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Treasure beneath your feet and under the waves

New laws have made the search for historical valuables more lucrative, but the diggers and divers behind important finds say the real thrill comes from revealing the past

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[The Observer](#)



Dreams of an unexpected windfall, lottery win or chance find possibly have their origin in childhood tales of buried treasure. The responsibility of adult life, however, means we must rely almost solely on lady luck to make these dreams come true. 'If only.' 'It could be you.' But for some, those dreams have become part of their daily working lives.

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The pursuit of buried treasure is a mix of art and chance which varies by method of discovery. Less than 0.1 per cent of what metal detectorists find is significant, but they always find something. Professional divers however, will not go to sea until they've undertaken months, even years, in research and due diligence.

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But, purists claim, the wealth of history in any find transcends its monetary value. David Barwell, chairman of the National Council for Metal Detecting, says: 'The stigma of the treasure hunter is a mercenary digging up history for its commercial value. When a metal detector uncovers their first significant find, they realise they've discovered history and invariably from then the possibility of acquiring wealth is less important.'

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The Observer

Today it's easier to indulge the romance of history because the 1996 Treasure Act rewards finders at the full market value for their discovery. Before the act, about 25 discoveries of treasure were declared each year. Up to November this year, 359 cases had been declared.

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However, the problem of clandestine theft by a minority of 'Nighthawk' metal detectorists from archaeological sites still exists, although it is hoped that the Trading in Cultural Objects (Offences) Act 2003, which outlaws the trade in anything illegally found, will deter dealers from providing demand. Salvage law, meanwhile, is almost as old as the sea. All salvage and wreck must be reported to the Receiver of Wreck.

The metal detectorist

The Ringlemere cup, unearthed in 2001 by former electrician Cliff Bradshaw, is one of the most famous metal detector finds. Discovered outside Sandwich in Kent, the Bronze Age gold cup is valued at £270,000 and is on display in the Reading Room at the British Museum. This is something that makes purist metal detectorist Bradshaw very happy.

He says: 'I don't go out thinking about finding a chest of doubloons. How can you think of pounds, shillings and pence when you are absorbed in unravelling history? My cup is just a tiny key in the lock. The resulting archaeological dig has uncovered a henge and further barrows. I'm pleased that finds of significance can be seen at museums and not sold abroad via "confidentiality assured ads".'

Bradshaw has been metal detecting since 1992, during which time he studied history at night school for four years. He says his first significant find, a hammered Henry II silver penny, captured his imagination. 'When I looked it up in a book, I started thinking about that time in history. I couldn't help imagining if the man had dropped his penny - a week's wages - from the shock of hearing that his bishop, Thomas Beckett, had been murdered.'

House clearer

Christopher Spencer, a BBC Antiques Road Show expert and house clearer says that during one clearance he found about 20 diamond pieces set in platinum in a box of costume jewellery. They fetched £37,000 at Drewitt Neate Auction House. Because Spencer works on a commission basis, it means relatives of the deceased do not lose out through items of value being included as part of a job-lot price, which is how most house clearers work. 'The costume jewellery was worth little more than £200, but it's unlikely the deceased's relatives would have spotted the diamonds,' he says.

House clearers do not immediately spring to mind when you think about buried treasure, but some kind of 'digging' and 'chance discovery' do play a part in their work. Spencer tells the story of two elderly sisters in Liverpool, whose carers were jailed for theft after



they died. 'When I undertook the house clearance, I realised the sisters must have known what their carers were up to. They had been hiding silver candlesticks under floorboards and hoarding money in glasses cases and shoving them under sets of drawers. It took two weeks to clear the whole house, in which time I uncovered £70,000 worth of goods.'

But, just like archaeologists, house clearers can play a role in uncovering history. 'Objects taken out of context lose their significance,' Spencer says. 'A house clearance should be sympathetically done so that items of personal value are not lost through being sold as a job lot. I once found a handwritten note from an inmate at Changi PoW camp in Malaysia who became famous for building the bridge on the River Kwai. It was hard not to imagine his condition.'

The archaeologist

Mike Pitts, a freelance archaeologist and editor of British Archaeology magazine, says: 'I have to practise the art of turning an empty hole in the ground into money - I have to pay the rent. But what fires me is finding out things no one knew before and creating new historical narratives. This is inherent in your training and thinking as an archaeologist, although there is an element of Indiana Jones in us all.'

Previously a restaurateur, Pitts was drawn to the romance and discovery of working full-time as an archaeologist. He cites standing on a strip of fossilised earth beneath the chalk bank at Avebury in Wiltshire as one of his most exciting finds: 'The emotional power of this find was standing on land the people who built Avebury had walked on and knowing that no one had walked on it since.'

But his most significant find was the site of a previously uncovered megalith close to the heel stone at Stonehenge. Its discovery solved the mystery of why the summer solstice sun doesn't rise over the heel stone, but between the heel stone and where Pitts' stone would have been. 'The story this find uncovered is priceless - you can't put an empty hole on eBay,' he says.

The deep sea diver

After working to retrieve military hardware, including F15 fighter planes and cruise missiles, David Mearns, director of Blue Water Recoveries, discovered about \$20 million of tin, silver, copper, nickel and gold, between 1995 and 1997. Just the kind of treasure the average person dreams of.

However, he says it's not all profit. Salvage law means that he must share the find with the original owner, after costs which can reach

£20,000 a day to undertake a search at sea. 'When I go to sea I want the risk to be infinitesimal, but that doesn't detract from the excitement of discovery,' he says.

But, like other purists, Mearns has become absorbed in the magic of uncovering history: 'The sense of the unknown and unexpected informs my work. I dream about the research and can't wait to get to work in the morning.'

His most important finds were locating HMS Hood and the German battleship Bismarck, both sunk in 1941 with the loss of 3,600 lives between them both. 'The war grave issue meant that we dealt with both ships on a "look but don't touch" basis,' he says. 'We laid down plaques detailing a full roll of honour for both ships, for all who were lost.'

The Treasure Act

The old law of treasure trove defined treasure as a find of gold or silver buried by owners who could not be traced with the aim of later recovery. Coroners' inquests often resulted in long-drawn out arguments by experts. In 1997, the Treasure Act came into force and created a new definition that applies in England, Wales and Northern Ireland.

This includes finds that are at least 300 years old of: objects containing more than 10 per cent silver or gold; groups of coins found together; objects associated with these finds. Treasure is offered to the British Museum and other museums to acquire and the finder and landowner are rewarded with its full market value. A different law applies in Scotland.

You must report all finds of treasure to a coroner for the district in which they are unearthed within 14 days of discovery or within 14 days of realising that the find might be treasure. For non-treasure items, the voluntary Portable Antiquities Scheme allows people to report them for the public benefit. All responsible finders should report their archaeological discoveries to their local finds liaison officer, who will be able to offer them advice.

Finding Our Past is at the [British Museum](#) until 14 March.

[The National Council for Metal Detecting](#)

To declare a find: Contact your local coroner or [The Portable Antiquities Scheme](#)

To declare salvage: [The Receiver of Wreck](#)



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