

The day I was really good at Metal Detecting

Mackenzie Crook

I've found gold three times, the first in 1977 when I was six years old.

An afternoon walk with my family took us past a church where, in the road I spied a tiny christening bracelet.

The church was all shut up so my mum and I dropped in at the village police station where we were told to come back in three weeks when, if the owner couldn't be traced, the bracelet would be mine to keep.

You'd think that wouldn't be too difficult a task, finding the owner. Small village, perhaps checking the church Record of Recent Christenings might throw up some clues. But no, after what I can only assume were three weeks of exhaustive investigations, the case was closed and the gold was mine. Not many months later my little sister was born and the bracelet became a birthday present.

Fast forward nearly 20 years and I had moved with three mates into a shared house under the Heathrow flight path. The house was unfit for human habitation so I spent most of my time transforming the jungle out the back into my first garden. I loved that garden. When we eventually moved on, I seriously considered taking the compost heap with me.

One July evening I mowed the lawn, went in to watch TV, and went to bed. First thing the next morning I found a gold coin lying on top of the freshly mown grass. It was an Austrian one ducat dated, I think, 1915.

I've never been able to explain how the coin got there. It had to have been dropped or thrown but by whom and from where? The only theory vaguely plausible to me is that a magpie dropped it. But where does a magpie find an Austrian gold coin in Hounslow?

The next month I took a show to the Edinburgh Festival and it wasn't long before I sold the coin to pay for chips. I won't tell you how much I sold it for, to this day I wince. I was really hungry.

Fast forward another 20 years to 2017 and I'm not leaving it to chance anymore, I've taken up detecting and I'm actively searching. I say 'actively', the truth is I get out three or four times a year at most. Those days become

very precious and I find myself getting unduly anxious in the lead up. Equipment is checked, laid out, and packed meticulously. Weather forecasts are consulted and dismissed and I go to bed giddily compiling a ridiculous wish list of 'things I'd like to find tomorrow'.

Tomorrow was January 17, I know that because it says so on the Treasure report (spoiler alert). The following is recounted through rose-tinted glasses so forgive me if it gets a bit flowery:

I got up early, poured hot water in a flask (coffee and sugar already spooned in the night before), and was off up the A12 before anyone else had stirred. Slowed down at the Little Chef, thought I might get some pancakes, but it wasn't open yet so I drove on. Had it been open I would likely have had a brief conversation with the person who brought me my pancakes: "Here are your pancakes sir" "thank you," but as it was, I didn't speak to another person all day.

I only really have one permission that I detect on, a farm in Suffolk about two hours drive from my home. William, the landowner is a friend and is fascinated by the history of his land and what I turn up. But he wasn't around that day and the place was deserted as I drove up the track and parked next to the barn.

As I unpacked my gear from the boot of the car I happened to notice a small, brick out-house with an inviting blue door left slightly ajar. I wandered over and peaked around to see a wonderful thing: a spotless toilet and hand basin, toilet paper, soap, towel, lock on the door, even a five bar heater on the wall. Why had I never noticed this blue door before? Was I in Narnia? (As it turned out, I didn't have occasion to use the toilet that day, but it sure felt good to know it was there.)

The magical, Narnian bathroom proved to be the first discovery of a productive morning. I got to my allotted field, and before long a trickle of unspectacular but far from disappointing finds started to make themselves known.

Lots of buttons, sure, but then I do love a button. I find buttons very personal items that I can link to an individual. Coins are obviously great but they would have passed



through many hands when in circulation, whereas a button would have only belonged to one or two people at most. Is it right that old clothes used to be shredded and ploughed into the earth for fertilizer? Which is why we find so many buttons? I'm sure I read that somewhere.

Buttons, buckles, some Georgian and Roman grots were all coming up, and a lovely half crown that can't have been dropped long after it was struck in 1946.

Then one of the items on my fantasy list from the night before.

I'm not sure if I saw it first and then heard the signal or the other way round but it was pretty simultaneous and probably counts as eyes-only. Sitting on the surface like an ancient, bronze plum, a crotal bell. I instinctively whipped out my phone and did



a little video with a commentary. (I watched it back later and it was ludicrous so I deleted it.) The bell was broken open on one side and the pea was gone but even so, as I scraped out the earth, the bell began to faintly ring again and I could hear a distant sound from medieval England.

