



# Detectorist Dave Derby



The editor often reminds me that not all detectorists are wired-up. Before you jump to the wrong conclusion she meant not all of our readers have a computer, access to the World Wide Web or the means to send an email.

With this in mind I have mentioned on several occasions that if any reader has a story to tell then please contact the magazine by 'snail mail' or telephone. Dave Derby did just that and as a result of our conversation I visited him recently in the small

Northamptonshire village where he lives. My wife, constant carer, unofficial sub-editor and chauffeur Lynda, accompanied me.

When we arrived Mrs. Derby (Rita) called her husband - who was ensconced in his little 'detecting den' surrounded by various trophies, framed hobby-related pictures on the walls, magazines carpeting the floor, newspaper cuttings of his exploits, record books and examples of his finds. Oh ... and a Minelab detector propped up in a convenient corner ready for instant action. I was entranced.

### Detecting for 40 years

After making a welcome coffee the two girls left us to chat. In a soft, almost inaudible voice, Dave began his tale, filling me with wonder and delight that grabbed and held my attention. He talked for over 60 minutes; I made few interruptions, mainly entreaties like, 'Can you speak up, Dave?'

The transcription of the tape made on that warm summer day reminds me of Dave's remarkable detecting 'career' so far. I hope that what follows is a faithful record and that I manage to convey some of the excitement and important moments

All pictures by John Winter except where stated



Detecting trophies



Wall display

he shared with me, especially his close working relationship with the local archaeological community.

Dave is 78, still very active in the hobby and has been detecting for about 40 years. He told me that his interest started with the discovery of a Georgian coin found when he was a young lad helping his father to dig the garden. Being inquisitive and wanting to know more, it was taken to the local museum. The seed was sown.

Many years later he bought his first detector, a C-Scope costing about £50, went along to a local detecting club, liked what he saw and joined. There were some 'fantastic guys', but





Dave Derby

one in particular became a good friend and remains his detecting partner to this day. His name is Steve Pulley.

## Aircraft recovery

In the early days a group specialising in aircraft recovery contacted them asking for help. They went on to find a Spitfire and a Flying Fortress, but the recovery of a Wellington Bomber in 1992 proved to be quite memorable and rather special.

The Bomber had crashed on its return from Germany in 1944, 'just up the road' at Rothersthorpe. Dave and Steve went along with the recovery team and managed to locate various bits and pieces from the doomed aircraft. A mechanical digger was called upon and found two propeller blades and one of the engines.

After research, help from the Parish Council and co-operation from the Air Force, it was determined that the mainly New Zealand crew had been reported as 'lost in action'. A memorial service was organised at the site of the crash and was attended by family descendants of the unfortunate airmen.

In Rothersthorpe's St Peter and St Paul church near the site of the crash hangs the mounted, refurbished propeller with a plaque giving the names of each member of the crew. There is also a small museum depicting the event. The young airmen, their sacrifice, the efforts of the recovery team and the two detectorists will be remembered in perpetuity. Dave and Steve remain members of the Northamptonshire Artefact Recovery Club (Motto: *Research-Recover-Record*) and still detect on the farm where the plane crashed.

## "Quietly spoken and diffident"

Dave had heard that a Roman excavation was taking place two villages away, so paid a visit to see what was happening. He introduced himself to an 'archaeological chap' who seemed to be in charge saying, "I'm a detectorist ... if you can use my services, you are more than welcome." Stephen Young, the archaeologist, said that he was just the sort of chap he'd like to get involved to which Dave replied, "Fantastic. Can I bring my friend, Steve?"

