Archaeology and the Material Past in the Public Realm

Conference Report

On Wednesday 23rd November 2011, The Institute for the Public Understanding of the Past (IPUP) held a one-day conference entitled "Archaeology and the Material Past in the Public Realm". The event was generously sponsored by the University's Department of Archaeology, and by York Archaeological Trust, and took place in the Philip Rahtz Lecture Theatre at the King's Manor. The increasing visibility of 'community archaeology', in a wide variety of guises, over the course of the last decade or so is a phenomenon that is deservedly much remarked upon. Seemingly more people than ever before are becoming involved with archaeology in their local communities (and certainly people from more diverse communities). Recent years have seen the establishment of a wide range of frameworks that have facilitated greater public involvement in archaeology. Sometimes these changes have been attitudinal, with outreach and engagement strategies being ever-more folded into a project's design, rather than merely bolted on at the end. New streams of financial support have allowed the establishment of dedicated positions within archaeological organisations, so that community-based projects can be co-ordinated and encouraged. In many cases, this work is about connecting with long-established amateur groups already well-embedded in their local historical landscapes; in other cases, whole new sections of the community are being shown the power and value of exploring the past's remains.

After a welcome offered by Julian Richards, the Head of the Department of Archaeology, and an introduction by Helen Weinstein, of the Institute for the Public Understanding of the Past, the conference began with a paper by the historian, writer, and broadcaster Michael Wood, who reflected on his most recent series *Story of England*, which used the villages of Kibworth Harcourt, Kibworth Beauchamp, and Smeeton Westerby, in Leicestershire as a microcosm to tell the story of the English nation from its origins to the present day. He began by saying how delighted he was to be in the Philip Rahtz Lecture Theatre, and recalled interviewing the late Professor Rahtz for the very first programme he made as a broadcaster. He emphasised that public understanding of the past is very much what he has spent his life doing, as a public service broadcaster, 'ploughing a Reithian furrow'. Archaeology, history, and landscape have always been central to all he has done, bringing those things together in everything from massive grand sweeping historical travelogues, to smaller-scale documentaries focussing on one aspect or one group of individuals from the past. The present-ness of the past is absolutely central to his work, he explained, coupled with the belief that history is very much what we make of it: history's fabric is constructed from what we make of our memories, our landscape, our archaeology, and all that is around us.

Focussing on *Story of England*, he confided that this was a project he had long had on his mind: a history of the nation as a microcosm. Key to this was his belief (inspired by Hoskins) that, potentially, this story could be told anywhere: everywhere had the potential to tell, through its own history, a history of England. Another element that was vitally important was that this be a chronological account: this approach allowed the story to play out as a narrative and ultimately resulted in the series becoming more compelling as its tale unfolded. Wood also emphasised that he was determined that this be a bottom-up history, rather than a top-down. He reflected that there have been many recent series that have told the story of the nation, but all have been done from the perspectives of those in power and mostly with the authorial voice of a single presenter. In contrast, this series was from its origin designed to be a people's history, and one that illustrated the development of a working class culture (and here he perceived the influence of the approach of E.P. Thompson on his own thinking). The desire for community involvement began with the realisation that there was very little relating to Kibworth in the surviving documentary records of the region pre-dating Domesday. Thus, advertisements were placed in the local press looking for people who would be happy to sink a test-pit in their garden, and excavate and record their findings. Subsequent to this part of the project, which was a resounding success, the local community kept returning to ask if there were other parts of the project that they could undertake. This led to members of the present community going to look at their own familial Poor Law records, and a local dramatic society staging an authentic nineteenth-century entertainment at a local venue. This embrace of the community was also extended to contemporary individuals reading historic texts, which created intensely powerful television, linking past and present. Central to all of the series' design was a desire to involve the community, make the past accessible, and empower the present through the exploration of

its past. The lesson of the work at Kibworth was that great learning can be worn very lightly, and that the history of ordinary people is a very important way of looking at the past. This last point is all the more significant because history has the potential to empower and to give value to the present. We can, if we investigate the past, come to understand how we came to be where we are, and how our rights and duties were achieved.

