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## **A Harness Fitting from Buckinghamshire on the UK Market**

### ***Abstract***

In February 2021 a Late Iron Age harness brooch was sold at auction in Derbyshire, England. The brooch had been found by an artefact hunter in Buckinghamshire, though there appear to be conflicting reports of when this took place. The paper explores the circumstances of the discovery, and the eve of sale recording of the brooch by the Portable Antiquities Scheme. The process of documenting the find is examined and concerns are raised about the lack of transparency.

On February 25 2021, the ‘Historica two-day Coins, Banknotes and Antiquities Auction’ was held online by Hansons Auctioneers and Valuers Ltd. of Etwall, Derbyshire, UK. Lot 1 in the sale consisted of a

“Celtic Harness Brooch [...] amazing piece of Ancient British horse furniture [...] mid 1st century AD [...] discovered in Buckinghamshire [...] Published in The Searcher magazine March 2021 ‘Cheiftain [sic] Chariot Brooch’ and featured on the front cover. Recorded on the Portable Antiquities Scheme database: DENO-2BAD49” (Hansons 2021b).

There are several features about this sale that seem to warrant further discussion, not least because it highlights the degree to which there is a lack of clarity of approach among heritage professionals in the United Kingdom toward the commerce in archaeological artefacts.

### **The Find**

All of the reported facts about this case appeared in the public domain after the object was in the hands of Hansons, and some aspects of the account can only be reconstructed using inference from these. The finder of this Late Iron Age enamelled harness brooch is named in an article in the metal detecting hobbyists’ magazine *The Searcher* (Staples 2021) and a series of articles in the local and national press (Anon. 2021b; Bamford 2021; Smith 2021; Richings 2021) leading up to, or describing the results of, the sale. According to these, the finder was a 64-year old van driver from Haddenham, Buckinghamshire who had been artefact hunting with a metal detector for the last thirty years. There are conflicting reports of the date of the

discovery. The Portable Antiquities Scheme (PAS) account (DENO-2BAD49), written after the object had come on sale, gives it as Saturday October 17 2020 (Ray 2021), while the seller provides a different version (see below). Online records indicate that Saturday October 17 was a damp and rainy day with a temperature of 9°C,<sup>2</sup> and the artefact hunter is quoted in several news reports as saying he almost did not go out on the day he found the item (this, however, is a typical trope in such ‘discovery stories’). We are also told that the item was located “after an hour of searching” with a metal detector (but it is nowhere stated how long he searched the findspot afterwards) (Bamford 2021). Local newspaper accounts report that “after receiving a strong signal” and digging down, the find was made “eight to ten inches down”, i.e., approximately 20-25 cm (Bamford 2021; Richings 2021). Citing a shallow depth of digging is another standard trope, intended to suggest that objects are only found within ploughing depth and therefore disturbed contexts. The current state of the fragile object does not support the notion it came from ploughsoil, as it bears no traces of plough damage. Interestingly, the PAS record (which usually pays especial attention to gathering this kind of information) does not indicate that the object was from cultivated land. Was the find made in unploughed land (pasture or forest)? In either case, the recovery of archaeological finds from either situation has no approval in the 2017 Code of Best Practice for Responsible Metal Detecting in England and Wales (Portable Antiquities Advisory Group 2017; see also Council for British Archaeology 2012). Did the auctioneer address these concerns when accepting the object for sale?

The reported date of discovery, October 17 2020, was during England’s Covid-19 (SARS-CoV-2) lockdown, when metal detector users had been asked by the National Council for Metal Detecting, following government guidelines, to abstain from artefact hunting on other people’s land, even though (through treating artefact hunting as a form of outdoor “exercise”) anti-pandemic restrictions would not necessarily have applied to individual searching at that time; much stricter regulations were introduced at the beginning of the following month (UK Government 2020).

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.timeanddate.com/weather/uk/aylesbury/historic?month=10&year=2020> (all internet links quoted here were active on 9.03.2022, unless otherwise noted)

In the PAS public record, the recorder only gives the findspot as “Buckinghamshire” (Ray 2021). Local reporters seem to be quoting the finder when asserting that the object had been dug up somewhere in Haddenham in West Buckinghamshire, in a field near his house (Bamford 2021; Richings 2021) The same reports also note that immediately after the sale, the finder physically went to the landowner’s house to tell him the results of the sale, which in the stricter lockdown of February 2021 (unless he was acting illegally), would be an indicator that the landowner must have been very local to the finder’s own home.

But even if the “x-marks-the-spot” place where the object was found was considered to be public knowledge, that reported information cannot substitute for a lack of information about the context and associations of this loose item. These are known only to the finder, but only if he observed the indicators in the field. Was the object derived from a site with pottery dating to the 1<sup>st</sup> century CE, or from a ploughed out or intact chariot burial? Could the object have been found in a scatter of objects from a disturbed hoard? Was it part of a pattern of items deposited as some kind of votive act? Or none of these? Was it an isolated find, or had it been buried in a pit? Was it found associated with other horse-care items, or maybe horse bones? The finder removed this item from any context it might have had, and no information is recorded about what that was. The find has lost its context, but also that context has now lost this find (a piece of evidence from the archaeological matrix). That evidence has been taken away, unrecorded, and the object simply sold—and it is all perfectly legal under UK heritage protection laws.

### **The Portable Antiquities Scheme**

The Portable Antiquities Scheme of England and Wales (PAS) was set up in 1996 as a result of growing concerns about the destruction of archaeological sites by artefact hunters merely as a source of collectables, many of which were disappearing into scattered ephemeral personal collections with no record. The Treasure Act (1996) made the reporting and surrender of certain categories of artefact compulsory, to allow the acquisition of so-called Treasure items for public collections. The bulk of material being removed from the ground by artefact hunters does not fall in this category. The PAS was set up to allow members of the public finding archaeological artefacts to bring them to regional centres where they would be examined by the

trained eye of archaeologists (Finds Liaison Officers, FLOs) and fully recorded on a central public database; the FLOs would also use this opportunity to outreach to finders on 'best practice'. The non-Treasure objects themselves would remain the property of the finder and landowner, but there would be a proper record of the material.