Stephen Young, now a Senior Lecturer at the University of Northampton, remembers that first meeting rather well:

*"My first memory of Dave was his arrival on one of my sample sites whilst I was undertaking some trial trenching and open area excavation. I remember that he was a quietly spoken and diffident individual but someone who appeared to be dedicated to achieving a more informed outcome for his finds."*

*He asked whether I would be interested in having a metal detectorist join the 'digging' team, a proposition that at the time was quite novel and would have probably been a little contentious amongst the wider archaeological fraternity. Nevertheless I saw no reason then – or since – not to include him and make use of his skills.*

*They [the detectorists] added to our resource capability and brought a more*

*intense clarity to the recovery of small finds and particularly the coin lists associated with individual sites, literally changing our perspective with the range and scope of material recovered ...*

*During that time we have always had a good and close working relationship which has certainly helped and I think considerably enriched both my and his understanding particularly of the Roman archaeology of our local area in Central Northamptonshire."*

## A military bonanza

Thus began a long and fruitful association between archaeologist and detectorist going back to the late 1980s. On that first site the detectorists found over 50 coins; previously to that the tally discovered by the professionals had been three.

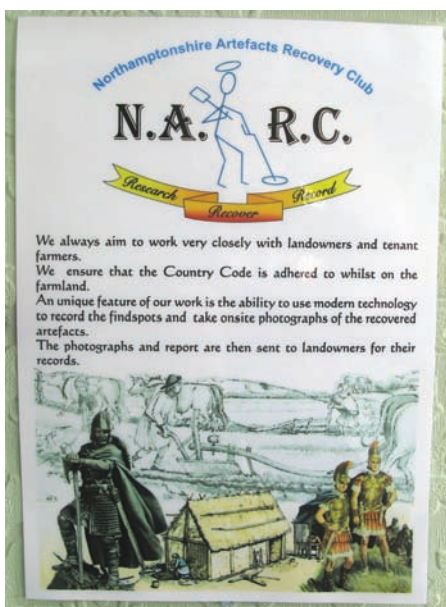
Dave and Steve proved to be reliable, trustworthy and keen and were allowed to detect further. They started unearthing a lot of military artefacts and numerous buttons from at least 24 different regiments – described by Dave as, "Coming out like confetti".

Stephen decided to investigate further and dug a trench. It was thought that what they had stumbled upon was an army camp that had originally been under canvas and used for troop mobilisation before going off to war. But it was more than that.

This experience sparked Dave's interest in military items, which grew and grew. In 2006 he was the subject of a *Searcher* article in a regular feature by Dave Knight on *Military Insignia*.

Mr. Knight wrote, "David's collection consists of several hundred buttons and pieces of which I have examined 40, and I am pleased to say that not one was a disappointment! Each button tells its own story".

At the end of the two-page article it was said that a very important conclusion could be made from the collection. First, all the finds were all from the same immediate vicinity and clearly displayed that there had been a lot of military activity in the area,



NARC



Buttons and military artefacts



probably at its height in the 1840's and 1850's. The author speculated that it was maybe a kitting out camp for the invasion of the Crimea in 1854.

## Famous last words

*"We've had two chaps around before, but they haven't found anything," intoned the farmer in answer to Dave's knock on his door asking for permission to search, "but you are welcome to have a look".*

1966 was the start of a detecting adventure. Dave and his mate Steve didn't find much at first, but then they discovered tesserae and a large number of Roman coins, which they took to show the farmer and suggested that they introduce him to their friend, archaeologist Stephen. He agreed.

Stephen told me: *"Dave has always impressed me with his ability to understand the paramount importance of the provenance of finds and how the information associated with them can impart a great deal more to the archaeological experience. I have also been encouraged by his commitment to a community-based approach to archaeological field practice, which is something I strongly believe in myself. We both feel archaeology and field survey should be open and accessible to all and that this means inclusivity at all levels of the process. He also represents a group of field workers who are investigating and finding sites in areas that we know nothing about and for which British archaeology at present is ill equipped to locate itself.*

