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Commercial archaeology in the UK: public interest, benefit and engagement

Hilary Orange, Dominic Perring

Introduction

Commercial archaeology in the UK involves the contracting of professional archaeological services primarily to the construction industry. Since 1990, the sector has operated within the framework of an evolving UK government planning policy that has adhered to broad principles of sustainable development set out in EU directives and international conventions. The relationship between the commercial sector and planning is predicated on the notion that archaeology serves the public interest by providing key benefits. The sector supports the construction industry in discharging its regulatory duties as it responds to public demand for new housing and infrastructure (Aitchison 2012), and mitigates the impact of development by conserving and interpreting a record of the heritage asset and advancing understanding of its significance (DCLG 2010, 2012). This chapter presents an overview of commercial archaeology in the UK and outlines the relationship between the sector and the public realm. Alongside some general concepts, a brief history of commercial archaeology is presented before common factors that encourage and impede engagement and outreach services are outlined. Two case studies illustrate recent practice in this area.

A brief history of commercial archaeology

Before 1990 most investigations undertaken ahead of new construction were considered rescue excavations, aimed at recovering scientific evidence from the jaws of the bulldozer. Important rescue projects took place in rebuilding after the Second World War, but work increased massively from the 1970s onwards when a patchwork of local and regional teams, or field units, was established (Jones 1984). Various local solutions emerged from arrangements that had previously relied on volunteers coordinated by museums, university departments and ad hoc excavation committees. Although these rescue units were grant-aided by central government, they remained independent organisations, often structured as charitable trusts committed to community benefit (Thomas 2007; Schofield et al. 2011). Several district and county authorities appointed archaeologists to support the rescue programme. These posts were often located within local museum services, but local authority archaeologists soon forged links with planning departments, initially to anticipate where rescue excavations might be necessary and subsequently to arrange for the protection of important sites.

The risk of a conflict between development and archaeology was instrumental in the introduction of new planning guidance in 1990 (DoE 1990). This guidance established the need to consider the interests of archaeological conservation before development could proceed, drawing on the practice of cultural resource management developed in the USA (King 2004: 23). Local planning authorities were encouraged to require developers to record and advance understanding of the significance of any heritage assets at risk of being damaged, in a manner proportionate to their importance and the impact, and to make evidence of significance publicly accessible (DCLG 2012).

The planning reforms encouraged a separation between the decision-making that obliged developers to support archaeological works and the undertaking of those works, formalising a division between ‘curator’ (engaged in cultural resource management) and ‘contractor’ (undertaking excavation and research for development clients). Public funds were directed towards supporting ‘curatorial’ posts within planning departments, whilst field units came to depend on commercial income as grant aid diminished. This accelerated a move towards developer funding, as construction companies responded to the need to provide information on the archaeological and historical landscape in order to secure planning permission. In turn, consultancies found a profitable role mediating between the

interests of the different parties involved and helping commercial clients manage their archaeological work programmes. The expansion of archaeological employment was accompanied by the establishment in 1982 of a professional body, now the Chartered Institute for Archaeologists (CIFA), with a remit to promote standards and regulate professional archaeology in the UK. According to CIFA (2010), the duty of the profession is to realise the full potential of archaeological resources 'for education and research, the improvement of our environment and the enrichment of people's lives'.

The scale of commercial archaeology

Development-led archaeology is an established business, drawing on project-management practices found in the construction industry. It is estimated that around 90 per cent of all archaeological investigations are undertaken by commercial organisations (Fulford 2011: 33) and therefore the sector's potential to contribute to public understanding of archaeology has long been recognised (Flatman 2011: 30–1, 90–1). In busy years, some 5000 developer-funded investigations can be undertaken, at an estimated cost to developers of approximately £150 million (Aitchison 2010: 26). By 2015, this platform of funded work meant that commercially funded organisations employed over 3000 people, representing some 60 per cent of all those working in British archaeology. The work is, however, vulnerable to the fluctuating fortunes of the construction industry, resulting in considerable variations in volumes of work and employment opportunities.

