

‘That belongs in a museum’: The true ‘cost’ of detecting in England and Wales.

By Tess Machling

‘My members don’t want to be quasi-archaeologists, they want to go out on a Sunday, dig around, get dirty, find something good’

John Wells, the Association for Metal Detecting Sport [*in oral evidence to the All Party Parliamentary Archaeology Group \(APPAG\) Inquiry on Archaeology and Metal-detecting*](#), 26th June 2025.

Abstract

[My previous work](#) has discussed various aspects of the hobby of detecting: how the [context of archaeological finds is often lost](#), how [private ownership of finds is reducing the archaeological dataset](#), how our obsession with monetary worth [may be fueling an increase in artefact theft](#) and, more recently, the [hidden and unacknowledged costs of the hobby of detecting to the wider British public](#).

This work has looked at England and Wales only, and so these observations *do not* include the costs incurred in Scotland. In Scotland, [6000-8000 finds are reported](#) to the Scottish Treasure Trove Unit every year, and it should be noted that the increasing ‘reward’ sums ([£138,651 was paid to Scottish detectorists](#) in the 2024/2025 period) and associated administrative costs are significant additional costs to the England and Wales figures that I have been working on.

This blog brings the current work up to date, with new information received from Freedom of Information requests submitted to the Department of Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) and to the British Museum, which were returned in December and January 2025. These figures have never before been publicly available and provide the only absolute costings for the amount paid out in ‘Treasure’ rewards since 2020. I have also included information from the latest, 2024, Treasure Valuation Committee (TVC) minutes, which were published in early January 2025.

The overall picture is shocking - tens of millions of pounds worth of costs are being incurred by the British public (via government funding, funding bodies, individual donations, crowdfunding and museum payments) and tens of thousands of artefacts are being lost: metal detecting, rather than being a harmless hobby, is in fact a huge drain on the heritage resources of England and Wales.

I would argue that it is now time for further regulation of the detecting community and, at the very least, for the detecting community to start contributing to the costs incurred by their hobby. That money is certainly available, with the National Council of Metal Detectorists (NCMD) adding tens of thousands of pounds each year to their [£600,000+](#), self-described, ‘[Battle Fund](#)’ war chest. With over [80,000 detected artefacts being found every single year in England and Wales](#), this regulation cannot come soon enough.

Hidden costs

The hobby of detecting places a large burden on the public purse. However, the precise cost is difficult to quantify. The only two fixed figures that we have is the amount paid by DCMS ([£1.4 million grant-in-aid](#) to the British Museum) to fund the scheme, and the ‘reward’ payments (£7.2 million in 2024/2025) made to finders and landowners. But beyond this £8.6 million current annual figure, there are many other - more hidden - costs.

Although the DCMS grant-in-aid funding to the British Museum contributes towards the salaries of the Finds Liaison Officers and Finds Liaison Assistants, their salaries are also significantly supported by funding from partner museums, Historic Environment Record centres and councils etc. A number of internships are funded by the Headley Trust and the Worshipful Company of Arts Scholars. As such, I suspect the £1.4 million is probably much less than half of the day to day costs of administering the PAS.

In addition, the Coroner's work during the Treasure process is funded by government and the Treasure Valuation Committee members do not take any remuneration for the increasing number of hours they work for the PAS.

In the field, excavation and other weekend and out of hours work, by FLOs and other archaeological professionals/academics is largely unpaid (beyond [a few hundred pounds contributed by the NCMD](#)) and, in the case of finds which need specialist conservation treatments, the cost is usually picked up by the archaeological community and/or government or charitable organisations (for example, the recent Melsonby hoard, where Historic England - another DCMS grant-in-aid body – [gave over £120,000](#) to the excavation and initial conservation of these complex deposits. The £250,000 amount to buy the find has been achieved by grants and public donations, but the [fundraising for ongoing conservation and display has yet to be realised](#)). As [I've previously written about](#) - via public donation and crowdfunding, philanthropic benefactors and government, museum or charitable funds - treasure 'rewards' to finders and landowners are also paid for without contribution from the detecting community.

In the longer term, preservation, conservation, curation, display and security charges are met by the acquiring museums. Again, there is no financial input from finders, landowners or the wider detecting community. In short, we – the British public – are paying, by one route or another, both the reward to landowners and finders and for the administration, excavation and ongoing costs of PAS finds.

The real cost of 'Treasure rewards'

Having [previously done a very rough, 'back of fag packet', adding up of all the 'rewards' recommended by the TVC](#) in any one year, I had come to the following figures and, with the publication in January 2026 of the TVC minutes for 2024, I have been able to update these to include 2024. The 2024 figures, although lower than 2023, still show an upward trend in amounts since the time of Covid which echoes the increasing numbers of detectorists taking up the hobby since then.