*I was repaid for my trust in Dave a little while later when he found a range of finds and material consistent with the remains of a previously unidentified Romano-British villa at Whitehall Farm, Nether Heyford, Northamptonshire. He not only introduced me to the landowner but assisted me in developing a research based initiative to explore the archaeological remains. He subsequently took an active part in the large scale archaeological assessment and excavation of the site over the next 13 years.*

*The assemblages and the coin list in no small measure personally recovered by him have given a whole new dimension to the interpretation of the site. Added to which on all our open days Dave generously gave of his time and expertise to bring our work to public notice and potentially energise a future generation of metal detecting enthusiasts and archaeologists. In particular he also has facilitated working with metal detectorist clubs and societies and other individuals in a series of archaeological projects undertaken by the Community Landscape and Archaeological Survey Project (CLASP). This has also encouraged and helped me to develop bonds of trust with other metal detecting practitioners, which has also lead to improved contact with landowners and farmers."*

Excavations, a geophysical survey and more detecting revealed a Romano-British villa based on stone round houses with

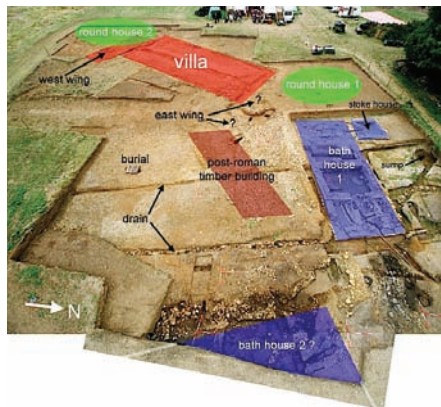


Illustration of Whitehall Farm Roman Villa © John Hodgson

accompanying rectangular enclosures and bathhouses and has become known as the Whitehall Farm Roman Villa.

The site has been the subject of a major annual excavation each year since 2000. Early digs were training excavations providing archaeology students with structured fieldwork experience to help them to qualify.

They came from as far away as Canada, Japan and Australia to undertake research, but unpaid local volunteers did the majority of the work. The Project is run by Stephen Young (our archaeologist) and by Nick Adams, the farmer who owns the site.



Aerial View © CLASP

In 2005 Whitehall villa was proud to be selected as one of only nine projects nationwide to be featured in the Time Team's 'Big Roman Dig' TV series made for Channel 4.

On 18 September 2012 the site was infilled and returned to pasture. Anyone wishing to read more about the Whitehall story and have a computer may take a look at [www.whitehallvilla.co.uk](http://www.whitehallvilla.co.uk)

## That's not all!

Just three years after Dave and Steve discovered the Roman villa, they made another remarkable discovery on another nearby field. Dave 'picked up' a beautiful

Saxon brooch and Steve found the end of a sword! Then they saw bones; it was time to bring in the experts.

The skeleton they found was christened *The Whitehall Warrior* and his status as a local leader was confirmed by the way he was buried and the artefacts found around him, especially the sword found by Steve. He explained to the local press, *"Swords from the Saxon period were highly treasured and were only owned by the wealthy. To be buried with a sword is the equivalent these days of being buried with a new BMW car".*



Unearthed: The skeleton of a Saxon warrior (right) with his sword by his side. And above, an artist's impression of how the man would have looked when he was first laid to rest.

The Saxon warrior as he appeared in the local press

More skeletons – three men, a woman, three adolescents and a baby were unearthed and reinterred in a simple ceremony. The woman – thought to be French – was buried with jewellery, a tasting fork and a metal buckle.



## And there's more!

Shortly after taking up the hobby, Dave decided that he needed to keep a record of his finds, so he started recording in a notebook. Without any formal training he made meticulous sketches and detailed notes. He told me that he had 'an urge to write it down.' It is rare to see such a comprehensive record of sketches and one done so skillfully - an exemplar for all detectorists. Today the computer literate will no doubt use photographs.

In April 1994, one of Dave's finds, a 16th century bridle boss, was shown on the front cover of *The Searcher*. The writer described it as 'a most impressive find' and although damaged was still 'a most attractive object.'