In 2003, in collaboration with other stakeholders, including metal detecting organizations and landowner bodies, a Code of Best Practice for Responsible Metal Detecting in England and Wales was published (revised in 2017). This code is an important development as it provides an accepted definition of what "responsible metal detecting" consists of. A fundamental issue included in its codification of responsible behaviour is the reporting of artefacts so that they can be recorded before they disappear into scattered ephemeral private collections or be sold off (Daubney 2017; see also Gill 2010). In other words, "responsible metal detecting" is defined above all by whether or not the information about finds made by any particular artefact hunter is found in the database of the Portable Antiquities Scheme.

In November 2014 with the increase in the number of finders (and metal detector users in particular) coming forward and the reorganisation of the PAS, a Heritage Lottery Funded PAST Explorers scheme began to operate within the main organization. In the period until funding ended in April 2021, this involved the use of 619 volunteers in the recording scheme. These "members of the local community fully trained in finds recording by the PAS" worked within Community Finds Recording Teams (CFRTs) under the guidance of the FLOs who were intended to vet the records they produced to maintain a high quality (Costin 2021). It seems that it was one of the volunteers from this scheme who was responsible for producing the record of the Haddenham 'harness brooch'.

### **The Historica Sale of February 25 2021**

There is little information about the background to the decision to sell the Haddenham harness mount and split the proceeds between finder and landowner, but it seems implied by the local newspaper accounts that it was the finder who dealt with the auctioneer on the latter's behalf (Bamford 2021; Richings 2021; Smith

2021). The harness fitting was taken or sent by the vendor to the auctioneer Hansons based in Derby and accepted for inclusion in one of their upcoming sales.

Charles Hanson had set up his auction house in August 2005.<sup>3</sup> The business rapidly grew and the auctioneer also became a television celebrity due to involvement in several antiques shows. After a while, Hansons decided to explore the market for sales of collectable archaeological artefacts and coins found by metal detector users. This letter was circulated to various metal detecting clubs (Hanson 2015):

Dear All

I am writing further to our inaugural metal detector find auction – the auction, entitled ‘What Lies Beneath, A Treasure Hunting Sale’, to be held at our Auction Centre in front of an audience, will also be open to live bidding via our internet host, [www.the-saleroom.com](http://www.the-saleroom.com). We are currently looking for entries, and would like to offer you and your fellow detecting enthusiasts the opportunity to be involved by consigning finds. [...]

I have been fortunate to be involved with several BBC television programmes, Bargain Hunt, Flog It and Antiques Roadtrip, enabling my company to reach a wide audience, which in turn means we can educate [sic] the public on such an intriguing and fruitful subject.

With such public interest in the recently discovered hauls [sic], I feel now is the time, across the rich fertile soils of Britain, to hold a sale specialising in such items, and I hope such an opportunity of sale may be of interest to you and your fellow members and subscribers.

Do please get in touch [...].

It should be noted that no mention was made here of the Code of Best Practice, or of requiring any type of paperwork accompanying the objects, such as finds release protocols from the landowners assigning title to finders. Following this announcement, Hansons created a specialist coins and antiquities department called

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<sup>3</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Charles\\_Hanson\\_\(auctioneer\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Charles_Hanson_(auctioneer))

“Historica and Metal Detecting Finds” focussing on the sale at quarterly auctions of freshly-surfaced archaeological material found in the UK by artefact hunters. The antiquities section is reportedly headed by metal detectorists Mark Becher, and later by Adam Staples and Lisa Grace (Chesters 2016).<sup>4</sup>

Five years, and some twenty such auctions later, the Haddenham harness mount was included in the February 2021 Historica sale of *Coins, Banknotes and Antiquities* (see also the video of the sale: Hanson 2021a). This comprised 442 lots, some containing multiple objects. Of these lots 1–124 were antiquities (by far the bulk of which were small decorative items and personal ornament of non-ferrous metals); lots 125–154 were Greek and Celtic coins; lots 155–211 were Roman coins; lots 212–223 were early medieval English coins; lots 224–263 were medieval hammered coins (the vast majority British); lots 264–284 were sixteenth and seventeenth century hammered issues, while the rest of the 158 lots were modern coins and banknotes.

Apart from Lot 1 (see below), of the 36 lots of Celtic and Roman artefacts being sold (in total, 96 objects), only one other item was PAS-recorded, and just eight were said to be from an old collection. Of the 24 early medieval finds, just one [a disclaimed Treasure item] had passed through the hands of the PAS, while seven were claimed as old collection material. Of the 42 Medieval lots, two finds had been recorded by the PAS [one a disclaimed Treasure item]; a further two items were claimed as old collection material. Of the 20 post-medieval artefacts, two had been recorded by the PAS—both disclaimed Treasure finds. It was notable, however, that the online records of the PAS database had been used as a source of parallels for seven of the objects that were not themselves reported (other comparanda cited in the catalogue descriptions of many of the objects came mainly from relatively popular books produced as finds guides for artefact collectors).

