# Illegal nighthawking at Lydford Castle sparks police probe amid rising heritage crime



Illegal metal detectorists have sparked a police investigation following a brazen act of trespassing at the historic Lydford Castle in Devon, renowned for its medieval heritage. This incident, part of a growing trend of so-called nighthawking, involved offenders who left multiple holes in their wake, signifying the illegal excavation of artefacts for profit—a practice that is increasingly concerning for heritage conservationists.

Lydford Castle, alongside its ruins, is an important archaeological site that includes both a Norman castle and the remnants of a 13th-century stone prison tower. It is managed by English Heritage, an organisation tasked with safeguarding the UK’s historic environment and ensuring that such sites are preserved for future generations. The castle not only holds historical significance but also serves as a tourist attraction, drawing visitors eager to learn about England's rich past.

The recent nighthawking incident at Lydford comes in the wake of a notable prosecution of five metal detectorists who were convicted of similar offences at two other protected sites: Beeston Castle in Cheshire and Roche Abbey in Yorkshire. This gang had illegally excavated valuable historical artefacts, including Bronze Age axe heads and coins, which are now recognised as objects of considerable archaeological significance. Their illicit activities were uncovered after police discovered numerous holes at the sites, indicating systematic digging.

During court proceedings, it was revealed that the gang had coordinated their efforts through a dedicated WhatsApp group, which facilitated their illegal operations. Each member faced judicial consequences, including substantial fines and Criminal Behaviour Orders that prohibit them from engaging in metal detecting within English Heritage properties—a first in the North West. The fines totalled over £5,000 collectively, with individuals facing penalties ranging from £572 to £1,760. This stringent response signifies the increasing resolve of law enforcement and heritage agencies to combat the rising threat of heritage crime.

Mark Harrison, head of Heritage Crime Strategy at Historic England, highlighted the evolution of investigative techniques that have made it possible to tackle such crimes more effectively than in previous years. He stated, "When thieves steal artefacts from a protected archaeological site, they are stealing from all of us and damaging something often irreplaceable." This sentiment underscores the intrinsic value of these historical sites, which are not merely remnants of the past but also reservoirs of knowledge that can inform our understanding of history.

The ramifications of nighthawking extend beyond immediate financial loss; they also threaten the cultural and historical insights afforded by archaeological study. Win Scutt, curator at English Heritage, poignantly remarked that illegal metal detecting "robs us of our past" and expressed concern that unlawful activities like those at Beeston Castle and Roche Abbey cause irreparable damage, leading to the permanent loss of historical context and significance.

In recent years, incidents of nighthawking have seen a noticeable uptick, prompting calls for greater public vigilance and legislative support to protect vulnerable heritage sites. Although the majority of metal detectorists operate within the law, the small minority engaging in illegal activities is enough to warrant serious concern among heritage protectors.

With the landscape of heritage crime evolving, it is clear that both authorities and communities need to work collaboratively towards the preservation of historical sites. To ensure that treasures unearthed in the future are situated within a framework of respect and legality remains vital in protecting the past for the enrichment of future generations.

## Reference Map:

* Paragraph 1 – [[1]](https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-14747423/police-historic-castle-illegal-night-metal-detectors.html?ns_mchannel=rss&ns_campaign=1490&ito=1490), [[3]](https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-merseyside-51021886)
* Paragraph 2 – [[1]](https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-14747423/police-historic-castle-illegal-night-metal-detectors.html?ns_mchannel=rss&ns_campaign=1490&ito=1490), [[2]](https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-merseyside-57037495), [[4]](https://historicengland.org.uk/whats-new/news/five-metal-detectorists-sentenced/)
* Paragraph 3 – [[5]](https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-england-york-north-yorkshire-22553951), [[6]](https://www.cheshire-live.co.uk/news/chester-cheshire-news/nighthawking-gang-stole-priceless-historical-20554061)
* Paragraph 4 – [[6]](https://www.cheshire-live.co.uk/news/chester-cheshire-news/nighthawking-gang-stole-priceless-historical-20554061), [[7]](https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/c4n3k8l7ydro)
* Paragraph 5 – [[1]](https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-14747423/police-historic-castle-illegal-night-metal-detectors.html?ns_mchannel=rss&ns_campaign=1490&ito=1490), [[2]](https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-merseyside-57037495)

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## Bibliography

1. <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-14747423/police-historic-castle-illegal-night-metal-detectors.html?ns_mchannel=rss&ns_campaign=1490&ito=1490> - Please view link - unable to able to access data
2. <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-merseyside-57037495> - A gang of metal detectorists admitted to illegally searching for artifacts at Beeston Castle in Cheshire and Roche Abbey in South Yorkshire. Their activities were discovered when holes were found at both sites in December 2019, leading to police raids that uncovered dozens of stolen items. The five men, aged between 29 and 33, were fined and given criminal behavior orders, barring them from metal detecting at any English Heritage or Cadw site in England and Wales. The stolen artifacts, including Bronze Age axe heads and coins, were valued at approximately £1,000 each.
3. <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-merseyside-51021886> - Two metal detectorists were arrested after historic artifacts were stolen from Beeston Castle's grounds. The men, aged 28 and 31, were detained following reports of 'nighthawking' at the site in December. Police raids in Greater Manchester led to the discovery of stolen items, including Bronze Age axe heads and coins. The suspects were released under investigation, and the stolen artifacts were analyzed by archaeologists from Historic England. Nighthawking, the illegal removal of artifacts from protected sites, is a serious crime that can lead to the irretrievable loss of invaluable information.
4. <https://historicengland.org.uk/whats-new/news/five-metal-detectorists-sentenced/> - Five men were sentenced after admitting unlawful metal detecting at Beeston Castle in Cheshire and Roche Abbey in South Yorkshire. The men, aged between 29 and 33, were fined and handed five-year Criminal Behaviour Orders, preventing them from entering any historic site in England and Wales. Their illegal activities were uncovered when holes were found at both sites in December 2019, leading to police raids that seized dozens of stolen artifacts, including Bronze Age axe heads and coins. The stolen items were valued at approximately £1,000 each.
5. <https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-england-york-north-yorkshire-22553951> - Damage was caused to the grounds of the historic Whitby Abbey by illegal metal detecting, known as 'nighthawking'. Between March and May, 14 holes were dug across the Grade I-listed site during the night. English Heritage and police believe the activity was the result of illegal metal detecting. The abbey, dating from AD664, has been the subject of numerous archaeological digs over the years. English Heritage expressed concern over the damage and called for public vigilance to protect historic sites from such activities.
6. <https://www.cheshire-live.co.uk/news/chester-cheshire-news/nighthawking-gang-stole-priceless-historical-20554061> - A nighthawking gang was sentenced after stealing priceless historical artifacts, including Bronze Age axe heads, from Beeston Castle. The five men admitted metal detecting at the historic monument in Cheshire and also targeted the Grade II listed Roche Abbey in Yorkshire. Their illegal activities were unearthed when holes were found in the grounds of both sites in December 2019, sparking an investigation. The stolen items, valued at approximately £1,000 each, were seized during police raids and have been returned to the sites.
7. <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/c4n3k8l7ydro> - A police investigation was launched after a metal detectorist was believed to have been spotted at Roche Abbey in Rotherham. The front lawn of the 12th-century monastery was dug up overnight between 3 and 4 June. Officers believe someone using a detector illegally was present at the protected English Heritage site that evening. Police appealed for witnesses or anyone with information to come forward. In 2019, holes were also spotted in the abbey lawn, prompting a similar appeal by police.