperatures in the 60s. We were heading to the site of a former Roman settlement. I was still pretty jet lagged but was too excited to notice. After a hearty English breakfast, we boarded the big tour bus for the short trip to our site. We kept turning off on smaller and smaller roads, until we were on almost a one lane road with high hedges on either side. Occasionally we passed small clusters of houses that were easily 400 years old. Even though I was metal detecting, I couldn't help but wonder about the bottles that had to be buried somewhere around those houses. The bus finally cleared the hedges and turned into a farmyard. The fields we would be hunting were right in front of us. They were in short-cropped wheat stubble.

I hunted the better part of the day without finding much to speak of, but I didn't get discouraged. I could just feel the history under my feet. Late in the afternoon I got a signal that I would have dismissed as trash at home, but here you dig any non-iron signal. I removed about eight inches of sandy soil and saw a little round disk in the hole. The bronze coin was smaller than a dime but much thicker. I had my first Roman coin! It was an unbelievable feeling to me to be holding an item that was last touched by a Roman at least 1,550 years old (the Romans left England in 450 A.D.). I found out that night that the coin was from the reign of Constantine 1st and dated from 306 to 337 A.D. I also found out that I had found the top of a Roman hair pin from the 1st or 2nd century. That really gave me a goosebumps, to think that some Roman woman could have been wearing this pin while Jesus was alive on the Earth. Oh yeah, I also found a "new" buckle plate from the 1300s.

My only recordable find on Thursday was a silver love token. Love tokens were made from worn coins from the 1600s or older. The hopeful suitor would give the token to the object of his affection. If she also liked him, she kept the token. If she didn't like him, or they broke up later, she would bend the token and throw it away. Mine was bent. Large copper pennies and other coins from the 18th century are common finds and I detected several during the day. Most are so corroded that they are illegible and due to their color are referred to as "greenies." Most people don't even keep them, but I never could bring myself to throw these away with the other junk. Greenies give great signals and read up as coins on the detector. The older, more desirable coins are so small or thin that they read up in the junk range. So, in a complete flip-flop from my detecting in the States, I found myself hoping for the "trash" signals instead of the "good" signals.

On Friday, our third day of hunting, we were in a harvested pea field that was now



mostly bare dirt, making it ideal for detecting. The icing on the cake was that this was one of the fields that had never been detected before. One-piece buttons from the 18th century and earlier are common finds, and I dug several of these in fairly short order. I also found an older and less common Tudor button from 16th century. My first recordable find for the day. I then found my first hammered silver coin of the trip! These crude coins are



My last visit with the gold ring before sealing it up in the bag that declared it as "treasure."



Both sides of a Charles I royal farthing.

entirely handmade. A blank of silver is placed between two embossed dies. The top die is then hit with a hammer, leaving the impression of the dies on both sides. My coin was a cut Henry III penny made between 1216 and 1272 and had been cut in half to make change. I followed this up shortly with a hammered silver 13th century French Tournois. I then found an early milled silver William III shilling dated 1696.

The old saying about time flying when you are having fun is certainly true. Glancing at my watch, and noticing that the bus would be leaving in ten minutes, I started walking towards the entrance at the far side of the field. Of course, one doesn't walk across a field like this with a metal detector without swinging it, even if it is swung a little too fast. I was about 50 feet from the entrance when I got a good solid signal. It read lower than the dreaded greenie (apologies to Mark Wiseman), but higher than the hammered coins. I carefully dug a small hole and removed the dirt. Laying there in the hole, as bright as the day it was dropped, was a big gold ring! Gently picking it up, I noted how heavy it was. This was serious Woohoo time! I looked around and no one was there; everyone had returned to the bus. I filled in the hole and hurried back to the bus. As soon as I told the group about the ring, I suddenly felt like a quarterback in a large huddle. That night, the ring was tentatively dated to the 16th century and declared treasure. I filled out the necessary paperwork and got some pictures. Now it's just a waiting game to hear of the ring's value and disposition.

Day four, Saturday, was cool and overcast like the others with the possibility of light rain. My detector and I had raingear so the weather wouldn't slow us down. The field was short grass, making for excellent detecting conditions. The first time I sunk, or attempted to sink, my small digging shovel into the ground, I found the catch. The hard ground was full of flint chunks making digging extremely difficult. The digging was worth the effort, though,



Both sides of a rose orb jeton.

as I dug my second Roman coin. It was also from Constantine 1st. I also found a hammered copper Charles I royal farthing from 1625-49, and a 13th century gilded horse pendant made with an eagle design. The field also gave up its share of one-piece buttons and greenies.