Looking at the coins reveals a similar pattern. All the eight Greek coins were from an old collection and had dealer’s tickets, and five non-British Celtic coins were presumably also old collection material. None of the other 16 Celtic coins was

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<sup>4</sup> Though in fact they are not currently included on the company’s website as formal members of the team: Hansons 2019.

recorded with the PAS and although most were assigned to 'tribes', no findspot was given (all of the seven gold examples were said to have been from an 'old private UK collection', but not how they had got there). The 105 Roman coins included at least 29 that were stated to be, or probably were, old collection material. A group of fifteen coins of Carausius and Allectus in rather rough condition may have been from a split hoard (less likely, given their state, an old specialist collection). The other 61 coins seem to be British dugup finds. Only two of the Roman coin lots were reported to the PAS (notably, both through the Derbyshire and Nottinghamshire office - DENO).<sup>5</sup> The 11 Early Medieval coins had no mention of where they had been found, but three were recorded in the Corpus of Early Medieval Coin Finds (EMC) based at the Fitzwilliam Museum,<sup>6</sup> and one in the PAS record (DENO-984DE6).<sup>7</sup> One may have been an old collection item. Of the 64 medieval coins, none have any kind of mention of where they were found, and only one was recorded in the EMC (and at least ten may be old collection material). There were a number of coins that had normally circulated in Ireland and an intriguing group of large value silver coins in good condition from a restricted date range, with no indication in the catalogue whether they were single finds, old collection material, or a split hoard.<sup>8</sup> None of the 25 post-1500 coins had any kind of indication of findspot and none of them was recorded by the PAS.

In summary, of the (122+221=) 343 antiquities and coins sold, (17+45=) 62 of them were old collection material. Of the rest, 7 in 105 antiquities lots were reported to the PAS (4 on account of being disclaimed Treasure) and of the 104 dugup coin lots, three had been recorded with the PAS (one on account of being Treasure) and another four were recorded in the EMC. Interestingly, of the ten PAS records in question, five had been made in the DENO office, even for finds made in other counties (Buckinghamshire, West Lindsey, South Kesteven in Lincolnshire). So in fact, disclaimed Treasure finds excluded (and excluding the Haddenham harness

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<sup>5</sup> Including Lot 158, a mysterious siliqua 'hoard' of three coins from Skillington, just south of Grantham, two counties away and the subject of three individual records some time after Nov 21<sup>st</sup> 2018: DENO-A950E9, DENO-5617D6 and DENO-55E976; Treasure case no. 2019 T419: Barford 2021.

<sup>6</sup> <https://emc.fitzmuseum.cam.ac.uk/>

<sup>7</sup> <https://hansonslive.hansonsauctioneers.co.uk/m/lot-details/index/catalog/135/lot/60720?url=%2Fm%2Fview-auctions%2Fcatalog%2Fid%2F135%3Fpage%3D4>

<sup>8</sup> Lots 241, 260 worn Edward III groat and halfgroat, 234, 233, 231, Henry VI groats, 240 and 252 Edward IV groats.

fitting), of the dugup material accepted by Hansons for the February 2021 Historical sale, only 1.92% had been previously recorded by the PAS. While disturbing, this is not at all atypical of the patterns seen in other British sales of similar material.

Given, however, that Hansons was quite unconcerned that the other 98.8% of the 204 lots of dugup artefacts that the auctioneer had accepted to sell (including several more examples of 'Celtic' metalwork) had not previously been recorded by the PAS, one might consider the reasons why a record was suddenly made of this single item and put online over a month after it had come to Hansons and just four days before the scheduled sale.

### **The Haddenham Harness Fitting on Sale**

It is not known what paperwork accompanied the deposition of the Haddenham harness fitting with Hansons. If the object had indeed been found in October 2020, the passage from the Buckinghamshire soil to the Derbyshire auction room during the UK's Covid-19 lockdown would seem to have been remarkably quick. At some stage, the object was carefully cleaned and presumably the decayed enamel consolidated. A series of professional photographs were then taken on a white background, but without a scale. These were to be used in all subsequent publications referred to below (*The Searcher* article, the auction catalogue, the PAS record and a number of promotional articles in the national and local press). There are no photographs in the public domain of what the item looked like in the ground or before cleaning.

The social media accounts of the auctioneer indicate that the catalogue of the sale was in the later stages of production by January 14, 2021 (Hanson 2021c; Vine 2021), and it was also clear by then that the Haddenham harness fitting would be the leading lot of the sale. Presumably to promote this find and give it some kind of a back-story, an article on this "Chieftain Chariot Brooch" (sic) appeared in the March number of *The Searcher* magazine for metal detecting hobbyists, written by Hansons consultant Adam Staples, who also doubles as a feature writer for the magazine (Staples 2021). An image of the publication was used to announce the future sale of the harness brooch on 28 January 2021 (Hanson 2021b). It is not known whether Hansons paid any fee for the publication of this promotional text and the location of a

photograph of the Haddenham harness brooch on the front cover of the magazine. No details of the finding of the object or findspot (beyond “Buckinghamshire”) were given.

The auction catalogue for the February 2021 Historica sale itself (Hansons 2021a) was not made public until about two weeks before the sale, probably February 16, when a photograph was circulated on social media (Adam’s Treasure 2021). As Brockman observed (Brockman 2021a), the catalogue’s description of the object shares in common large fragments of text with the magazine article, which strongly suggests that, although it is unattributed, the bulk of the catalogue description was also authored by Adam Staples. The catalogue entry shares the same lack of information on the finding and findspot (beyond “Buckinghamshire”) as the magazine article. The description of the item itself in the catalogue is 840 words, but of these, only 277 describe the object and its present condition, another 103 the decoration on the front, and 460 are ‘narrativisation’, spinning a romantic tale around the decontextualised object as part of the marketing strategy. This is quite normal in auction descriptions of antiquities in Britain.

It is from the milieu of the auction house that two additional pieces of information come. The first is an alternative date of finding. This was published in a promotional video put online on February 21, four days before the sale (coincidentally, this was on the same day as the Derbyshire and Nottinghamshire PAS record was being published a few miles away containing the October 17 date of discovery). The video shows the find displayed on a wooden surface and being enthusiastically described by the auctioneer, who continues the theme of “unseen history beneath your feet” and concludes the show-and-tell with the words (Hanson 2021d):

“It’s quite a large object this, it was found three years ago, it’s going to cause a real stir when it’s sold on Thursday, we guide it between four and six thousand pounds,<sup>11</sup> but actually I think it will make a lot more money, so watch this object, and of course when you are walking today and you are walking maybe in

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<sup>11</sup> In fact, the estimate in the catalogue on the day of the sale was £6,000-£8,000 (<https://hansonlive.hansonsauctioneers.co.uk/m/view-auctions/catalog/id/135>).

undergrowth or grass, or maybe a ploughed field, you never know what is lurking under your feet".