The second half of the conference consisted of a panel of five speakers, each giving their own perspectives on community archaeology projects, many of which went on in and around York itself. The first speaker in the panel was Cath Neal, who is the Field Officer at the University of York's Department of Archaeology, working on the Heslington East project. Heslington East is a 115 hectare site, 3.5km from the city, with multi-period remains running from the Bronze Age onwards. As a site, it combines commercial archaeology with an integrated community engagement programme which has seen over 550 individuals digging (including students, volunteers, school children, and the homeless), and which has been supported by an Heritage Lottery Fund grant. Finding mechanisms for evaluation was one of the central problems is assessing the impact of the project on its participants. A questionnaire was developed with

English Heritage to be taken both before and after participation, but although feedback was generally positive, it was difficult to gauge in any real sense what the precise value of the work had been for those involved. Neal worked with Helen Graham, a research specialist in participation, who facilitated workshops with the participants. The findings were that those taking part in the project on the whole mentioned other collateral benefits and skills accrued from their participation besides the merely archaeological or historical; instead, they mentioned 'softer' issues such as learning about belonging, ownership, and memory. This led, she explained, to a deeper consideration of the nature of community archaeology, and how engagement is really being played out. In some ways, real engagement with the community is going on at those places when the archaeology is a cause of conflict, such as with travellers, or militant dog walkers striding across the site cutting wire fences as they did so. Furthermore, the archaeology is taking place in advance of a massive extension of the university campus and some of the development plans, including cutting a new road adjacent to the village's parish church, have caused local uproar. Surely, Neal reflected, it is these arenas where conflict is apparent and things aren't being 'managed' or 'overseen' that real engagement is occurring. She used this as an opportunity to reflect back on Sherry Arnstein's 1969 'Ladder of Citizen Participation' (recently updated by Brian Head), which reminds those involved in such projects to be perpetually wary of tokenism. She argued that we are now at a stage where community archaeology is almost universally regarded as a 'good thing', and thus many people (except for scholars such as Laurajane Smith) have stopped thinking critically about it. Applying Foucauldian models, Neal argued that most engagement is still top-down, sometimes controlled by complex mechanisms via institutions, and it is critical that we move away from models of stewardship, which emphasise too heavily the materiality of the past and the scientific processes necessary to interrogate it and which place archaeologists in a position of power. Ultimately, she concluded, if you want to empower people it is impossible to simultaneously regulate them. We must realise that the current drive for engagement is being driven by contemporary social and cultural concerns, and thus is not a wholly neutral ambition.
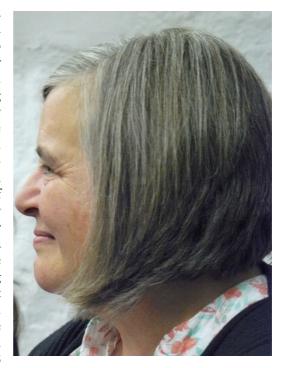
Jon Kenny, Community Archaeologist for York Archaeological Trust, spoke next, with a focus on explaining what had brought him to work on archaeology engagement projects, what it was he did on a day-to-day basis, and how community archaeology can work socially for all. He began by reminding the audience that archaeology is, more often than not, a great deal of fun. People do it because they enjoy it: the work itself is engaging and brings those who do it a great deal of satisfaction. Kenny's own personal journey had brought him from working with social housing, through time spent writing and thinking about archaeology in an academic context, to his current position working with community groups. He hoped that all he had done and learned over the course of his earlier professional life had given him skills that were both useful and necessary in the world of community archaeology. He went on to remind the audience that although we may all think in terms of 'communities' there isn't really anything like a unified whole that corresponds to the term: all communities, made up as they are of individuals, have their rifts, their factions, their divisions. If one worries too much about the nature

of these inter-relationships within the community, then paralysis is a risk; instead, action should be central to the engagement work: get on with the project, and worry about the rest only when necessary. He reflected that his own job was as a facilitator, training and helping those individuals and groups who came to him for support. Many local history and archaeology groups in the York area are thriving and long-lived: they don't need much in the way of help to do the practical things that they want to do, although they may want help with other aspects of their pursuits, such as completing funding applications. Other smaller or newer groups may need more hands on training; one important task is to bring these groups together, to ensure that they are networked and talking to each other. Once again he emphasised that absolutely central to the whole project of archaeological outreach is the actual doing: if a group is visibly engaged in a practical project (surveying, fieldwalking, excavation) it gets other people involved. Kenny concluded by saying that he understood the concerns that community archaeology might at times be seen as tokenistic, but ultimately from his own position, the importance of his role as a facilitator was that he was making it possible for local groups to engage in projects that they themselves had chosen, and this outreach was vital, because it had the potential to draw many different parts of a community (including traditionally excluded groups) together.

