

Assessment 1: Review of project success against its research design

Introduction

This assignment will focus on an excavation that took place between 2019 and 2020 at Burnmill Road, Market Harborough, Leicestershire. This site was the location of a series of Iron Age and Roman settlements which moved progressively west to east across the site over the course of its occupation (Clapton & Kipling, 2021). Along with evidence for agricultural and settlement activity there was also the unexpected discovery of ten burials, including an Iron Age crouched inhumation (ibid). Work on this site was severely impacted by inclement weather and the outbreak of Covid-19 which caused a six-month stoppage in work part way through the excavation phase (ibid). My only involvement in this project was in the preparation of the finds, specifically the pottery, for the archive deposition, and as the final report is light on comments that relate to the implementation and management of the project, I have had to infer some aspects of these from comparisons between the initial project design and its final results, along with discussions with a colleague who worked on the excavation.

ULAS and Project Designs/WSIs

ULAS's approach to project design exists in parallel to the MoRPHE approach (Historic England, 2015) rather than adhering to it, following broader project management approaches that have been standardised in the field over time. In general, ULAS WSIs are formulaic cut and paste templates which follow a very similar approach no matter the size of the site being investigated, with approximately two thirds to three quarters of every WSI going unchanged from the generic template. The methodological approaches outlined for full excavations vary very little, and they tend not to be updated if issues arise during excavation. The manager presiding over the project is generally the only one in the unit involved in the preparation of the WSI, and while the specialists who will work on the post-excavation for the project are named in the WSI they are generally only consulted prior to the finalisation of it if there are expected to be specific reasons to do so, i.e. waterlogging, burials, industrial activity, otherwise their input is only sought either during the event of unexpected findings on site or at the start of the post-excavation process (Browning, 2024).

As a commercial archaeological unit, the main difference between a standard MoRPHE project design and ULAS WSIs/Project Designs is that they do not feature a 'Business Case' section. The financial side

of the is dealt with separately and records of this are generally not kept with the rest of the project documentation. Projects undertaken outside of the commercial environment usually see ULAS in a sub-contractor role, and so ULAS rarely make a 'business case' for this work either.

Burnmill Road WSI

As previously mentioned ULAS WSIs tend not to be the most detailed in terms of site-specific project documentation, and the Burnmill Road one (Score, 2020) is no different, although it does largely adhere to the ClfA guidelines (2014). The summary of the archaeological background in this WSI is short but it gives a reasonable overview of the existing knowledge, though the writeup could perhaps benefit from a better structure and firmer delineations between the historical periods being mentioned; in a similar way to how the data is presented in the DBA (Hunt & Score, 2017) and the final report (Clapton & Kipling, 2021). The information laid out in this section does however display a firm understanding of what the expected findings of the excavation would be, with a combination of the DBA, geophysical survey, and evaluation trenching results providing a well-rounded picture of the anticipated nature of the site, which the final excavation shows to be quite accurate (Clapton & Kipling, 2021:223). This firm grasp on the likely character of the site allowed for a good number of questions from the research framework to be put forward as areas the project's results could potentially contribute towards. There is a focus on the Iron Age and Roman periods in the questions selected, despite the proximity to medieval activity in the area, likely due to the solely agricultural nature of the site during the post Roman period suggested by the map evidence and the evaluation results (Brown, 2018). As far as it is possible to tell, the Research Objectives noted in the WSI were not updated at any later point during the course of the excavation.

The excavation strategy appears to have been devised primarily to target all of the features detected by the geophysical survey and shows no indication of having been specifically tailored to the research questions. The site was divided into two areas for the purposes of the excavation as the two parts of the site formed two distinct, separate fields. These are referred to as Areas 1 and 2 in the WSI, and in the report as 'West Field' and 'East Field', and were excavated and reported on as separate entities until the concluding sections of the report (Clapton & Kipling, 2021:22). The methodology for the excavation noted in the WSI sets out a 'core area' and a 'contingency area' with the contingency area only to be investigated if criteria set out in the WSI are met and the planning archaeologist agrees (Score, 2020:7). The final excavation stripped the core area and one western portion of the contingency area. Along with providing basic details of the excavation methodology as a whole, the WSI also

provides a breakdown of the excavation approaches for each type of archaeological feature that might potentially be encountered, something that is not a common feature of ULAS WSI (Score, 2020:7-8). The remainder of the WSI consists of the unaltered boilerplate content on the standard methodologies that will be employed in relation to all other aspects of the excavation, post-excavation, and archiving of the project. This includes a section on Human Remains, and although these were discovered unexpectedly during the excavation no site-specific changes were made to this section, although it is possible that the section was considered to already be a satisfactorily account of the procedures that would be followed for any work undertaken in relation to these.