The reference to undergrowth and grass may or may not reflect what the finder said about the day he found it,<sup>12</sup> but what is significant is the auctioneer indicates that from what he has been told, he thinks it was found some time in 2018. Which is correct? Why is there a discrepancy between the two accounts?

The second comment is far more disturbing. After quoting the close parallels of this object in the Polden Hill Hoard, the Hanson's catalogue (Hansons 2021a) goes on to say in the description:

"It is unclear whether **these hoards** were buried for safekeeping or given as votive offerings to the Gods [sic]. The size of this brooch, its prized status and its dual attachment mechanism make it very unlikely to be a casual loss. More probable is that **it was carefully placed in the ground for the above reasons**".

Similar wording is contained in the *Searcher* article. The reference to "these hoards" arouses disquiet because in both texts above that phrase, only the Polden Hill Hoard is mentioned earlier in the text, and that this is then developed with a statement that the Haddenham fitting had "probably" been deposited in the ground as part of one. Had the finder told Adam Staples something that induced him to write in such terms? Does the phrasing of these texts suggest that the object may have formed part of a group or deposit? The significance of this issue is that if the Haddenham item was from a pre-Roman hoard, it would be classified as Treasure and could only legally find its way to the auction house after reporting within 14 days of discovery, the holding of an inquest and eventual disclaiming by the Crown (Treasure Act 1996).<sup>13</sup>

## The Artefact Itself

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<sup>12</sup> Significantly the PAS statistics record that rather than cultivated land, it comes from: "No land use recorded" <https://finds.org.uk/database/statistics/institution/datefrom/2021-02-19/dateto/2021-02-24/institution/DENO>

<sup>13</sup> It should be noted, however, that current thinking seems to be that in southern Britain, material related to the Polden Hill assemblage was generally deposited in a period c. 50-75/80 CE, even though some of the items in such deposits may have been manufactured earlier. This complicates the legal situation somewhat.

The object depicted in the photos (Fig. 1) consists of two conjoined elements. The first is a bi-lobal headplate, c. 128 x 67mm,<sup>14</sup> of complex form dictated by the curvilinear decoration on the front of small areas of red champlevé enamel (most of which is lost) set in broad metal fields, representing a central loop with upturned and expanded feet. The headplate is slightly convex in at least one plane. On the reverse on the long axis are two projecting parallel lugs that held the loop of an iron pin now lost, but represented by corrosion products. At the other end of the object is a third lug, perpendicular to their line, forming a catchplate with a shallow notch to receive the pin. A third projection on the back of the headplate is a round-sectioned bronze pin c. 3.5-4 mm diameter that projects perpendicularly to engage with a hole in the second element (in its present state, it is difficult to see how the two parts would have been held together in use). The second element is a straight strap with convex sides, c. 115 mm long and 47 mm across at its widest point. It is quite strongly convex along its long axis and snapped across (probably recently) near a central part of the decoration where the metal was thinner. It is not however clear from the existing images whether the proximal end of the strap continues the same curve as the body of the element, or is curved slightly upwards where it articulates with the headplate. This element had similar champlevé decoration on the distal terminal, mirroring that of the catchplate, a central roundel and again most of the enamel is now lost. Another feature of this element that is unclear from the photographs (produced for marketing not documentation), and not mentioned in any of the descriptions, is what appears to be a transverse ridge of unknown characteristics and dimensions crossing its distal end. There is a connecting hole in the campanulate proximal end linking it to the catchplate, and on the reverse side of the distal terminal is a projecting rectangular loop.

The object is very similar to items found in the Polden Hill Hoard that was found during ploughing near Bridgewater in Somerset in June 1800, and acquired by the British Museum in 1889 (Brailsford 1975; Farley and Hunter 2015, 133–34, fig. 119; Ghey 2015, 37). Recent finds in a similar style include a fragment found in September 2007 by a metal detectorist searching ploughed land near Stoneleigh in Warwickshire (the PAS record says “Stoneley”). It was reported to the PAS and a

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<sup>14</sup> Measurements estimated from the photographs and the stated overall length of the object from the catalogue. The photos themselves have no scale.

detailed record was created (Portable Antiquities Scheme 2008). Interestingly, it was recognised that it was found in the same field as two other fragments that were already in the local museum (not PAS-recorded), one of which joined the new fragment (the photograph shows that the fractures at the edges of the object were old ones). For this reason, the new fragment was donated to the museum, a rare case of the recording of material found by artefact hunters leading to the identification of scattered items taken from the same archaeological assemblage at different times.

Another similar item was coincidentally also sold by Hansons, in the May 20-21 2021 Historica auction,<sup>15</sup> and also has a thought-provoking story (Clark 2021). The seller was a man from Ashford in Surrey who had reportedly bought it in early 2019 as part of a job lot he acquired for £10 in a car boot sale in Middlesex. The object had presumably been dug up some unknown time earlier by a metal detector user and after passing through at least one ephemeral personal artefact collection ended up mixed up in what the seller described as a “general box of old coins and bits of metal” being disposed of in this manner.<sup>16</sup> The seller admits he had been at the sale only looking for “old coins and metal toy cars, that sort of thing. Something else actually took my eye in the box the harness mount was in [...] I had no idea what it was, or that it was so old and valuable”. It was only the news coverage of the sale of the Haddenham piece that alerted him to the nature of the item that for two years had been lying neglected in a dusty box at home. As usual, contemporary news coverage of this sale concentrated on the financial aspects (although it had an estimate of £1,000-£2,000, the bidding ended at £3,800) and the human interest aspect of the “lucky find”. The media consistently failed to mention that through its treatment, the actual origins of this piece had been completely lost and even the object had narrowly escaped being dumped in a skip by ignominiously ending up at the lowest end of the British antiquities market, as a piece of so-called “floating culture” (Daubney 2017) in a box of assorted bric-a-brac in a car boot sale.