Anne Curtis, a volunteer who had built up a formidable amount of experience working on community archaeology projects, was next to speak, reflecting on the things that brought her to archaeology and the benefits she had derived from that experience. She began by remarking that each individual community archaeology participant would have a very different, unique story that explained how and why they had become involved, but her story began in 2005 with the formation of the Strensall Local History Society. This, coupled with a grant of HLF funding that allowed archaeology study days to take place in York, had propelled her into the world of community archaeology at a time in her life when she was looking to be more active and socially engaged. Taking Wednesdays off work, she began digging at York Archaeological Trust's Hungate site, and she described one particularly memorable artefact that she had been involved with recovering, a seventeenth century cup. In 2008 she moved on to work at the Heslington East project, an excavation which was particularly important to her as her mother's family, the Hopwoods, had lived and farmed in the area in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries (and indeed, some of her relatives still do). She reflected that an especially important moment came when she was involved with the excavation of her first set of human remains, a process that brought about conflicting emotions tied to her own links with the area. She continued to work at that site until 2011, and has enlarged her excavation experience after she became involved with a project near Hornby Castle in Bedale, and at the same time she hopes to pursue an MA at the University of York with a research project that will look at the history and landscape of the village of Huntington, and specifically the church there (where her parents were married and she was herself baptised). In conclusion, she reflected, community archaeology has increased her physical and mental activity and well-being, continued her education, and allowed her to meet like-minded people engaged in projects that they all enjoy.

Peter Connelly, the Director of York Archaeological Trust's Hungate excavation spoke next, with a paper designed to interrogate archaeologists themselves and ask what it was that they derived from the parts of their job that dealt with public engagement. He sent out, in a manner he suggested was admittedly unscientific, two questions to professional archaeologists (who worked at both junior and senior levels) asking them "why do you do public participation archaeology?" and "what do you get out of doing public participation archaeology?". Although this produced only a small sample size of respondents (24 in total: 13 senior staff, and 11 junior), he was able to analyse their answers and group them into some overall broad themes. Although some responses stated that they did so because it was a requirement of their job, others emphasised issues of the shared ownership of archaeological heritage and the vital ways outreach can keep archaeology socially engaged and relevant.

Answers to the first question highlighted how archaeology is strengthened by opening itself to the wider public. In the main, the answers to the second question revolved around how it brought those who did engagement work a sense of happiness, enjoyment, and a reminder of the importance of sharing the archaeological heritage with all. This is especially important, Connelly reflected, because professional archaeologists have no small reputation for being a jaded and somewhat cynical bunch; thus public archaeology can help them break out of those feelings, and remind themselves of the joys of discovering the past and sharing it with others. He concluded by emphasising the importance of broadcasting to professionals that community engagement is a two-way street. It is not merely the public who gain from the transaction, as the archaeologists themselves amass a wealth of benefits, ranging from straight CPD-style skillsets (increased confidence, enhanced pedagogical abilities) to a more broader sense of work-place well-being and enhanced happiness.

The final speaker of the panel was Suzie Thomas, who is the Community Archaeology Support Officer at the Council for British Archaeology (CBA). Thanks to her work across the UK, she was able to give a broad-brush picture of the state of community archaeology in the UK and consider its potential futures. She began by considering the newly passed Localism Act 2011, which went into law only a week before the conference took place. This, very much an early centre-piece of the coalition government's policy promises to put the community at the heart of their strategic thinking across the country, will take much decision-making down to a local level, and claims to put the public good as the heart of decision-making, enabling public participation with its planning processes. The bill also reflects 'The Big Society', a government buzz-word which attempts to make volunteerism a major part of policy delivery. This is the policy backdrop to a nationwide picture of community archaeology on the rise. Although 'community archaeology' is notoriously difficult to define, Thomas' work suggests that there are currently over 2200 separate groups across the UK, suggesting perhaps somewhere in the region of a quarter of a million people currently engaged in community archaeology of one sort or another. These numbers are massive, but threats do loom. For many of these groups, her research has shown that a major point of engagement with