2018: £571,000
2019: £1,003,000
2020: £150,000
2021: £998,000
2022: £2,016,000
2023: £7,172,000
2024: £4,285,000

However, my adding up was very much an approximation and so, in November 2025, I submitted two Freedom of Information (FOI) requests: one to DCMS and the second to the British Museum. In these, I asked for the total amount of money paid out, each year, to finders and landowners for the years 2020, 2021, 2022, 2023 and 2024. But why FOIs to these two organisations?

Who pays for what?

‘Treasure reward’ payments are administrated by two bodies: DCMS and the British Museum. As the FOI response I received from DCMS says, both organisations ‘invoice the acquiring museums, hold the reward payments in a suspense account and then pay them on to the finder and landowner.’ Money in, money out. As such, these amounts do not appear in the accounts for either organisation and so a FOI was apparently the only way of getting hold of them.

DCMS handles any funds for ‘Treasure’ acquisitions made by the British Museum and the British Museum deals with acquisitions that involve any other English and Welsh museums. There are occasional exceptions where the British Museum has initially shown an interest in acquiring finds, but then pulled out and the finds were then bought by another museum. As such, in the figures below, the £4.3 million paid for the Chew Valley Hoard was included in the 2024/2025 DCMS figures as the British Museum had initially expressed a wish to acquire the hoard, even though it was the South West Heritage Trust who eventually bought it. As you can see, much to my dismay, my ‘back of fag packet’ adding up really wasn’t that far off the mark!

Financial year:	Money:
2020/2021	£1,655
2021/2022	£35,172.50
2022/2023	£805,200.00
2023/2024	£26,688.00
2024/2025	£6,627,777.50

Amounts paid to finders and landowners administrated by DCMS.

For the British Museum, despite initially refusing my FOI request, I requested an internal review (which was carried out by the Finance Director of the British Museum) and my request was granted and the figures released:

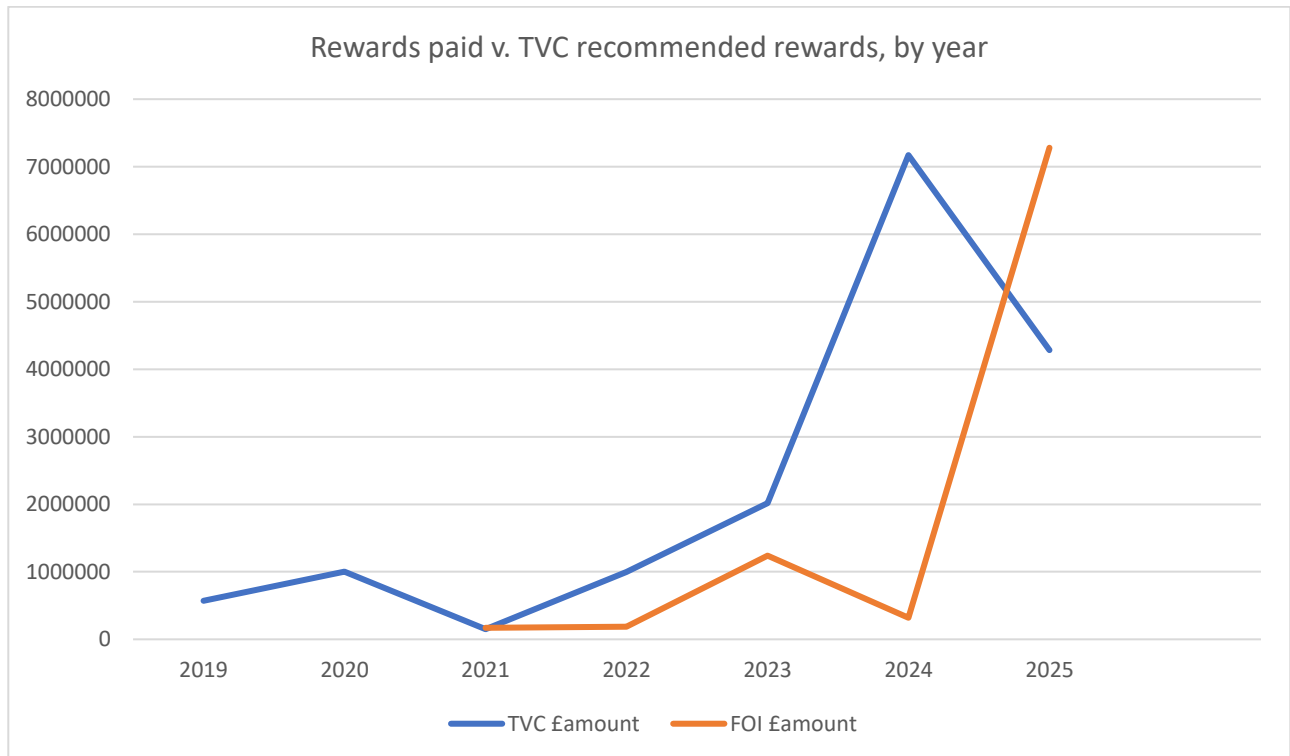
2020/2021	£169,058.00
2021/2022	£153,078.85
2022/2023	£431,769.61
2023/2024	£294,438.99
2024/2025	£652,544.46

