

Digging in England -- Revisited

by

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As many of you know, I've been fortunate enough to be able to hunt in England a number of times over the years. My last trip was three years ago, and I did find bags of stuff on that trip, including my prize, a fairly rare Anglo-Saxon sceat (a silver late 7th Cent. coin). However, at the end of that long trip, I was a bit burnt out and decided I would probably not go back. But never say never. Three years on, and yes, I was chomping to go again. So I phoned my old friend Jeff Clark (a local dentist and former MTMDC member), and he jumped at the chance to go along for his first time to detect in England

Hunting in England is quite different from the sort of hunting most of us do in the USA. In the first place, hunting is almost entirely done on farmers' plowed fields. People have lived, worked, and traveled on the land now occupied by these fields since ancient times, and objects ranging easily back 2000 years are not uncommon finds in the fields. Secondly, you won't get far by simply pitching up and knocking on some farmer's door, asking for permission. The vast majority of farmer's fields are under written contract to some detectorist, for his exclusive hunting rights. So, if you are a foreigner, the best way to proceed is to hook up with one of the British detectorists who allow other detectorists to hunt on the fields he has under contract for a fee. These operations often have an American partner who organizes things on this side. The larger, all inclusive, operations have a lot to be said for them. They provide nice accommodations, great eating places, good hunting fields, relaxed hunting hours, find identifications, some wonderful castle sightseeing, and take care of all the export permit and other paperwork for your finds. Oh yes, and transportation. Don't forget about this little item. They pick you up at Heathrow airport and drive you to the town where you stay, and to and from your fields every day. If you have ever bailed out of Heathrow in a rental car into the frantic maelstrom of British traffic, all seemingly driving on the "wrong" side of the road, you will understand how leaving all the driving to your host can be a pleasure!

Now, having said all that, I personally tend to go a little more DIY. Firstly, I know the exact area I want to hunt: East Anglia. I know this area well, having lived there (in Cambridge) for almost a year in 1974, and for six months (in the small village of Lavenham) in 2005. This is an area rich in Celtic, Roman, Anglo-Saxon, Medieval, etc. history. I also know a guy who has some 20,000 acres under contract in the area, and only takes on small groups of paying hunters. It is admittedly a bit "hard core". This year he had two groups in the area. My group consisted of seven hunters, counting Jeff and me: Americans, Canadians, and a couple of guys from Germany. We hunted from the afternoon we got off the plane for 14 straight days. No sightseeing, modest accommodations, pub meals or takeaways at night, and *long* hunting hours. We were on the fields from about 7:30 am to 6:00 pm, rain or shine. Mostly rain, unfortunately. It was raining when we got there, and it kept on raining for the next 5 ½ days. Not a downpour at any time, just a foggy drizzle. The main problem is what the rain does to the plowed fields. Mud, mud, and more mud: you sink down into it; you labor up hills with pounds of the stuff loaded on your boots; it sticks to and weighs down your detector coil. Even your shovel gets caked with mud on both sides of the blade, and has to be cleaned off after every time you shove

it into the ground. You are also battling to keep your detector's meter and controls, and yourself, dry with whatever heavy rain gear and detector covers you brought along or can cobble together. Moreover, have you ever tried to find a target in sticky, wet mud? It's not easy – but you get a lot better at it after DAY AFTER DAY OF PRACTICE! Seven guys all trying to dry their gear out at night in cramped conditions isn't recommended either. But finally, wonder of wonders, it stopped raining! In a couple of more days the fields had dried out enough for the heavy boots to come off, target recovery sped up, and in general, we started making more and better finds. We would usually hit one farmer's fields in the morning, and move to another set of fields in the afternoon, after lunch (a sandwich, chips, cookies, and a coke in the field). As always in England, we found a lot of good stuff.

The things I selected for keeping will be sent to me in about six months, after all the paperwork, museum examination (mostly of photos of the objects), and export permits are issued. But here is a summary, in no particular order, just to illustrate the sort of things I found:

Buttons: These are everywhere. People just lost a lot of buttons off their clothes. Flat buttons, mostly “pewter” (actually Tombac) predominate, but also lots of military buttons, livery buttons, etc. I found 172 buttons of all types on this trip, some as early as the 17th Cent. They will be a lot of fun to research individually after I get them home and clean them up properly.



Miscellaneous buttons

Lead: Bag and bale seals (including some 19th Cent. Russian seals), musket balls (I discarded about a dozen -- too heavy to ship back), curious shapes (possibly tokens or trade weights of some sort), part of a toy horse, and an oval piece with a bust figure on one side and initials on the other. Needs cleaning and research to identify.

Jewelry: The most interesting find was the upper half of a Medieval bronze ring with colored stones in the bezel. Looks pretty crummy now, but I think it will clean up. Part of a Roman brooch; a few pendants, notably one Roman (can't really tell what it is yet), and a 19th Cent. Ottoman Empire Islamic coin pendant. Also found something that may be an engraved personal seal.



