

Archaeologist Shortage

“There is a shortage of archaeological companies willing to match the level of skill, education and professionalism of staff with appropriate remuneration, improved conditions and decent contracts”

A Response

Diggers Forum welcomes the report by Historic England into the ‘Shortage of trained archaeologists’, which has brought national attention to a problem we have long been pointing out. However the report contains a glaring omission: the reason for this ‘shortage’. There is in fact not a shortage of trained archaeologists in the UK. There is a shortage of archaeological companies willing to match the level of skill, education and professionalism of staff with appropriate remuneration, improved conditions and decent contracts. This has led to a drain of trained staff which over the last few years has felt more like a flood. Simply put, archaeologists on all grades are not paid enough, do not have enough job security and have to put up with such poor conditions when in work that they are forced out into other jobs.

There are hundreds of highly trained professional archaeologists who left the profession either during the recession or over the last few years of minimal growth who understandably will not return to a life of low pay, poor conditions and short term contracts (4792 archaeologists in 2012/13 compared to 6865 in 2007/8- a drop of 30% (Aitchison and Rocks-Mcqueen 2013: 10)). There are hundreds of career entrants who leave after less than five years in order to obtain a more stable, higher paid job outside of the profession, with studies repeatedly showing a high attrition rate within the 25-30 age group. The most recent survey of the profession (Aitchison and Rocks-Mcqueen 2013: 13) found that, potentially as a result of this exodus, there are significant skills shortages and skills gaps across the profession in fieldwork, post-excavation analysis and project management.

Diggers Forum sees these major infrastructure projects not only as an opportunity to enhance our understanding of the archaeology of the UK but also as the catalyst for change. A higher, and sustained, demand for archaeological services over the period envisaged by the report gives us an opportunity to reform the way we operate both in terms of respect and reward to enable the high quality results we should be striving for.



It is vitally important that we learn lessons from the past. Archaeological companies providing services to national infrastructure projects should not flood the market with cheap, untrained, inexperienced staff, in order to drive down prices in order to be 'competitive' on price, rather than quality or service. If this happens upon the impending HS2 and other large projects, then we face a bleak future once these projects are over. Companies will not be able to sustain staffing levels, and again thousands of archaeologists will be forced out to seek higher paid, more secure jobs outside of archaeology, which will inevitably lead to a second skills gap in the profession.

Archaeologists should be remunerated correctly for their skill. Companies should be worried that their experienced, professional staff might be employed on a better wage by another company. Companies should be investing in their workforce to ensure they are well trained and well-motivated to complete their work. Employees should take advantage of this known and now well publicised 'shortage' to push, through the unions and CIfA, for higher wages and higher standards. This is particularly true of those in ACIfA level posts (supervisors and project officers) who, in the latest JIBA report for CIfA (The Archaeologist Autumn 2015) have been shown to be those most at risk of being paid below even the minima set by CIfA and BAJR. With these individuals being the most in demand, it should be them who are seeing the greatest benefit of the 'shortage'. It should certainly not be a strain for them to be paid at or above the CIfA recommended minimum level.

The recession was widely, and perhaps rightly, blamed for the freeze on wages and the tightening of company belts. This vast increase in work should be an opportunity for the archaeological employers to make up for that lost time, both for their companies and for their employees. If we do not fight now to raise the level of pay to CIfA Recommended Starting Salary (RSS) then we will continue to see talented skilled professionals leave commercial archaeology, a scenario which, as the HE report demonstrates, causes a great many issues.