Amounts paid to finders and landowners administrated by the British Museum.

The total amounts paid out in rewards to finders and landowners, per financial year, by DCMS and the British Museum are therefore as follows:

2020/2021	£170,713
2021/2022	£188,251.35
2022/2023	£1,236,969.61
2023/2024	£321,126.99
2024/2025	£7,280,321.96

I have plotted the TVC recommended reward totals, against the annual amounts paid out by DCMS and the British Museum. It should be noted that there is a slight lag in numbers, as the TVC minutes work on a calendar year and their committee decisions are made before 'reward' payments are made, whereas the DCMS/BM FOI figures are actual payments made in each financial, April to April, tax year. As such, the FOI data slightly lags behind the TVC data, but the trends are very clear.



Although, there is variation each year, the upwards trend of the last few years is clear, with £9,197,382.91 having been paid out in 'Treasure' rewards since 2020. However, it should be noted that a large portion of this figure was spent in 2024/2025 and - despite the inclusion of the £4.3 million Chew Valley hoard in these numbers - the TVC minutes figures for 2024 of around £4,285,000 would suggest that the trend for excessively high reward payouts will continue into 2025/2026 and beyond.

These multiple £million payouts dwarf the £1.4 million paid to run the Portable Antiquities Scheme each year and also represent a loss to English and Welsh Museums who paid the £7.3 million rewards in 2024/2025, and who will face a further annual bill of £4.3 million in 2025/2026. These are huge figures and represent the equivalent of hundreds of curator or FLO salaries. This does not have to happen: if finders/landowners waived their rights to rewards, as archaeologists do, those same finds could have gone to the museums anyway, and the monies saved could have been spent elsewhere to support the museums involved.

It must also not be forgotten that this is just the reward costs, and does not include the cost of administrating PAS or the other hidden costs to museums/HERs/the wider heritage community who give their time, resources and expertise unpaid to supporting this creaking system.

The TLDR bit.

I wanted to end this blog summing up the 'Too Long Didn't Read' figures for everything I have been doing over the last few months. Afterall, the financial cost is not the only element in this picture:

- 1) Only c.4000 (less than 1-10%) of the 40,000 to [420,000](#) detectorists in the UK are recording their finds with PAS.**
- 2) 'Treasure' case numbers are rising by at least 10% a year. How many are not being declared?**
- 3) The recorded numbers of non-'Treasure' finds are rising by thousands each year, but it may be much higher if we include finds that are not being recorded by PAS (N.B. recording with PAS is voluntary).**
- 4) Of the less than c.4% of 'Treasure' finds donated to museums, almost none are detected finds.**
- 5) c.50% of 'Treasure' finds wanted by museums are subsequently disclaimed as museums struggle to find funding to pay for them.**
- 6) Only c.25% of Treasure finds are being bought by museums.**
- 7) Treasure is currently costing us, the British tax payer – via grants, crowdfunding, museum funds – at least £7 million a year.**
- 8) From export records, c.6% of 'Treasure' finds are being exported from the country.**
- 9) c.80,000 recorded non-'Treasure' finds and c.1000 (75%) 'Treasure' finds a year are being handed back to finders and landowners to do with as they wish: they can be sold on, given away...or even destroyed/melted down. This is entirely legal.**
- 10) Of the c.80,000 - perhaps hundreds of thousands - of finds detected each year, at least 30% are taken out of the country/exported overseas.**

If you want to read how I have come to the figures above, the precise workings can be found in the blogs [HERE](#), but I reiterate again: we are now in a position where the portable heritage of the country is at dire risk and if we don't act now to legislate the hobby of metal detecting, it will be too late.

It is time for the archaeological community - and the responsible detecting community - to act.