Approximately 80 per cent of development-led archaeological work falls within the orbit of professional audit and regulation, where the public interest of archaeological work is addressed (Perring 2016: 96). CIFA maintains a list of registered organisations that have been subject to peer review and have successfully demonstrated their adherence to professional standards (CIFA 2015). There are about seventy such organisations operating in England, 46 of which undertake developer-funded archaeological excavations, employing some 2200 staff. The sector remains dominated by business practices that were established in the 1970s as regional rescue units. These remain not-for-profit organisations structured to meet research and charitable objectives, retaining specialist knowledge of regions within which they have worked for many decades. A smaller group of more recently established companies do not trace their origins to the public sector provision of the 1970s,

but many have also inherited the research culture and commitment to local community engagement that characterises the longer-established archaeological companies.

Typical services

Archaeological contractors provide a wide range of specialist services, including site evaluation, survey, excavation, and areas of work such as historic building recording, forensic archaeology (including scene-of-crime work), geo-archaeology, heritage site management and interpretation, and maritime archaeology. Most archaeological investigations are small-scale evaluation exercises undertaken to establish whether important and vulnerable remains are present; sometimes following on from earlier desk-based research and environmental impact assessment that has identified that this might be the case. A typical archaeological evaluation will involve the machine excavation of a few trial trenches or test pits down to the horizons where archaeology might be present, but will not entail the detailed investigation of the remains uncovered, since these may warrant preservation in situ. Sometimes non-invasive techniques, such as geophysical and topographic survey, will also be deployed, although not routinely. Evaluation exercises are usually arranged at short notice and completed within a matter of days, offering little opportunity for public engagement or access. Since the purpose of these works is to inform a planning decision, the results are generally summarised in a technical report submitted to a planning committee, and this kind of ‘grey literature’ can be difficult to find or use for other purposes (Bradley 2006). Summary information is more readily available through local Historic Environment Records held by the planning authorities concerned.

Where significant finds are made during an evaluation exercise, the planning decision will usually require the conservation of the remains in situ or for an archaeological excavation to take place ahead of construction (see case study 10.1). These investigations are intended to mitigate the physical loss of archaeological resources by identifying some form of compensatory public benefit, such as a research value or use value. Such benefits could include, for instance, interpretation panels, historical information and public open days, the repair of a heritage asset or public access to archives (Historic England 2015b: 7). Such programmes of mitigation are structured by a research design, usually described as a ‘written scheme of investigation’ (WSI), prepared by the archaeological

Case study 10.1: Volunteers and outreach at the Pococks Field excavation

Archaeology South-East (ASE) operates as an independent cost-centre within the UCL Institute of Archaeology (IoA) and has offices in Brighton, London and Witham. ASE started life as the IoA's Field Archaeology Unit in the early 1970s before becoming increasingly involved in commercial work in the 1990s. Employing approximately 100 permanent staff, the company tenders for nearly 1000 projects annually and has an annual operating turnover of around £4 million (Perring 2015b: 192). ASE offers services in excavation, building survey, maritime archaeology, forensic archaeology, academic publication, specialist illustration and computer modelling (UCL 2015).

In 2014, ASE completed a seven-month-long excavation and associated outreach programme ahead of development on behalf of Bovis Homes at Pococks Field, Eastbourne, East Sussex. Previous small-scale investigations on the site, especially work by the Eastbourne Natural History and Archaeological Society, had already uncovered prehistoric, Roman and medieval settlement. The excavation and outreach in 2014 were funded by Bovis Homes, following recommendations from East Sussex County Council, acting as advisors to Eastbourne District Council, and were undertaken in accordance with a written scheme of investigation prepared by ASE to meet the requirements of planning conditions.

ASE opened the excavation to volunteers, with training and supervision provided by staff. Over eighty volunteers took part, including students, retired people, unemployed people and some with declared disabilities, with the vast majority of volunteers living locally. The excavation was opened to the public who could see the work in progress and visit an on-site exhibition. Guided tours were offered on a weekly basis and two large-scale family open days were held (Dawkes 2015). The outreach programme also included visits to the site by local schools (over 200 pupils attended), which entailed site tours and handling sessions with finds and environmental materials. Feedback from a visitor survey indicated that people appreciated the opportunity to visit the site and learn more about the depth of history on their doorstep, and developed a deeper understanding of the process and complexity of archaeological investigation (L. Rayner, pers. comm.).