Top view, Medieval ring



Side view, Medieval ring

Toys: A great brass toy top (probably “Georgian”, i.e., 1714-1820), and an 18th Cent. toy cannon about 3” long.



18th Cent. toy cannon

Tokens: Various 18th, 19th and early 20th Cent. merchants’ tokens. One is a cool Dutch East Indies token. Again, they will have to be cleaned and researched more thoroughly to see exactly what I’ve got.

Misc. brass: Lots and lots of pieces of different things. Bells, thimbles, buckles, decorated shoe clasps, strap and cord ends, a watch winder, military badges, various harness mounts of several types, ranging at least back to Medieval times; a lovely bell clapper; trade weights; and many, many as yet unidentified pieces.



Misc. brass buckles, bells, clasps, etc., etc.



A.D. 1300-1600 leather mount



George II (1727-1760) London trade weight

Coins: The “background noise” are the so-called “Greenies” (I found a couple of handfuls), which are copper coins dating from the 17th to early 20th Cent. (most from the 19th). These are called simply “Greenies”, because the copper is corroded and there is seldom enough recognizable design left (effects of soil weathering and fertilizer) to identify them. What everyone is really looking for, and talking about, are “hammered silver” coins. As the name implies, they are hand-struck between dies; machine-made coins only began in 1662, so “hammered” are old, rare, and very desirable. Yet even in these huge fields, they turn up regularly as losses from hundreds of years ago. I found two hammered on this trip; a King Henry III silver penny from A.D. 1216 (it’s bent, but I may have it straightened), and a Queen Elizabeth I half-groat from A.D. 1582. I also found some later milled (machine made) silver coins.



Henry III silver penny Elizabeth I silver half groat



Reverse side of A.D. 1582 Elizabeth I half groat

My very best find I have, of course, saved until last. I consider it to be the find of a lifetime. It is a Celtic gold quarter stater, dating from 70 B.C. I found it on the very last day of our hunt.

We had piled into the van at 7:00 am as usual and were discussing where to go that morning. As Jeff and I were leaving to fly home the next day, we were given our choice preference. I said, "Let's hunt the fields next to the Morini village site." The Morini were an ancient Celtic tribe with most of their villages along the mainland European coast just across the channel from England (more-or-less where Belgium is today). They also had a few scattered villages on the English side. The site I referred to was a known village site that had produced several Morini gold coins in the past. The Celts did not use these coins for daily transactions the way we do. They used them for major trade purchases, but more frequently buried them in the crop fields surrounding their villages as offerings to the gods for fruitful harvests. We had visited the Morini village site the previous week, but it had been in high stubble and not really huntable. The fields next to it, although not in stubble when we were there, were in thick mud and we found very little. In any case, I thought perhaps they were worth another shot, now that they had dried out. As we came up to the fields, we all whooped in surprise. The farmer had unexpectedly just finished plowing the stubble field on the Morini site itself and was now rolling it! We forgot about the fields next door and went for the Morini-site field itself. I hunted all morning, meticulously gridding the high ground at the far end of the field but came away with only a few buttons, one measly Roman coin, and some miscellaneous bits. I finally decided to walk straight across the field for the half-mile or so back to the van for lunch. Nobody had found much (we all had radios to keep in touch), and we planned to move to another field in the afternoon. As I was coming across the field, I got yet another "14-16" signal on my MXT. I had dug dozens and dozens of small buttons and lead in that signal range during the last two weeks.

But when I dug *this* signal, I saw the glint of gold – it was just the edge of a small object, but nothing else looks like that. I knew immediately what it was. I reached down and plucked it out of the dirt, where it had lain for over 2000 years: my first ever gold coin, and one of the rarest I could ever hope to find.



70 B.C. Celtic gold quarter stater



I saw a highly stylized boat with two people in it on one side of the coin, and a stylized tree on the other side. I later learned that the “tree” was venerated by the Celts as a symbol of life, and the boat” was obviously important to the coastal and seafaring Morini tribe (the very word “morini” refers to people of the sea). Later measurement gave a diameter of 10.9 mm. These are tiny coins, as implied by the “quarter” of a stater (a stater is a denomination term, like “dollar”, or “dime”). The very small size of a quarter stater makes them even harder to find than a larger, full stater, which is found rarely enough.

Back at the van, after the congratulations and handshakes, my required “gold dance”, and the photos/videos, the entire team, plus the other team whom we phoned to notify, descended on that part of the field like a flock of ravenous seagulls. Any thoughts of moving to another field were long gone. Hard hunting by the two teams amazingly turned up another similar quarter stater in the same field later that day.

So, with literally a few hunting hours to go before the end of our trip, and when all I was thinking about was getting to my sandwich for lunch, I found what may be the rarest item I have ever found. Talk about dumb luck – and it truly was. Just think about it. A vast field, and my coil just happened to pass over the right spot to pick up a tiny object like this. The coin has been officially registered with the CCI (the Celtic Coin Index maintained by Oxford University). I’ll only see it again in six months or so when it and my other finds are sent to me.

Think I’m not still excited? ☺