Treasures lost and found

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Tudor pendant. Credit: Colchester Castle Museum

Buried hoards are the stuff of childhood dreams. Treasure Under Your Feet, an exhibition at the Fitzwilliam Museum, brings together precious objects found all over East Anglia. Heaps of glittering coins, a collection of axe heads, a gold pendant set with diamonds, a penny bearing the image of a she-wolf suckling Romulus and Remus: each one tells a different human story of loss and discovery.

The cache of exquisite gold and silver coins dating from 1580 was discovered three centuries later by a labourer digging a pit for an outside lavatory in Houghton-cum-Wyton, Cambridgeshire. The fabulous golden torc, a twisted necklace made more than 2,000 years ago and similar to that worn by Boudicca as she rode into battle, caught the eye of a Norfolk farmer as he loaded bales on to a trailer in 2003.

The fact that all these items are now on display in a public museum, not

far from where they were found, is a small miracle in itself. Broadly speaking there are two types of hoards: items that were deliberately hidden and those that were lost or unrecovered.

Until the 18th century, there were few local banks. People kept their riches in their houses or on their persons. To keep their wealth secure, and especially so in troubled times, they hid it – under floor boards, in the fabric of buildings, buried in the earth. Sometimes it was never retrieved from its secret hiding place, perhaps because the person who buried it died or forgot where it was.

Hoards of hidden treasure make the most spectacular discoveries. More are found by chance, and by metal detector users, than by archaeologists. A rare exception is the collection of 39 gold staters, many found inside a cow bone, discovered by a group of volunteers carrying out a dig in the Norfolk village of Sedgeford. This find of coins made in France between 60 and 50 BC is evidence of connections between Iron Age tribes fighting against Roman invaders both sides of the English Channel.

The bits and pieces that communities unwittingly leave behind provide vital snippets of information about how our ancestors lived. The Vikings carried out hit and run raids on the East of England from the late 8th century onwards. They brought with them bullion in the form of ingots, ornaments and foreign coins which they chopped up to exchange for goods of every kind. At Torksey in Lincolnshire, a mighty Viking army, along with an entourage of hangers-on, formed an encampment over 65 acres on the banks of the River Trent while they saw out the winter.

“Imagine Glastonbury Festival where people camp in the field battling with rain and mud for a few days in the summer. The Viking army camped at Torksey for much longer than that. Inevitably objects were dropped in the mud and lost only to be found by metal detector users,” says Dr Adrian Popescu, senior Assistant Keeper of Coins and Medals at

the Fitzwilliam.

Each year users of metal detectors turn up countless items. In 1996 the Government established the Portable Antiquities Scheme to encourage this band of largely amateur enthusiasts to report their findings. Since then some 700,000 finds have been reported by 18,500 people. Oxford and Cambridge Universities undertook to handle finds of coins, with Oxford concentrating on Iron-Age coins through the Celtic Coin Index and the Fitzwilliam Museum in Cambridge on Anglo-Saxon and Norman coins through the Early Medieval Corpus.

Searching is addictive: maybe there is something deep in the human psyche that drives us to turn over the earth beneath our feet. Near Royston, two metal detector users have been walking the same two fields, thought to have been the site of a market in Anglo-Saxon times, for more that 25 years. In 2004, 83 items from the site were donated to the Fitzwilliam, including dress fittings.

A tiny crumpled coin bearing the image of a lamb on one face and a dove on the other is one of the most highly prized items/coins in the exhibition. Known as Aetheldred's Agnus Dei Penny, and one of only 21 of its kind ever to have been found, it is made in silver and dates from 1009. It is thought to have been minted by King Aetheldred who ordered a national programme of processions, fasting, prayer and alms-giving as a response to the threat posed by a Danish army led by Earl Thorkell. It was found in 2008 at Thorwood Common near Epping, Essex by a metal detector user.

All that glitters is not gold (or silver) – and forgery has a long history. A series of artefacts, found in the Cambridgeshire village of Bourn, neatly illustrates the dark art of the forger in the third century AD. On display are fragments of what was once a monumental statue that has been melted down and cast into bars, ready to be cut into blanks. Next to it are

some blanks, waiting to be struck into coins. It is just as if the forger had been caught red-handed or the workshop suddenly destroyed.

Today's counterfeiters face heavy fines and prison sentences. In response to an epidemic of forgeries in the 12th century, all of England's moneyers (official mint masters) were called to the Royal Court. Many of them had their right hands chopped off, and some were also castrated, for making counterfeit money. Until the 1730s men caught dabbling in forgery were hung and women were burnt at the stake, and right up until the early 19th century the penalty for counterfeiting was death.

The relationship between mankind and money has always been murky. But, on occasion, generosity prevails. When in 1877 the labourer digging a hole in his back garden in Houghton-cum-Wyton found around 300 gold and silver coins in an earthenware jar, the land-owner handed them over to the Treasury and they were acquired by the Fitzwilliam Museum. However, he retained some of the most splendid coins to make into a necklace and bracelet for his wife. These passed down in the family until, 130 years later, they were bequeathed by a family member to the Museum. They take centre stage in one the displays of the current exhibition.

More information: Treasure Under your Feet runs till 4 September 2011 (no charge). The Fitzwilliam Museum is open Tuesday to Saturday 10:00–17:00 Sunday and Bank Holiday Mondays 12:00–17:00. Admission free.

Provided by University of Cambridge