'professional' archaeologists (for advice, training, or equipment) is the council or local authority archaeology service. It is, she reflected, precisely these jobs that are under the most pressure in the economic context of cuts and austerity. Furthermore, it is not just the local authorities that are under pressure: university departments, continuing education programmes, English Heritage (which cut its entire Outreach Department), and even the Council for British Archaeology itself, are all under sustained pressure that risks the loss of precisely those jobs which are the links to community archaeology groups across the country. Although there are some rays of light, as seen in the CBA's new Community Archaeology Bursaries Scheme, the overall picture remains bleak. She concluded with a plea for support, because the regional branches of the CBA's Young Archaeologist's Club are under significant financial pressure, and support is needed for them to continue the sterling work they do bringing up the next generation of professional and community archaeologists.

After a question and answer discussion session, with all five members of the panel engaging in a lively debate with the audience, the final word was left to Mike Nevell of the University of Salford to offer some concluding remarks on the afternoon as a whole. He began by asking three questions which had emerged from the papers given by all of the contributors. How do we embrace community engagement? How do we ensure that there is access for all?; What are the challenges and opportunities for the future? He asked the audience to remember that when 'community engagement' is under discussion, we must never shy away from considering the difficult issues about who this archaeology is being done for, what is its purpose, and what does it mean? Yet these are not just questions for those organising archaeological engagement projects, because those participating in them are surely asking themselves the same questions. Alongside these structural issues, volunteers and participants might have other reasons for engaging with community projects: to gain confidence, for the enjoyment of working with others, for the empowerment that comes from giving meaning to the present. Simply by doing, by engaging in activities, new skills can be acquired and at the same time some of our big overarching questions addressed. Looking forward, Nevell suggested a possible dichotomy between the way we understand and conceptualise engagement projects: a 'community archaeology' that was voluntary and run by the networks of participants themselves, and a 'public archaeology' that was more top-down, structured, and organisational. Naturally, these two categories are fluid and they overlap enormously, but one benefit of imagining the situation in this fashion is that the economic crisis and its concomitant cuts only threaten the latter: a real bottom-up, grassroots, popular community archaeology might escape largely unscathed. This is very much the kind of archaeology that needs to be encouraged (and indeed, may be significantly aided by the Localism Act), as archaeologists need to encourage people to be interested in the past on their own terms, enchanted by it sufficiently to allow it to remain alive and a living part of the present, a tool to understand ourselves and our communities better. Thus, he concluded on an optimistic note: if engagement strategies can do this, if they can provoke people to get interested themselves, to self-organise and commit to real bottom-up strategies for exploring the past, then community archaeology as a whole will overcome these incredibly testing times, and the cuts will have proved to be a catalyst (albeit a depressing one) for a genuinely engaged public archaeology.

The purpose of the conference was to allow for reflection on some of community archaeology's many successes: its desire to reprioritise and place the present's communities at the heart of an exploration of their past counterparts; its ability to reach beyond the corrals of proprietary knowledge to democratise the investigation of shared histories; its capacity to create and refine the present's sense of community and identity. The day also allowed the speakers the opportunity to take stock of the present and to consider the future, in order to think about what could be done better and how oncoming economic challenges might be met. Widening participation is absolutely vital; archaeology, like all the humanities, can only survive through social engagement, and community archaeology is one of the vehicles to communicate why the past is so very important to the present.

A storifyed version of the twitter conversations relating to the day, made by Pat Handley of the Department of Archaeology, is available here: http://storify.com/PatHadley/archaeology-communities-and-the-public

The Institute for the Public Understanding of the Past is immensely grateful for the sponsorship it received from York Archaeological Trust and the Department of Archaeology which made this event possible. For further information about IPUP's research and conference events, please visit www.york.ac.uk/ipup