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<sup>15</sup> Lot 13, Celtic enamelled harness mount. <https://hansonslive.hansonsauctioneers.co.uk/m/lot-details/index/catalog/153/lot/70028?url=%2Fm%2Fview-auctions%2Fcatalog%2Fid%2F153>

<sup>16</sup> It is worth noting that the auction catalogue photographs show that this strap fitting had differential corrosion on the reverse suggesting that it had been buried in contact with other items.

As this article was in preparation, there was an announcement (British Archaeology 2021) of yet another find of a harness brooch found buried in a pot, apparently originally covered by a puddingstone quern in 2020 by a metal detector user on a site at the west end of the Chilterns in South Oxfordshire. Other metal objects deposited in the vicinity (interpreted as a scattered hoard), were found when the findspot was subsequently examined by archaeologists. None of these finds is currently visible in the PAS database.

### **Archaeological Response to the Hansons Sale**

It seems that very few heritage professionals were aware of the existence of this object between the time when it was dug up by a metal detector user and the appearance of promotional material about the sale. On January 29, 2021, *The Searcher* article was published.<sup>17</sup> What happened next is now unclear.

It seems that a number of concerns were raised in several circles about the hint from Staples' text in *The Searcher* article that it might have come from a hoard. In any case an object of national importance was about to be sold. At the end of February 2021, Andy Brockman wrote to Hansons (Brockman 2021c)<sup>18</sup> with a series of questions about this item and the fact that the article implied that object had not been recorded by the PAS before arriving in the showroom.

“... given the frequent allegations that illicit metal detecting finds are laundered through auctions sales, do you agree that Hansons puts itself at reputational and legal risk by accepting metal detecting finds without an accompanying PAS number, which demonstrate best practice for detectorists and would at least offer some independent indication of legal status?”

He also asked whether the vendor had shown Hansons any document confirming the finder had permission to be on the land where the object was found and had title to sell the object, and whether Hansons is “satisfied that any buyer of the artefact will not later be subject to legal action by parties claiming to be the true owner of the artefact”. Mr Brockman did not receive any response from Hansons (pers. comm.).

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<sup>17</sup> <https://www.mymagazinesub.co.uk/searcher/latest-issue/details/searcher-march-2021/>

<sup>18</sup> We would like to thank Andy Brockman for discussion of this object with us and sharing copies of his letters to the auction house.

Neither did he receive, we are informed, a reply to a second communication following the sale where he questioned the conflict between the two statements about the date of the find, and asking for details of the contacts between Hansons and the PAS (Brockman 2021b).

In the meanwhile, on the day of the sale Brockman published an online article on his *Pipeline* investigative heritage news website, criticising the lack of transparency surrounding this object (Brockman 2021a). Although the sellers are presenting the object as a legal find and there was no evidence of illegal activity, Brockman commented that the lack of transparency and absolute clarity regarding provenance is undesirable. This is because, whatever the real facts behind this particular discovery, there is

“the widespread suspicion that hoards of various periods, are being located illicitly and broken up to be laundered through various outlets from individual dealers and online platforms to commercial auction houses”.

Brockman notes that as “a late twist to the story, within days of the auction going ahead, the Hansons catalogue was suddenly revised to include a catalogue number from the Portable Antiquities Scheme” (Brockman 2021a). It is quite conceivable that there was a growing awareness that under such circumstances, this non-recorded item could be growing into a liability. Arranging for a PAS record to be made, even at the last moment, could be seen as a belated attempt by someone “to be seen above reproach and to abide by the good practice guidelines on reporting finds to the relevant authorities [...] it is almost as if someone had a word and said, “You had better report this”...” (Brockman 2021a).

### **PAS Recording the Harness Fitting**

From present evidence, it would seem that the controversy surrounding the harness fitting prompted a member of the British Museum staff to contact Hanson’s enquiring whether it would be possible to record the object. It is unclear why the request was not made either to the landowner or to the finder, and whether the request was made through the PAS or only later involving it. Attempts were made to clarify this with the PAS and according to the Head of the PAS, Professor Michael Lewis:

“We only knew about this find because it was in *The Searcher* magazine, hence Julia Farley (Iron Age Curator at the British Museum) contacted the auction house to see if the finder might record it with the PAS, to which he agreed. We have not seen the find ‘in the flesh’ but this was the best we could get in the circumstances” (Lewis 2021).

On February 28 2021, Professor Lewis reiterated the story, with some differences (Lewis 2021), in this case it is not the finder agreeing to supply information, but the auctioneer:

“Julia Farley (who is an expert in these things) contacted the auction house to see if we could recorded (sic) this object and they agreed. The record was made by a volunteer based on the information the auction house provided. Obviously we would have rather have seen the object etc etc, but this is the best that could be done in the circumstances”.

This account raises a number of questions, not least the auctioneer’s right to give permission for the recording of the unsold object instead of the landowner.

The harness fitting was recorded on the Portable Antiquities Scheme database on Sunday February 21, 2021 (DENO-2BAD49), some months after its discovery, and one month after the announcement of its sale. The prefix, ‘DENO’, indicates that it was recorded under the scheme for Derbyshire and Northamptonshire, some distance (130 km) from Haddenham in Buckinghamshire. Intriguingly, PAS statistics reveal that this record was an anomaly within the context of the finds records made in DENO in this period. Recording there had been going on in fits and starts until September 15, 2020 (this was during the Covid19 SARS-2 lockdown), with one more record being made on September 22, and then only four records made by a volunteer before the Haddenham harness brooch 152 days later. After this, and before the second half of May and early June 2021, only two other finds records were made by DENO.

