

# Archaeo-detectorists and the SPIAS approach:

## *embedding non-intrusive detecting methods in archaeological practice*

Keith Westcott, Founder and CEO, Detectorists Institute and Foundation

Coinciding with the release of the 2017 *Code for Responsible Metal Detecting*, a plan to establish an Institute of Detectorists founded on archaeological principles and values was submitted to Historic England. Two rounds of Historic England funding and eight years later, the Detectorists Institute and Foundation (DIF) has been created by asset-locking a not-for-profit research and educational institute together with a charitable foundation. During this time, we have worked on multiple projects, exploring existing approaches to using the metal detector in archaeology, while also developing a new search methodology and defining the role of practitioner detectorists within the archaeological team.

*Surveying at  
Broughton Castle.  
Credit: Nathan  
Portlock-Allan*



*Sarcophagus at Broughton Castle  
Villa. Credit: Mark Bletchly*



### The challenge

SPIAS is Systematic, Partial and Intensive Artefact Survey. For clarity, in earlier articles we referred to the approach as DAPAS. However, we adopted the acronym **SPIAS** after a helpful chat with Prof Carezza Lewis, in a Belfast pub, about the importance of good acronyms, following a lecture on the DIF approach at the 2023 European Association of Archaeologists (EAA) conference.

Historically, the lack of a consistent approach to involving detectorists led to fragmented and uneven practice. Often, a relationship would be built with a local hobbyist or two, which worked well until they became unavailable or, because of the commercial nature of a development site, were denied access. In practice, for example, the typical 'spoil heap challenge' illustrates the limitations of signal penetration into a low surface-area-to-volume heap, creating a classic needle-in-a-haystack scenario.

Recognising the need for a consistent approach, our mission and methods have evolved through a purposeful effort to foster the growing partnership between archaeologists and detectorists. Our

challenge, however, comes from both sectors: from the general practice of stripping topsoils that have not been fieldwalked or detected on archaeological sites, and from detectorists who claim that finds within the ploughsoil horizon have lost all contextual relationship to the buried archaeology.

We continue to build evidence that portable heritage recovered through fieldwalking and metal detecting reveals past inhabitation, contributes to the archaeological record, and forms an important element in site evaluation.

### SPIAS as a non-intrusive approach

A core principle of **SPIAS** is recognising all material artefacts as potential dating evidence and integrating fieldwalking and metal detecting into a single practice. Practitioner detectorists, educated in archaeological practices and capable of a broad range of responsibilities, such as setting out, retrieving their own targets, and accurately recording and geolocating finds in line with a predetermined discard policy, work to extract material from the topsoil. All deeper signals within the subsoil are marked for archaeologists to investigate as potential in situ finds.

Written to reflect this approach, the DIF course *Metal Detecting for Archaeological Projects*, held at the University of Oxford and winner of the 2019 ATF Award, was based on the National Occupational Standard 'CCSAPAC3: Contribute to non-intrusive archaeological investigations'.

**SPIAS**, in recognising some of the more basic requirements, sets out practical conditions and equipment to support the approach. All materials used are non-metallic, which may seem self-explanatory; however, it is surprising how often close-quartered intensive survey areas are marked out with metal posts, metal flags to denote targets, and metal-eyed tarpaulins for spoil (our detectors love those ringed eyelets!).

A practitioner's ability to fieldwalk while detecting relies on acute focus on the ground, maintaining the detector's head close to the surface and avoiding embedded stones. Conversely, this level of downward concentration often results in poor alignment on transects, making it



*Buckle plate. Credit: Portable Antiquities Scheme*

easy to drift off course. Using tall yellow fibreglass flagpoles placed at close, uniform intervals helps prevent zigzagging during the search – for example, when moving towards ranging poles set on the horizon.

### Looking forward

While developing set-distance roped grids for intensive search areas, using multiple nylon-eyed ropes to create close transects at 4m × 2m × 20m, which are quick and easy to move between survey points, we also recommend safety helmets designed to withstand side impacts from mechanical excavators and that stay secure when bending to retrieve finds.

The method goes further into spoil distribution, finds retrieval and recording, offering a comprehensive, standalone approach that can be employed without

the need for others to be on site to set up or supervise. However, we recognise the importance of gathering a broad range of opinions before **SPIAS** can be adopted as a respected, tried-and-tested approach.

Our plan, in collaboration with ClfA, is to consult their members on current practices and produce a paper that serves as an initial set of methods and guidance, before later incorporating it into formal standards. ClfA has confirmed that they will signpost to the DIF paper, and following outline discussions, the CBA has also expressed interest in signposting the paper and jointly developing further guidance for community archaeology.

We hope that the **SPIAS** approach will be widely welcomed and adopted within British archaeology.

For further details, see [www.thedif.org.uk](http://www.thedif.org.uk) and Westcott (2024), *Metal Detecting Survey at Black Piece Romano British Villa, Clipsham, Rutland*, published by ArchaeoDIG: <https://doi.org/10.5284/1134721>.



**Keith Westcott**

Detectorist, archaeologist and public speaker, founder of the DIF and creator of the SPIAS approach, Keith found the Ashmolean's Broughton Castle Hoard in 1996 and later discovered the Broughton Roman Villa using landscape archaeology principles. He taught *Metal Detecting for Archaeological Projects* at Oxford, and won the 2019 Archaeology Training Forum Award.