The excavation revealed settlement from the prehistoric to the Tudor period, including an Iron Age enclosed settlement, the first evidence of the Saxon settlement of Eastbourne, medieval occupation and an impressive large stone-built Tudor Hall. Following post-excavation analysis of 6000 excavated contexts, 500 registered finds and 250 environmental samples (Dawkes 2015), an academic monograph will be published on the findings of the excavation set in their local and regional context.



Figure 10.1: Visitors to an open day being shown the post-built Saxon building. Photo reproduced with kind permission of Archaeology South-East.

contractor and consultant on behalf of the client for approval by the local planning authority drawing on appropriate archaeological advice (CIFA 2014). These documents set out the research objectives of the exercise and define the methodologies that need to be employed (and hence help to set the timetable and budget). It is at this point that some larger, longer-running archaeological projects are designed to include opportunities for public engagement and outreach, particularly where the public value of an engagement programme can be demonstrated

or is felt to be self-evident. Although most work is closely restricted to the boundaries of an individual development project, there is also some scope for project work to embrace wider research goals on larger infrastructure projects where whole landscapes are explored. In the case of projects that cross authority borders, planning conditions are set by the government's Planning Inspectorate.

On completion of fieldwork, a programme of analysis is prepared. An initial review of the quality, quantity and significance of the archaeological data recovered is set out in a 'post-excavation assessment' (PXA), which the local planning authority will use as the basis for agreeing on the final analytical works required to secure the discharge of any planning restrictions placed on the site (English Heritage 1991; Historic England 2015a). Post-excavation work, usually aimed at providing a descriptive narrative of landscape change, informed by the evidence of the artefacts (pottery, building material, small finds and coins), and eco-facts (human and animal bone, palaeobotanical remains, etc.), is time-consuming and can often take several years to complete. Depending on the complexity of the remains encountered, the post-excavation work can cost as much again as the field investigations, and may draw on a range of external specialist contributions (such as scientific dating). The ultimate goal of post-excavation work is the academic publication of the results and the deposition of the fieldwork archive in a local museum. Owing to their complexity, archaeologists struggle to keep these complicated work programmes on track, and a significant proportion of the work undertaken in development-led archaeology generates little in the way of publicly accessible results and materials. The greater public interest engendered by the more significant discoveries helps, however, to ensure that these are given the attention they merit.

Public engagement and outreach

Although more recent planning reforms have explored ways of adding to the range of public benefit obtained from developer-funded archaeological work (Southport Group 2011), these planning reforms have had little direct impact on the nature of commercial practice. This remains dominated by the needs of resource management, where the benefits of knowledge gain and social engagement are valued but often remain subordinate (Carver 2011). The financing and organisation of public engagement or outreach activities are hampered by several factors. The prevalence of short-duration projects resulting in ephemeral features and

finds has already been noted above. Low profit margins can lead to reluctance to fund staff training in 'peripheral' areas, such as public engagement (Aitchison 2012; Flatman 2011: 92; Southport Group 2011: 12). Clients may request confidentiality or control the release of information. For instance, confidentiality is common with 'pre-determination' works prior to a decision on planning and when construction is contested by the local community (Orange 2013). Site access may be restricted when there is heavy plant operating, demolition in progress or requirements to undergo formal inductions into safety regimes. Access may also be complicated by the shared use of a site by contractors. Unsympathetic working systems and poorly designed or non-existent public engagement strategies (Perring 2015a: 169–71) can lead to a lack of confidence in developing outreach services. Moreover, a desire to maintain professional standards can contribute to a reluctance to communicate interim findings to the public and the media before the post-excavation assessment and reporting stages of a project are concluded.

Clients may see public engagement as an unnecessary delay and expense that comes without certain outcomes. However, some clients may request outreach services; for example, the Environment Agency, the National Trust and the RSPB place a particular emphasis on engagement as part of their charitable or public sector remit. Private sector clients – for instance, those behind large-scale public utility projects and housing schemes – may view public engagement favourably for public relations reasons. In addition, some commercial companies develop their own programmes of outreach and community engagement by attracting small-scale funding from trusts and learned societies. Importantly, since 1994, National Lottery funding has provided more substantive funding that has enabled cross-sector organisations and voluntary groups to work in partnership with, and to commission, commercial firms to carry out archaeological services (see case study 10.2). It is important to note that not all public engagement work in commercial archaeology is driven by developer funding.