Project Implementation

The primary factor potentially affecting the implementation of the excavation strategy was the extended pause in work between January 2020 and July 2020, which was caused by abject weather conditions and then the outbreak of Covid-19. The WSI for the project was updated during the stoppage between the two phases as a result of this, though the only changes made were a noting of the stoppage and its cause, an updated plan illustrating what was left to excavate, and the addition of Covid 19 precautions to the constraints (Score, 2019;2020). The actual details of the excavation strategy remained the same. Discussions with a colleague (Johnson-Moss, 2024) who worked on the excavation leave it unclear whether the stoppage in work played any part in only the western portion of the contingency area being explored, but since the report suggests the limit of the features was established (Clapton & Kipling, 2021:18-19), it is probable that there were primarily archaeological reasons for this choice, in line with the 'buffer zone' criteria which was specified in the original methodology.

Although the stoppage due to the weather conditions occurred in January 2020, the conditions on the site had been poor since the prior October (Johnson-Moss, 2024). The decision to shut the site down followed communications between the ULAS manager presiding over the site and the site workers once things began to become untenable in the January (ibid). The site director was apparently unconcerned with the conditions, did not attempt to alter the excavation strategy or on-site procedures as a result of them, and did not play an active part in the decision to call a halt to the work (ibid).

In addition to the weather the other notable factor which could have affected the excavation strategy was the discovery of the burials, but it would seem that no adjustments were made, or additional

precautions taken following the initial burial finds (ibid). The burials were simply left partially uncovered after discovery until a site worker with experience with burial excavation was free from their other tasks such that they were available to excavate them fully (ibid).

Final Project Report

The final report provides a comprehensive overview of the findings of the excavation, with a lengthy 'General Discussion' of the knowledge that has been gained (Clapton & Kipling, 2021:209-225). In common with a significant proportion of ULAS's reports, it doesn't however refer back to any of the research questions in its conclusions, whether there were applicable results or not. This is despite there being explicit sections in the report's conclusion which discuss two of the primary topics of the research questions: boundary systems and settlement changes (ibid:213,216,221). These sections detail enough appropriate information that the project can be considered to have successfully achieved its intended aims, even though the report itself fails to highlight that its findings have done so.

Archiving and Publication

The final report and archive largely fulfil the intended contents set out in the WSI, though the report does fail to give an assessment on the potential that the archive has for further analysis. Following completion of the project and the report in 2021, it was finally archived in August 2023. At the time of writing it has yet to be added to the Leicestershire and Rutland HER, but considering the HER backlog this is to be expected.

Due to the inexperience of the individuals charged with preparing the archive for deposition, however, the addition of the site to the Archaeological Data Service digital archive was missed, a fact that was only picked up due to the project's usage for this assignment. This is now due to be resolved but not until new archive staff are put in place in the coming months.

The end of the report mentions that a summary of the report will be submitted to a regional archaeological journal 'in due course', and a short update on the excavation was published in the 2021 volume of Transactions of the Leicestershire Archaeological and Historical Society (Speed, 2021), with a brief write up having also featured in the 2020 volume detailing the work up until the stoppage

(Bourne, 2020). A more extensive article is however due to be published in the 2024 volume which will pay particular attention to the settlement shifts and burial practices evidenced at the site.

Project effectiveness

Although not perfect this realistically has to be considered an effective project. It started with a strong idea of what it anticipated would be found on the site, and made use of the geophysical survey and evaluation excavation to target the parts of the site with the most archaeological potential, while also putting a strategy in place which allowed for further investigation of other areas of site, if criteria were met, and possibly time and budget permitted it. Although not a planned eventuality, the division of the site in this way allowed for a thorough investigation to still take place of the core area of the site despite the difficult on-site condition and eventual stoppage in work. The findings from the excavated areas produced a strong narrative for the site, with results that can contribute nicely to the regional research agenda for both the Iron Age and Roman periods.

Conclusion

The problem ULAS has is that their WSIs/Project Designs are consistently the weakest part of the approach to the work they do. The later reporting on the projects often demonstrates that they were well undertaken courses of work, that produce a good standard of results. However, as almost all of the senior figures at the company have been with the unit for at least a decade and many considerably longer than that, there is a feeling that they consider themselves comfortable enough in knowing what they're doing that the WSI stage of a project is, in many cases, a perfunctory piece of work, with the actual excavation approach formulated in conversations beforehand or once they reach site and get a lay of the land, rather than being set out on paper. In many ways the WSI for this project was similarly perfunctory, but the clear focus of the strategy underlying it proved effective. I think the key issue in this scenario is the fact that despite all of the issues and unexpected eventualities encountered on this project no fundamental changes were made to the WSI, and as there are limited comments on these in the final report there is an absence of contextual information on aspects of the project that will undoubtedly had some impact on the strategy or results. WSIs are important pieces of documentation in this respect and ULAS could really do with adopting an approach which better reflects that.

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