

Disrupting the past

In a world rocked by politics, pollution and pandemic, archaeology faces an unknown future. *British Archaeology* invites readers to wonder what might change, and how

Taking a people-centred approach to the past

Sadie Watson & Laura Hampden, London archaeologists, think that development archaeology should address living communities as much as physical remains:

Heritage conversations around diversity, equality, equity, accessibility and inclusion (DEEAI) have grown over the last two decades. Many archaeologists have argued that DEEAI approaches should be firmly embedded within our practice, rather than treated as optional. In 2018 for example the Chartered Institute for Archaeologists' Equality & Diversity Group campaigned for a cross-sector approach to DEEAI, arguing that cultural change was needed to address structural inequality, discrimination and harassment in the profession.

The need for change has been widely acknowledged. But to date it's been a slow process.

Let's be honest, meaningful self-reflection is hard and takes time. Archaeologists are good at looking back, but we should also look forward and aim for change. We can hold knowledge systems and embedded structures to account, but this cannot happen if the people who run things want them to stay the same. There is a lot of anxiety around getting things

wrong. But if conversations in the past year have done anything, they have highlighted that it's OK to be uncomfortable: in fact avoiding discomfort is one of the biggest barriers to progress. Starting the change is vital.

Few could have lived through 2020 without being aware of the killing of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor and other African Americans; or the global response that ensued to highlight racial injustice and oppression. Archaeology has never existed within a vacuum, aloof from wider social, economic and political forces and issues. The events of 2020 stimulated an unprecedented sectoral reflection on the colonial structures and ideas we have inherited, and the racism that is ingrained into them.

Debates about historic statues and the repatriation of objects collected or stolen during colonial wars, and the controversial instructions issued by the culture secretary, Oliver Dowden, to national institutions on what he called "contested heritage", have brought politics to the heart of our shared history. They affect how we study it, and how we attempt to manage the historic environment. Dowden's apparently contradictory

demands that publicly funded bodies should adopt policies "consistent with the government's position" while not being "motivated by activism or politics", have caused anxiety and frustration throughout the heritage sector, particularly from those working on legitimate projects exploring the process of decolonisation. There is concern that years of work to democratise heritage and address inequality could be undermined.

The result is that many in our sector are thinking about practical or creative ways in which we can approach the process of decolonising archaeology within existing frameworks, reconsidering how we work, and ultimately who we work for. The urgency of this, and the resistance from central government, mean that conversations are already taking place: how can we embed alternative considerations into our standardised templates for each stage of the archaeological process?

Rarely heard voices

We're not going to pretend this is straightforward. Challenging how things have been done for decades requires us to have an honest appraisal



In 1954 Winifred Atwell, a pianist born in Trinidad, became the first Black recording artist to top the UK singles charts, with her own ragtime composition, in the same year reaching no 9 with a Rachmaninov performance; she opened a hairdressing salon for Black women on Railton Road, south London in a building that was burnt down in the Brixton race riots in 1981



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of where we are. Archaeology is an endeavour of colonial origins. It has evolved since, but our predecessors' historical perspectives still dominate archaeological practice and values embedded in our policies, procedures and legislative frameworks.

This is a serious problem of our historiography, but it is not intractable. Decolonising faces three barriers in the world of contracting archaeology:

- In project designs, site reports and methodologies
- In wider structural issues (eg biased historical narratives and an exclusionary profession)
- In society as a whole.

There will be further barriers: decolonising is as much about identifying and explaining the cause of racial (and other) disparities, as it is rectifying them.

A desk-based assessment is often the first time an archaeologist will have studied a site, searching the local historic environment record and other sources to establish if significant remains are known there or nearby. Any archaeology identified will remain a key priority for development-linked fieldwork that might later occur; the document infuses the entire archaeological process. It is vital to consider wider stories at this stage, and how we might begin to take a people-centred rather than research-led approach. We should reconsider what we currently define (or prescribe) as significant: not to abandon our emphasis on research value, but to consider how that research may be perpetuating colonial aspects of our work. How do we avoid bypassing entire areas of the historic environment, and opportunities for other communities to enjoy it and benefit from it?

Archaeology can help people find a place in their local environment and community. It is important to remember that research aims need not be directly related to the archaeological work, but might instead focus, for example, on land use by particular members of the community, local historical events or people, or the impact on communities currently living or working there of buildings or



open land affected by a development. There is evidence that large-scale construction projects, particularly residential developments in cities, disrupt and uproot black communities more than white. Yet official statements or assessments often pay scant notice to their historic contributions or attachments. It is important in situations like this to ask who might benefit the most from the archaeological process. How can projects be designed to ensure communities can be involved if they want to be?

A wholesale democratisation of the planning system may not be within archaeology's gift. But we can certainly reassess the weight we place on specific conservation values. We could take a people-centred approach by asking communities what they think about, or might want from, any archaeological work in their area, using a more open set of questions than those in a standard desk-based assessment. These questions could include:

- Are there any significant cultural buildings, spaces or events in the area or on the site?

- What are local schools, libraries and community and youth groups focusing on? Can archaeology contribute to their aims and objectives?
- Will the development affect any particular communities?
- What barriers might exist to prevent these communities engaging?
- Overall, how can the impact of the changes on local communities be reflected by the archaeological project and in the new development?

Archaeology should be about more than the potential damage to buildings or below-ground remains. It should incorporate all aspects of life that contribute to a place and its people. The standard responses to acknowledging this, and providing creative solutions to change caused by development, need to be widened. We should listen to voices rarely heard in the existing structures of UK archaeological practice.

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(Defaced) Black Lives Matter graffiti on the Basingstoke canal near Woking, May 2020; the scheduled bridge was built around 1790 over a canal designed to stimulate agricultural development in Hampshire