Internal documentation available through the database statistical records indicate that the record itself was created by a Michelle Ray.<sup>19</sup> PAS public records indicate

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<sup>19</sup> <https://finds.org.uk/database/statistics/institution/datefrom/2021-02-19/dateto/2021-02-24/institution/DENO>

that Ms Ray is a one of the 15 volunteer helpers attached to the FLO's office in Derby Museums.<sup>20</sup> We have been unable to ascertain her qualifications and background, but in the past few years PAS statistics show that between 2015 and 2020, she had contributed just eight records to the PAS database, all under the DENO prefix (and all currently hidden in the database). The record of the Haddenham object was the only item she recorded in 2021. Does this suggest that the recording of the harness fitting was an isolated spot of volunteering? It is also the case that there are other people in the DENO office that had far more experience of recording items than Ms Ray.<sup>21</sup> Why was she chosen?

Dr Simon Maslin, the FLO for Surrey and Hampshire, claims knowledge of events and explained the nature of the record (Maslin 2021):

“The record was created by a PAS volunteer who was the only person who could get access to the find to record it”.

It is not clear why she is described in such terms, especially as the Head of the Scheme denies that she actually did have access to the object at all. Was Ms Ray making this record independently of DENO? Who assigned this to her, and who authorised it? Why would it appear as a DENO entry (when there is also a 'Public' category in the database structure)? By the time the record was made, the item itself was deposited in Charles Hanson's auction house (where Hanson himself was filming it while this record was being compiled). So, how was a PAS volunteer allegedly the only person who could get access to the find to record it, did she somehow have access to Charles Hanson's safe or secure areas at weekends? Many facts are unclear about how the PAS volunteer Ray created that record and what evidence she examined in order to produce this official record. Ms Ray herself was unavailable for comment.

The circumstances and timing of the creation of this record are troubling. A provincial auction house in the Midlands was selling an object about which doubts had been raised due to the skimpiness and wording of the original accounts of the context of discovery and the appearance of an alternative version of its finding. Yet

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<sup>20</sup> <https://finds.org.uk/counties/derbyshire/a-pae-an-to-the-deno-volunteers/>

<sup>21</sup> <https://finds.org.uk/counties/derbyshire/a-pae-an-to-the-deno-volunteers/>

just before the sale, it had received legitimisation by the PAS (endorsed by the British Museum), confirming one of the versions of the discovery.

### **From 'Lot 1' to DENO-2BAD49**

The PAS record DENO-2BAD49 was created on Sunday February 21, 2021.<sup>22</sup> Like all PAS database records, it consists of a text created within the fields of a fixed template that ensures standardisation of format. Some of the information held in the database is publicly visible, some is hidden (the writers have not seen the latter). As a piece of preservation by documentation, the public record leaves much to be desired. The basic description is a simple text just 204 words long. On closer examination, it moreover turns out that this element of the PAS database it has been created by merely joining together two consecutive cut-and-pasted verbatim fragments (100 words and 94 words respectively) of the auction catalogue, omitting one 48-word passage in between them and replacing other wording before and after the pastiche with “A late Iron Age enamelled harness brooch...” and “...with close parallels in the Polden Hill Hoard”. The dimensions and weight of the object seem copied from the auction catalogue entry too. Yet basic information is missing, such as the actual dimensions of the loop on the reverse of the straight element (which seems very flimsy for the functions suggested), which has just been copied uncritically from the auction catalogue. Among the other information recorded in the requisite fields, several are of note. The find is designated of “National importance”, the date of discovery is given as “Saturday 17th October 2020”, and it is decided that the findspot is “to be known as: Buckinghamshire”, though the reader is informed that there is a (hidden) grid reference accurate to a 1 metre square, the source of which is “from finder”. The record notes that the subsequent action after recording was “returned to finder”. The text is accompanied by eleven photographs without scale and on a white background that include several that are identical to the ones in the auction catalogue, though they are labelled: “Rights Holder: The Portable Antiquities Scheme CC License”. The PAS record does not contain any of the romanticised narrativisation of the auction catalogue, nor in its present state (at the time of writing the version visible is that produced by the last update Tuesday

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<sup>22</sup> <https://finds.org.uk/database/search/results/q/DENO-2BAD49>

February 23, 2021),<sup>23</sup> does the PAS record anywhere any statement of the nature and sources of the information on the basis of which the text was created.

In particular, there are serious doubts just what contact the recorder actually had with the finder. Although the PAS record in several places gives the impression that he was consulted directly (on the date of discovery, the precise findspot) and the latter received the item back after recording, Derby Museums deny that Ms Ray had any contact with the finder at all (see below). As we have seen above, PAS head office is suggesting that she did not have access to the object either, despite what Dr Maslin asserted.

The PAS record, like the auction catalogue entry, has next to no information about the condition of the object. This is important precisely because the condition in which it was found is a function of the conditions in the burial environment of the context from which it had come. The unevenness of the corrosion products on the surface of the harness visible in the photographs might suggest that it had been in contact with other objects in the ground. The end of the looped segment is more heavily corroded than the catchplate, was it in contact with another metal object in the ground, or is the discolouration there due to contact with decaying organic matter in the ground?

The straight element of the object is snapped across near its central point. This is despite the fact that even in a corroded state the element looks quite substantial. The lack of damage to the edges of the break suggests that this break is relatively recent. Had the object been damaged when it was removed from its position in the ground? The break has, however, the appearance of having been caused by pressure on the curved element from the front when the element itself could not move in the soil (for example being blocked by resting on something else), but the two fragments lay in the same position without being subsequently moved about by, for example, ploughing. The PAS volunteer making the record seems not to have noted this and asked deeper questions.