Bridle boss

The bridle boss, with an even patina and much gilding remaining, would have adorned the end of a snaffle bit and dates from the first half of the 16th century. The item is still in Dave's possession and I was able to take a better picture.

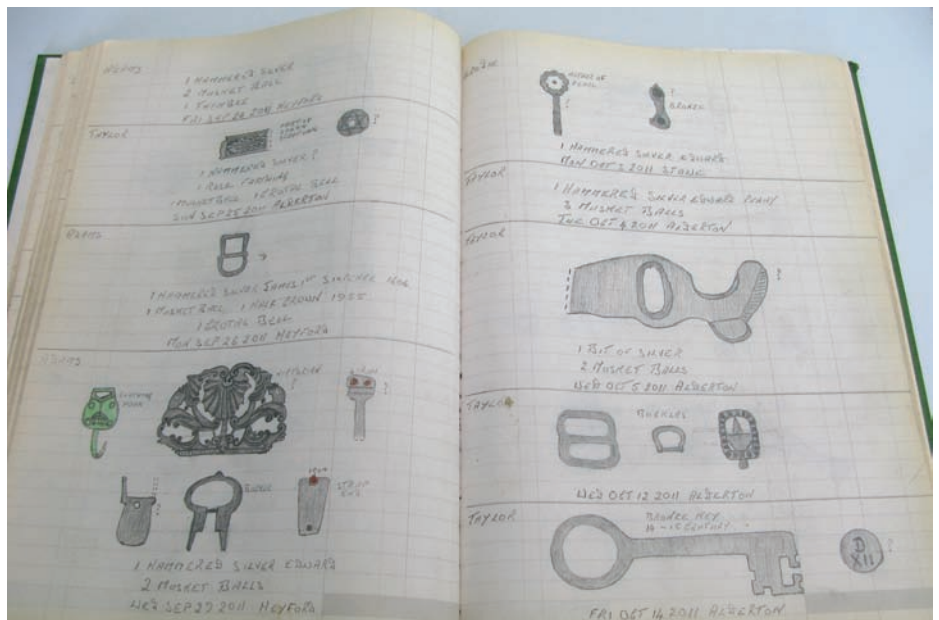
Dave has made some fantastic finds over the years. His latest significant artefact is a Saxon pyramid mount, the sort found on a sword scabbard. This particular example is impressive!



Saxon pyramid mount

## An asylum button

Knowing of Mrs. John's interest in the ubiquitous button, Dave presented her with a special example found not far from where he lives. He called it his 'Bad Boys' Button'. I find it ironic that the back plate should bear the legend EXTRA RICH QUALITY. The front shows a type of beehive known as a SKEP. The bee symbolises industry, diligence and effort.



Dave's records



Asylum button

Tiffield was founded in 1855 ... or 1856, depending upon which research items you pin your faith, and is a good example of a Reform School that received boys from all over the country, and for various misdemeanors. The length of sentence was harsh – such as three years for stealing boots, the same for a chicken, and five years for stealing eight eggs.

## Fitting tribute

Whilst writing this account I have become even more aware of the understanding between some archaeologists and detectorists

and how working together can be mutually beneficial. It is appropriate to let Stephen Young have the last word.

*"Dave and I continue to work together on new sites which allow us to fill in the gaps in our understanding of the historical landscape. I think that I can honestly say that Dave's contribution and that of his detecting colleagues to fieldwork that we undertake has been critical to the success of the projects and directly enhanced the relevance of our approach by helping develop the diversity and wide scale interest in archaeology necessary to make community based initiatives work in an effective way. I know as we start to reinterpret our understanding of Roman Britain at least in the watershed of the River Nene, his personal contribution should not be underestimated."*

Stephen Young, Senior Lecturer at the University of Northampton; Archaeological Director CLASP; Archaeological Director Whitehall Farm Roman Villa Research Project.