

Finds Care 101 for Metal Detectorists

The purpose of this document is to offer basic advice for detectorists caring for their finds in the interim period between unearthing and reporting the finds. It is your responsibility to familiarize yourself with the Portable Antiquities Scheme and record your actions. Details of your local Finds Liaison Officer can be found at www.finds.org.uk, e-mail info@finds.org.uk or phone 020 7323 8611. For further finds guidance please see: <https://finds.org.uk/conservation/index>

Before you go:

As always, review the rules and policies pertaining to land access and finds. Do a bit of research on the significance and physiography of where you are planning to go. Understanding the historic environment of an area will give you insight into the types of potential finds and their context. Also, make a plan for care. Though you may not find anything while you are out, take appropriate provisions to safely store materials every time you go detecting. Just as planning for reporting location is an essential part of ethical detecting practice, so is preserving information on an object.

Understand the burial environment

The depositional environment you uncovered the material in is the key to its preservation. The burial environment in the U.K. is typically damp with varying oxygen content. Good care measures are key to keeping finds safe from excavation to reporting.

The preservation of all materials will depend on the burial environment, with stable conditions slowing

rates of decay, and sudden changes in microenvironments accelerate deterioration.

Excavation tools:

While trowels and shovels move earth quickly and can be effective ways to begin digging, they can also damage artefacts. Consider using wood or plastic tools - such as pottery sculpting tools - to limit your potential of damaging an object. Bamboo skewers and brushes are also effective for uncovering an object once it has been located in the ground. If possible try to avoid ad-hoc cleaning in the field. Things like toothbrushes and canvas can damage the surface of an object, particularly softer surfaces such as gold and silver. Wet cleaning without adequate drying can accelerate corrosion and biological growth.

Plan for care

Bring a selection of storage materials with you to ensure the safe transport of artefacts. Basic storage equipment:

- Food storage containers
- Polythene bags
- Silica gel
- Jiffy foam or acid-free tissue

All these materials are available online or at many DIY shops in the UK. These items can be cleaned and reused multiple times. Try to avoid storing your finds in containers made of wood, metal, or wrapped in acidic paper. These materials can cause undesirable chemical reactions with your finds.

Following excavation artefacts should be stored in a manner that is informed by the transition from burial to research to retention environments. After excavation, some objects will acclimatize, but most should be kept in conditions that replicate burial as closely as possible. Most essential is keeping the artefacts in a stable environment away from direct sunlight.

If it's dry keep it dry. If you use silica gel make sure it is not sealed separately from the object. Store the object directly in the gel or ventilate the bag. Properly drying out wet materials can be a painstakingly long process best left to conservation professionals.

If it's wet, keep it wet. Waterlogged objects should be kept in a solution of a similar pH. (The water you found it in).

If it's organic: keep it humid (around 60% relative humidity), unless in the unlikely event it was found desiccated, then keep it dry.

Remember:

If in doubt on how to care for an object, leave it in the ground, notify the landowner, and get in contact with your local Finds Liaison Officer.