Not surprisingly, the number of archaeologists employed in designated engagement posts within commercial archaeological firms remains relatively small, but recently has been boosted by the Council for British Archaeology (CBA) work-based placements in community archaeology scheme, funded from the HLF's *Skills for the Future* programme from 2011 to 2015 (Bradley et al. 2015). The five-yearly survey of the archaeological profession, *Archaeology Labour Market Intelligence: Profiling the Profession*, recorded fifteen education and outreach posts in the latest report covering the period 2012–13. Females held 67 per cent of posts

Case study 10.2: The restoration of Carwynnen Quoit Project

In 2012, the Sustainable Trust, an educational charity based in Cornwall, contracted the Cornwall Archaeological Unit (CAU), Cornwall Council, to deliver a series of excavations at the site of a collapsed prehistoric monument known as Carwynnen Quoit. The monument is a Scheduled Ancient Monument (no. 396) comprising three granite uprights and a 9.8-tonne granite capstone, and belongs to a type of monument known as a portal dolmen, dating to the Early Neolithic. With a grant from the Heritage Lottery Fund (HLF), the Trust purchased the land surrounding the quoit in 2009. With further funding from HLF, local trusts, societies and private bequests, the Trust formed a partnership with the Cornwall Heritage Trust and the Cornwall Archaeological Society to restore the monument (Sustainable Trust 2014).

CAU was established as a charity in 1975 and became part of the local authority in 1988. With about twenty staff and an annual turnover of projects worth on average £1 million per year (J. Nowakowski, pers. comm.), the unit has responsibility for recording, conserving, presenting and interpreting the historic environment across Cornwall and the Isles of Scilly. CAU carries out a wide variety of archaeological projects including conservation management, aerial mapping, heritage audits, heritage assessments, historic building recording, excavations, evaluations, interpretation and research (CAU 2017). Over the last seven years, the unit has been actively developing community archaeology, which forms an increasingly significant part of its project portfolio (J. Nowakowski pers. comm.).

On this project, CAU's role was to develop and direct a series of community training excavations in order to establish how the monument should be reassembled – a requirement of the restoration licence from English Heritage (now Historic England). In 2012, CAU ran a test-pitting exercise as part of preliminary investigations followed by an open-area excavation. Up to forty-five people, with varying levels of experience, were given training in excavation, recording, illustration, finds processing and cataloguing. The excavations uncovered the partial survival of a granite stone and quartz pavement on the footprint of the original monument, the socket holes for the granite uprights, Neolithic and later pottery, many burnt and broken flint tools, a partially finished greenstone axe, some other worked stones items, a quern fragment and a hammerstone. The objects ranged in date from the Early Neolithic to the Bronze Age and later, showing

a long history of engagement and interest throughout prehistory (Sustainable Trust 2014: 7, 9).

The restoration work was completed in June 2014 when the capstone was lowered into position onto the three reinstated uprights by a large crane – an event that was watched by a crowd of over 600 people (see www.giantsquoit.org). In 2014, the project won the Council for British Archaeology's Marsh Award for Community Archaeology.



Figure 10.2: The capstone in position hovering over uprights on Midsummer Day 2014. Photo reproduced with the kind permission of Jacky Nowakowski.

and 93 per cent of posts were funded through established income. Salaries ranged from £15,000 to £40,500 and the average salary was £21,559. Job titles included variations on the words 'Community', 'Education', 'Outreach', 'Interpret', 'Access', 'Exploring' and 'Heritage' (Aitchison and Rocks-Macqueen 2013: 54, 179). The small number of designated outreach staff means that public engagement services are regularly carried out by staff whose main specialism(s) or focus of work lies in other areas. In consequence, engagement is an area that many

professional archaeologists have had ad hoc experience in, but it is perceived by some to be a non-archaeological skill (Orange 2013).

