Probus talk 21 November 2024

Treasure Trove

Jim Walker

The development of metal detectors has led to increased interest in searching for buried historic and valuable objects. These, and other such items found in whatever circumstances and with no known owner (bona vacantia), may be classed as Treasure Trove. There are many rules on what counts as Treasure Trove in England, Wales and Northern Ireland, notably precious metals and items of significant historical interest. Any such finds must be reported to the coroner. Under Scottish law all portable antiquities of archaeological, historical or cultural significance are subject to claim by the Crown. The Treasure Trove Department of the grandly named "King's and Lord Treasurer's Remembrancer" must be informed of any finds. The find will be valued and payment made to finder, to be equally shared with the owner of the land on which it was found.

Jim gave many examples of Treasure Trove finds, the first being a valuable horde found by two detectorists on their initial outing. However most finds in previous times were made by accident, and brief descriptions of the major ones were given in his presentation. They ranged from bronze age artifacts, through iron age, Roman, Viking, late medieval through to modern times.

Ploughmen discovered a number, as modern ploughs cut deeper to reveal treasures buried below. In 1982 a fine collection of grave goods from a bronze age burial cist was turned up in Peeblesshire. A magnificent collection of Roman silver was also found by a ploughman in 1942 near Mildenhall, Suffolk. It featuring a platter nearly two and a half feet in diameter and weighing over 18lbs. Separate hoards of iron age objects, many of gold, were unearthed in Norfolk. Perhaps one of the most interesting finds was made, by a cow, in 1831 on the Isle of Lewis – a set of 93 gaming pieces made from walrus ivory and whales' teeth.

In 2007 near Harrogate metal detectorists found a horde of Viking silver from around 927AD that was valued at near £1.1m. A 2014 find in Galloway of similar age was valued at almost £2m. It comprised of over 100 fascinating items in a metal pot of foreign origin wrapped in textiles. A Roman cavalry officer's helmet, discovered in Cumbria by a detectorist was declared Treasure Trove. It sold for £2.3m at auction.

Treasure trove can be found in the most unexpected places. A neolithic long bow was found in a peat bog. Coins can be hidden away in the structure of buildings, and a horde of coins dating from 1847 to 1915 was even found in a piano that had just been given away by its owners.

Altogether a well presented and informative talk with a personal touch. Jim himself as a teenager, had discovered a small stone Roman alter near the Antonine wall. This had helped inspire his interest in archaeology and history.