If the record came about at the instigation of the British Museum (Dr Farley or the PAS itself), it is not clear why it was not the Buckinghamshire FLO who was asked to create it. The fact that the object itself was already in Derby makes no difference in

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<sup>23</sup> <https://finds.org.uk/database/search/results/q/DENO-2BAD49>

the light of the fact that, from what we are told, the record was actually made remotely, on a Sunday, making use of material that had somehow been made available to the recorder (presumably online). The Buckinghamshire FLO, apart from being more experienced, would have perhaps known the finder from previous interactions, would have been able to ask more penetrating questions on the circumstances of the finding, and perhaps have some other information that would allow her to assess what she was being told. But there are some doubts about the extent to which (despite what the record specifically says) the finder was directly involved in the creation of that record through DENO.

In the context of the stated aims of the PAS database and the issue of the reliability of the information contained in it, the question of the value of this record must be raised. Accepting such skimpy documentation as “better than nothing”, disregards the nature of the process of preservation by documentation, and also the intended role of the PAS in instilling best practice among finders. This record cannot be regarded as a model of best practice, it seems that most of it is compiled from the auction catalogue, and this fact should have been stated in this description if the PAS database is to have any integrity. How reliable can this description be accepted as being if it is not based on a first hand examination of the object itself by a specialist?

Not only does the description in the PAS record contain almost nothing that is not already in the public domain, but it has not in any way increased knowledge about the archaeological context of this object. The find is little more than an x-marks-the-spot dot on a distribution map (but that information is among that which is hidden from the public).

The record was posted online very soon before the scheduled sale of the object. No reason was offered for why the publication of the record took place on a Sunday just four days before the auction, when in archaeological terms, the record would be just as valid as permanent “preservation by documentation” being published a week later, after the sale had taken place. No other artefacts in the Hansons February 2021 Historica sale were recorded by PAS while in the auctioneer’s hands. Indeed, from what can be ascertained, such behaviour was unusual seen in the context of previous sales by this auctioneer.

Although it had had a pre-sale estimate of £6,000-£8,000,<sup>24</sup> brisk bidding reached £55,000 (Simmons 2021). The harness brooch is said to have been purchased by an anonymous UK private telephone bidder. To what extent the existence of a PAS record of the item helped that by legitimising it can only now be guessed. Certainly antiquities with verified provenance are at a premium on the market (Brodie 2014), so it may be suggested that obtaining a PAS record was seen by dealers and buyers as an instant price-booster. The upshot of this evaluation was that this would then potentially place this piece beyond the abilities of many public institutions to acquire. The timing of the posting of this record is therefore particularly disturbing. At the least it suggests thoughtlessness on the part of the person/people responsible.

### **Interacting with the Antiquities Trade**

The recording of this item when it was already in the auction house raises a number of issues concerning the relationship between heritage professionals and the commerce in portable antiquities. The past quarter of a century has seen an exponential growth in the market for such items, facilitated by the rapid expansion of online sales as an integral part of the antiquities market. While the dangers inherent in this were recognised decades ago (Chippindale and Gill 2001), the British archaeological community and other heritage professionals have yet to take a stand on the implications of this phenomenon. The broad issue is sidestepped for example in most of the codes of practice of the archaeological and museum professions in the UK.

A report published twelve years ago on damage to archaeological sites caused by illegal searching and removal of antiquities in Britain (Oxford Archaeology 2009), takes the attitude that much of this is motivated by commercial gain, therefore among its recommendations (2009, 110) is to “implement changes [...] that increase the obligation on sellers of antiquities to provide provenances and establish legal title”, and (ibid. 116) making dealers aware of their obligations and best practice. There is also the recommendation (ibid. 114) that the parties concerned should be increasing public awareness of issues relating to illegal antiquities that may

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<sup>24</sup> Hansons seems to have a policy of placing “come and get me” low estimates on many of its auctions. It can be seen from the video of February 21, 2021 that the auctioneer was fairly sure that the estimate would be surpassed.

“encourage more people to check the provenance of objects they buy, making them less ready to accept the unsupported word of dealers”. While some of the other recommendations of this report were already being put into action several years ago (Wilson and Harrison 2013), it is disquieting to see that those referring to the handling of the commerce in archaeological artefacts have not. The vast majority of artefacts currently being offered by antiquities sellers in Britain are still totally without even very basic information on provenances and the manner of establishment of legal title.

In the case of the February 2021 Historica auction, the PAS contented itself with quietly adding notes on just one artefact from a sale of over 340 from this sale to its database. In light of these recommendations, as a public-funded body charged with overseeing the public’s interests, it could have made use of its position of authority and the access it has to the media to highlight the problem this sale epitomised. That is that in their handling of portable antiquities, British dealers ignore the issues raised by 25 years of public outreach by PAS on portable antiquities issues, and the definitions of responsible artefact hunting in the Code of Practice. A responsible auction house will have appropriate policies and measures in place to prevent the sale of blood diamonds, items falling under CITES restrictions and any other ethically-questionable artefacts. That should also apply to archaeological artefacts. Surely we should be striving for a situation where nobody should think of starting up an antiquities dealership in which little attention is paid to whether all the items handled have firmly-established collection histories indicating legal removal from the ground and source country, and in the case of newly-discovered items that they been recovered with adherence to standards of responsibility and best practice, rather than being merely “no-law-against-it” legal.

In fact, the Code of Best Practice (2017) does not mention the issue of the selling (or disposal) of archaeological artefacts found while artefact hunting. The PAS website once had advice for members of the public on buying antiquities, but this seems to have been deleted.<sup>25</sup> But there is no public statement visible on the

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<sup>25</sup> There is a derivative page on eBay produced on its basis <https://pages.ebay.co.uk/buy/guides/antiquities/>

Scheme webpage on the policy regarding the Scheme's own interactions with the antiquities market and what is "best practice" engaging with the antiquities trade.