The types of outreach and engagement activities that commercial firms deliver cover a 'spectrum of public involvement' (Kador 2014: 35), and could include informal conversations that take place when members of the public walk past a team conducting fieldwork, as well as multifaceted community archaeology programmes where members of the public can gain experience by working alongside trained archaeologists. A survey of commercial archaeology in the UK by Orange (2013) found that common engagement activities included giving talks to societies and other groups, publishing, hosting open days, communicating with the media, working with the media and facilitating work with volunteers and work experience placements. It should be noted that many professional archaeologists give up their own time to deliver public engagement outside of working hours.

Digital public engagement is also a burgeoning area of practice (Richardson 2013) and the use of web technology and social media has provided a valuable mechanism for distributing news and project updates to different public audiences. Archaeologists working in the commercial sector have contributed to the successful annual blogging carnival Day of Archaeology (Richardson 2014) and some archaeologists share details of their work informally on their personal social media platforms. The posting of project updates on company platforms has become increasingly common, but may be constrained by client confidentiality and a lack of staff time; however, digital archaeology is also seen as a useful marketing tool for archaeological firms seeking to establish new business and contacts (Orange 2013). Furthermore, digital archaeology can help to create and maintain relationships between commercial companies and public audiences. Commercial projects operate within communities on a time-limited basis and the formulation of exit strategies at project end are easily omitted from project designs. The identification and digital dissemination of information on different opportunities at local, regional and national levels can help to create progression routes that redirect and maintain public interest in archaeological participation.

Data and evaluation

Public engagement is usually well intentioned but is it always effective? Does it offer long-lived impact and meaningful collaboration with professional archaeologists? In one study, Simpson and Williams suggested

that the 'ideals of community archaeology programmes, both in the US and the UK, often do not match expectations for the practical and perceived benefits for the communities' (2008: 86). To better understand the contribution of the commercial sector to public life further data is needed, including empirical data on the types of audiences that stand to benefit most from interaction with commercial firms, and the engagement activities that are most valued by different public audiences. With such data, commercial companies will be better positioned to advocate for public engagement during discussions with clients and will be able to draw on evidence when seeking to shape regional and national policies. Standardised recording of public engagement is lacking across the sector and a competitive instinct perhaps hinders the sharing of public engagement failures, and hence the opportunity to learn lessons (Heaton 2014: 256).

Conclusion

The commercial sector provides a direct link between development and community and its potential to serve public interest is clear. The sector's foremost concern, however, is the delivery of tangible, closely defined and measurable outcomes that enable developers to comply with the conditions set on a grant of planning permission. These stand in contrast to more indistinct aspirations that enter debate on social engagement, as Perring notes, 'the politically fashionable goals of social cohesion and environmental wellbeing, adding values to our understanding and use of space and place' (2015b: 193). As such, the margin between professional practice and the public realm undergoes intermittent, rather than regular, permeation. When contractual stars align, public engagement can be given fuller reign (as our case studies illustrate), but it otherwise continues to be small-scale or incumbent on the goodwill of archaeologists to give their own time to it.

Too frequently public engagement and outreach are pushed to the margins of practice, treated as 'add-on' aspects, rather than central to, and embedded within, professional services. There is a disciplinary tension between archaeologists as managers of a resource (Fowler 2006: 1), as technicians providing a pre-construction service to developers (Lucas 2006: 21), and as translators and communicators striving to convert discovery into understanding through original research and accessible forms of presentation (Perring 2016: 95). The gulf between vision and reality is not new. In 2006, Parker Pearson and Pryor drew

attention to the fact that ‘What we would like to do and what we end up doing are often two different things, because of pressures of time and limits of funds’ (2006: 316). It is important to remember, however, that commercial archaeology depends on the idea that development-led investigations provide some form of public benefit. In many cases, outreach and social engagement can provide clearer and more tangible benefit than the marginal knowledge gain that might emerge from the academic publication of findings.

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Abbreviations

ASE:	Archaeology South-East
CAU:	Cornwall Archaeological Unit
CBA:	Council for British Archaeology
CIFA:	Chartered Institute for Archaeologists
DCLG:	Department for Communities and Local Government
DoE:	Department of the Environment
HLF:	Heritage Lottery Fund