Sunday and Monday did not produce any Romans or silvers. I did find a greenie in very good condition though. It was a George III large cent from 1803. It struck me that I was looking at the face of the man who had pushed the American colonists into the Revolutionary War just a few years before that coin was minted. If you like history, you will understand the feeling I had holding this coin in my hand. My recorded finds these two days were a penannular brooch pin fragment from the 13th or 14th centuries, a 14th century tinned belt fitting, a lead bead of unknown date (I am hoping for Roman), and a damaged rose orb jeton from the 16th century. Jetons are coin-sized counters that were used to perform calculations. They look very similar to the hammered coins of the same period. Kelly came out to the field on Monday for a while to take some pictures. While she was there she eyeballed a Stone Age flint tool that was recorded. The tour operators told her that this was the first time a non-detectorist had found a recordable find in the 10+ year history of the tours. Needless to say, Kelly was pleased.

Tuesday, our seventh day of detecting, found us in hunting in the shadow of an ancient looking stone church. The field was in clover, and though it was a little tall in places, was much easier to detect than the wheat stubble. I don't know if it was the clover or what but I felt lucky. After a little detecting, I was rewarded with an undamaged rose orb jeton and a cast double loop annular buckle which dated from 1350-1660. A little while later I found what I thought was a Roman coin. It was about the same diameter as a nickel, but was very thick, which is typical of Roman coins. I later found out that it was a coin weight produced by Isaac Abrahamsen in Amsterdam between 1648 and 1670. Coin



Both sides of an Edward III penny.

weights were used by merchants and others to verify that coins received in trade were of the correct weight, and had not been trimmed or otherwise "lightened." They were primarily used for gold coins. Before the day ended, I hit silver again, finding an Edward III hammered silver penny with a York mint mark from 1369-1377. As I was holding the coin, I glanced up at the church and realized that the person who dropped that coin likely attended services in that very building over 600 years ago.

Our last day of hunting, Wednesday, rolled around all too fast. While we had been intermittently sprinkled on throughout the trip, a steady rain was expected this day. I decided to don my raingear at the hotel which was a good idea as it was raining quite steadily when we arrived at the field. This field, like many of the others, was partly in wheat stubble. Part of the wheat was unharvested as the weather had hindered the farmer trying to get the harvest in. I was determined to find at least one more hammered silver before having to head home. The wind had picked up and was driving the rain sideways. I stayed pretty dry but had to stop and pour the water out of my treasure/trash pouch every now and then. I picked up a couple of corroded greenies as I worked across the field. I got to one area and started finding older buttons. Taking this as a good sign, I slowed down and listened for those faint trash signals. It wasn't long before I heard just such a signal. Digging into the soggy ground I unearthed an Edward III silver halfpenny from 1327-77. This is one small coin, being about the same size as a U.S. silver 3-cent piece. I walked some tight patterns in this area and found an even smaller Henry III cut silver halfpenny from 1216-72. Again, the coin had been cut in half to make change. Try as I might, time ran out before any more coins made their presence known. I returned to the bus a little soggy, but very happy.

Although the detecting was done, the day was far from over. We returned to the motel and packed our bags for the return trip to London. We had eaten great English



Tour hosts present book.

fare for the last nine days, but our British tour hosts had worked up a little surprise for our last meal together: hamburgers, fries, and corn-on-the-cob. It did taste good! After dinner, I was presented with a very nice British treasure book for my positive attitude and detecting success during the trip. Kelly and I said goodbye to our new friends. I said a temporary goodbye to my coins, and most likely a permanent goodbye to my gold ring. The 23 coins and relics I found that were recorded in the field will go to top experts of the British Museum for final identification and recording. All relics over 50 years old must have an export license to leave the country. This is a slow process that could take up to a year, but I will get all these coins and artifacts back. Being treasure, my gold ring will likely go to a museum. The thrill is in the hunt anyway, and even if the ring winds up in a museum, it will have my name beside it.

It was after 11:00 p.m. when we arrived back at our London hotel. After a short night, we shuttled back to the airport and our flight home. For some reason, the flight back seemed a little shorter, which was nice. Weather in the Chicago area delayed our flight out of Newark to Kansas City for three hours. We finally arrived home in Paola at about 10:30 p.m. We had been up for 23 hours straight.

It is hard for me to adequately summarize the trip. The tour operators at Discovery Tours were consummate hosts. The scenery was beautiful. The history is unbelievable. The old-timers on the trip made us immediately feel a part of the group and were very generous with tips and spare batteries (which are very expensive in England). Geeze, I haven't even gotten to the coins and relics yet. I honestly would have had a great time just making the trip. The finds were icing on the cake, though I wouldn't trade them for all the money in the world. I am already making plans to return next year.

Please note that I didn't have a camera that would take good close-ups so I have included pictures of very similar items that were taken from the excellent Colchester Treasure Hunting & Metal Detecting web site (www.colchestertreasurehunting.co.uk) and one (the William III shilling) from eBay to give readers an idea of what I found. The ring pictures are of *my* ring.

Want to go? Tours are limited to 25 detectorists. There are two tours each summer, usually in August. The 2008 tour cost is \$3,645 and includes food, lodging and transportation - but not airfare. For more info: Discovery Tours International, Jimmy Sierra, Inc., P.O. Box 519, Forest Knolls, CA 94933, 800-457-0875, JimmySierra@jimmysierra.com.



On my way to the York Expo.
All my friends are going to be there.