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Book Reviews



THE ARCHAEOLOGY OF ENGLISH BATTLEFIELDS: CONFLICT IN THE PRE-INDUSTRIAL LANDSCAPE. By Glenn Foard and Richard Morris. Pp. xii and 216, Illus 130. Council of British Archaeology (Research Report, **168**), 2012. Price: £25.00. ISBN 978 190277 188 5.

This attractive and well-illustrated volume explores issues surrounding the physical locations and remains of battles and other conflict-related sites in England down to the battle of Sedgemoor of 1685. Several chapters examine the nature and history of warfare within England, the past investigation, commemoration and interpretation of conflict sites, and current techniques and strategies for managing and interpreting them and their archaeological resources. All are covered sensibly and judiciously. More importantly, this volume makes a case for a much greater role for archaeology in the interpretative process. The authors stress that, while elements of landscape archaeology and assessment have long been employed by good military historians, only within the last generation have newer archaeological techniques been able to play a potentially significant role. Given the limited lasting archaeological impact of most battles down to the late Middle Ages, as well as uncertainties over their precise locations, the authors suggest that the new approaches championed here are best applied to later engagements, where the survival — albeit in a decayed form — of late medieval ferrous arrowheads and, slightly later but much more significantly, the employment and survival of metallic round shot from gunpowder weapons at sites of early modern conflict, open up new lines of enquiry. One such example is the more thorough investigation of the indentations left when round shot struck buildings, with careful recording of their size, shape, position and orientation, and interpretation of the type of shot involved, permitting a fuller understanding of sieges in particular (Chapter 7).

A controversial case made most fully and forcefully in the book, on a matter which is at the heart of the volume, is the argument that metal-detecting activities and the subsequent plotting of late medieval metallic artefacts and of (various types of) early modern round shot can make vital contributions (Chapters 5 and 7). The authors pursue this line to some extent through conflicts of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, but much more fully in its application to conflict sites of the English Civil War, several of which are re-examined in the light of metal detectorist discoveries. Such work can make a contribution and much of the discussion is interesting, but there are also concerns. Some archaeologists will look askance at the recognition and implicit encouragement of metal detectorist activity at historic sites. Much of the detectorist evidence included and reviewed here was amateurish, incomplete and inconsistent. For example, work at Towton was ‘random’ (p. 24) and was no better at Marston Moor, where one avid detectorist’s ‘sketch plan’ of his finds is shown to be inconsistent with more recent and more accurately plotted finds (pp.

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24–25, figure 2.11), and where detectorist ‘rallies’, undertaken during the 2000s at the instigation of a landowner seeking to raise money for charity, led to equally inadequate recording and may have done more harm than good (pp. 154–55). The map of the bullet scatter at Naseby ‘derives from non-systematic collection’ and is almost certainly very incomplete and creates uncertainty (p. 163, figure 8.13). Detectorist work at Boarstall discovered four hundred bullets, but the resulting ‘sketch plan’ of their distribution was ‘produced from memory’ and only indicated the position of around a quarter of them, while later finds were also not mapped ‘but were said to come from the same general area as before’ (p. 138, figure 7.41). A more systematic use of metal detectors at Grafton Regis led to the discovery and plotting of over eight hundred bullets, but ‘the investigation...was not completed because the survey was too intensive, demanding too great a commitment from the volunteers, especially in areas where few finds were being made’ (pp. 135–37, figure 7.38).

Given all these archaeological horror stories, as well as the other problems duly noted in this volume, and despite the authors’ careful outline of best practice in the use of metal detectors in archaeology, this reviewer for one is left wondering whether metal detectorist activity is really something to be encouraged at these sites. Equally, the radical reinterpretation of the deployment of armies at the battle of Edgehill suggested here in the light of metal detectorists’ finds (p. 126, figure 7.22), and completely at variance with other historians who have not only used the plentiful contemporary accounts of the engagement but also undertaken a lot of work on the cartographic evidence, the historic landscape and the terrain, is brave and bold but perhaps a step too far.

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