Another common find that I'd never before found was a thimble and it wasn't long before one of these poignant treasures, crumpled and Victorian, was calling to me from 3" down. Triumphant rounding off the morning was a hammered silver penny, folded in half by a plough sometime since the reign of Edward I.

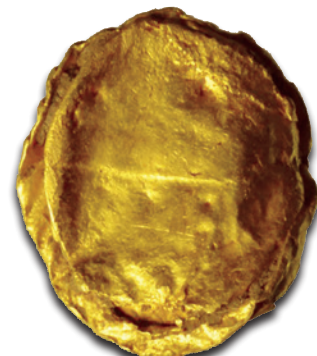
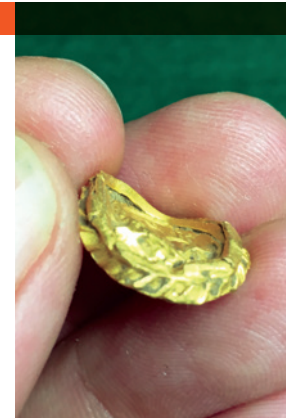
I stopped to eat my sandwiches at what I thought was probably lunchtime. Cheeky bottle of beer, why not? Got back to it.

My first signal after lunch was clear as a whistle and proved to be exactly that. A beautiful, I don't know, shepherd's whistle? Soldier's? I've been calling it a 'hawking' whistle but only to people who wouldn't know any better. They seem to be impressed by that, hawking whistle. It was full of dirt that I poked out with a blade of grass until it was as clean as a new pin, raised it to my lips and blew. The sound that echoed across the field sent shivers up my spine. Not the faint tinkle of a crotal bell but a piercing, urgent scream, and I knew the last person to have heard that ghostly shrill was the one who lost it centuries ago. That's going in the script, I thought.

I continued for the next few hours doing some brilliant metal detecting, even if I say so myself. I was really good at metal detecting that day. You know those times when you feel you're properly in control? Instinctively



OPPOSITE TOP Mackenzie Crook courtesy BBC
OPPOSITE BELOW A screen-grab from the (now deleted) 'live-dig' video; whistle **LEFT** A poor quality photo of the day's finds laid out on the traditional piece of kitchen roll
ABOVE Damage to an expensive barn door cancels out the value of the treasure; two smug scarecrows loiter close by;
RIGHT Roman gold **BELOW** Austrian one ducat coin.



knowing which signals are trash and which are worth digging, the finds were popping up on all sides.

Now I don't know about you but I get jealous reading about other people's great finds. Sorry Harry, but flicking through the pages of this magazine sometimes leaves me slightly irritated, with a feeling of 'that should have been me'. I don't want to hear 'it was only my second time detecting' and I certainly don't believe it when people roll out the old 'it was the last signal of the day, I was on my way back to the car...' cliché.

But then it happened to me.

“Now I don't know about you but I get jealous reading about other people's great finds.”

I was finding it hard to stop but it was getting dark so I said to myself, "start heading back to the car, one last, clear signal and then home."

The next clear signal was a shottie though, so I said, "OK, one more last clear signal and then home".

By the time it came it was dark enough that I couldn't see in colour anymore and what I picked out of the plug looked like a crumpled milk bottle top. But there was something about it, perhaps the weight, which made me put it in my wallet and then out of my mind for the journey home.

By the time I arrived back everyone was in bed and so there would be no witness to my belated and lonely gold-dance. What I'd found was a piece of Roman jewellery: an earring or a pendant, with an embossed design of a long-necked bird, surrounded by a rilled collar.

It's tiny, smaller than a penny, but to me it's as beautiful as Tutankhamen's golden mask or anything from Sutton Hoo. It's gone now of course, working it's way slowly through the system, but I kept hold of it for the full 14 days before I turned myself in.

I'd love to see it in a museum but honestly, I showed so many people in that fortnight (complete strangers some of them) that I think it would reach a wider audience if it were returned to me. If not, I only have 19 and a bit years until I find my next gold.

Epilogue/Punch Line

Having realised what I'd found I knew I had to go back and thoroughly check the surrounding area. I had a chance a few days later and fully expected to replicate my successful day. I drove all the way back and smashed my car into William's 20' barn door causing about two grand's worth of damage. Smooth. ●