Whether or not it is legal in Britain, the PAS should surely not be involved in any way with the legitimizing of antiquity sales or the sale of any individual item. In this case, it can be argued that the PAS helped an auctioneer to legitimise the sale of a decontextualised item, regurgitating as PAS-generated information ("data") unattributed fragments of the text of the auctioneer's own catalogue and using the photographs that had apparently been taken for that catalogue. The PAS could have waited until after the sale to publish their record of this item to avoid boosting the sales price. In the contacts with Mr Hanson, the PAS could have informed him using the strongest language possible that (in the public interest) their future reaction to further attempts to sell large numbers of metal detected antiquities straight from the ground and without any PAS record, would be a series of texts in the national newspapers on why such sales are irresponsible, poor practice, and damaging to the national heritage. PAS can influence dealers to stop this kind of behaviour right now by taking appropriate action.

### **Questions Unanswered**

The auctioneer refused to share any information with Brockman, perhaps considering that uncomfortable issues ignored will simply go away (Brockman 2021a; Brockman 2021b; Brockman 2021c). Letters of February 25 and subsequently by one of the writers (PMB) to Dr Julia Farley of the British Museum, Meghan King, the FLO for Derbyshire and Nottinghamshire (DENO) based in Derby Museums, and Arwen Wood, the FLO for Buckinghamshire, based in the County Museum, to clarify the recording process also not only did not elicit any information, but often went simply unanswered (!). We were not put in touch with Michelle Ray who remains a shadowy figure. The Derby Museums FLO (in litt. 25.02.21) instead of answering the questions that we had asked about the creation of the DENO-2BAD49 and the timing of its publication just four days before the sale, forwarded them to Professor Michael Lewis head of the PAS in the British Museum in Bloomsbury, mysteriously asserting that "he has more information regarding the recording of this object". Professor Lewis replied the same day, but also did not address the specific questions asked of the FLO but gave a brief account, quoted

above about how the finder had agreed to the recording of the object (Lewis 2021a). The Derby FLO, though copied into it, ignored our reply to that (reiterating the questions about the creation of the record in Derby, instead of Buckingham, and about the involvement of PAS with Hansons). Instead, Dr Lewis insists that the DENO FLO “was not involved with recording this find, so [I] doubt she can help answer your questions” (in litt. 27.02.2021). Similarly, the British Museum’s Julia Farley failed to respond to the request for further information.

The executive director of Derby Museums responded to the questions asked earlier by issuing a brief statement (Butler 2021), which included the information:

“The object you refer to in the Hansons Historica 2 sale was recorded on the PAS data base by one of the schemes volunteers [...] At the time the entry was made, the Derbys/Notts FLO post had only just been reappointed and volunteers were able to seek advice from BM staff [...] We sought to update the data base so that the record was as comprehensive as it could be, before it was sold. No member of staff or volunteer at Derby Museums was in contact with the finder or the seller [...]”.

It is difficult to see how the Museums sought to “update the database” but without being in contact with either “the finder or seller”. The lack of information from the PAS DENO office (all the FLO had to do was lift a phone and talk to Ms Ray) or Buckinghamshire, and conflicting information emerging from distant Bloomsbury as well as the DENO host museum leave a number of questions unanswered.

What seems not to be in dispute however is that the PAS record DENO-2BAD49 was created by somebody working for one of the 40 locally based Finds Liaison Officers belonging to the PAS network,<sup>26</sup> in this case working out of Derby Museums.

One area of concern is therefore particularly significant. The involvement of a volunteer attached to Derby Museums in the legitimisation of a controversial antiquity just days before its scheduled sale by Hansons would potentially involve a conflict of interest. Auctioneer Charles Hanson was (until 2019), a Trustee and member of the Board of Derby Museums and since 2016 has also been an ambassador for the

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<sup>26</sup> <https://finds.org.uk/about>

Trustees of the Derby Museums Service (Derby Museums 2019). Mr Hanson has been directly involved in a number of fundraising activities for the museums, mostly lending his auctioneering skills to auctions related to the Museums' annual gala ball. This includes a fundraising event that raised £4,600 for Derby Museums' Endowment Fund, which took place some three weeks before the 'Historica' sale (Anon. 2021a). It seems legitimate to ask whether there was a connection between these events.

The Museums' executive director addressed this point in his statement (Butler 2021):

"[...] Charles Hanson has been an ambassador for Derby Museums since 2016. [...] At no time during our relationship has there been any communication from me or any museum staff regarding objects and their attribution which might influence activities in the saleroom [...] I can assure you that Derby Museums has acted within ethical guidelines at all times".

## **Concluding Remarks**

This contribution has highlighted a number of important issues that clearly merit further discussion concerning the exploitation of the British archaeological record by hobbyists merely as a source of collectables, and the increasing commercial demand for this type of collectable. A major issue raised by our attempts to untangle the events behind the appearance of the record DENO-2BAD49 is the lack of transparency exhibited by members of staff of the archaeological and heritage bodies involved, some of whom had no qualms about simply ignoring requests for information. This is particularly in conflict with the overall aims of what might be considered the "PAS-approach" to artefact hunting and collecting, which is related to requiring transparency from finders and collectors of archaeological artefacts. This cannot be merely a one-sided process, with the PAS refusing to allow public scrutiny of its own actions, surrounding them with secrecy. Many of the issues left unresolved above could be easily settled were the PAS simply to be more forthcoming about what happened and why. A public database for public use and paid for by public money and concerning what is happening to the common archaeological heritage (in which not only the staff of the PAS are stakeholders) needs more transparency on

the nature of the “data” in it. FLOs and British Museum staff simply refusing to answer a (totally legitimate) public enquiry about their handling of this matter will face no consequences. The public, whose heritage it is and who pay for the PAS will be kept in the dark and are the losers. If mistakes were made, it is the role of a public-funded institution like the PAS to own up to them and resolve to be seen to do better in the future.

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**Figure 1. The Haddenham Harness Brooch. Portable Antiquities Scheme ID DENO-2BAD49. Rights Holder: Portable Antiquities Scheme (CC BY 2.0).**