

Curating public benefit and the power of ‘Once upon a time...’

BRUCE MANN MCIFA, ABERDEENSHIRE COUNCIL ARCHAEOLOGY SERVICE AND ALGAO UK VICE-CHAIR



Mesolithic Deeside Community Project, Aberdeenshire – connecting communities with researchers and commercial archaeologists, and developing local voluntary projects based on new knowledge gained (Copyright Cameron Archaeology Ltd)

The local authority archaeologist’s curatorial role is one confronted by daily questions. Questions arising from understanding the needs of a developer, questions from those undertaking mitigation works, questions of how to connect one discovery with larger regional and national narratives. Even the most difficult of questions – what to save and what to let go.

As a profession we are determined to do the best possible job, our work underpinned by the standards set by the Institute. It’s why we have strived to becoming chartered. I am frequently impressed by the dedication of the circa 6,800 archaeologists employed in the UK, their efforts in going ‘above and beyond’ are often not appreciated. As a sector we don’t stop innovating and improving, continually pushing the boundaries of science-based techniques, new technologies, and the frameworks we work within. We do all of this because we are passionate about our work, our collective discoveries, and the unfolding of our shared history.

As a profession, we can be proud of our combined contributions to the advancement of our understanding of the past. Indeed, archaeology itself goes ‘above and beyond’ as it informs ever wider issues ranging from climate change to public health and wellbeing. Even the economy benefits, with commercial archaeology

alone contributing £239 million last year. The scale of benefits is significant, if a little daunting.

However, we often fall short at the other end of the scale. National headlines can be generated through the discovery of an intact chariot grave, a hoard of coins, or evidence of the Romans on campaign. Local headlines may be generated by the discovery of a lost industrial building or a prehistoric roundhouse. Rarely is anything mentioned of the isolated pit found ahead of a small housing development, and that’s where we’re missing a trick.

As a profession we create narratives about the past, answering the journalistic benchmark of who, what, when, where and why. These narratives can be long and complex, covering entire landscapes, or they can be short and simple, focusing on a single moment in time. Take my example of a pit found ahead of a housing development. As archaeologists we will have seen countless pits during our careers. Does the digging of one more add anything to our academic understanding of them? Probably not. Would the residents of the new housing development go and look up the grey literature report on what was found? Probably not.

However, present the story to them of how that pit was dated to the Neolithic, that it was dug by the first farmers, and explain the context of what the land around them looked like and how society functioned back then, and you suddenly have a narrative that will interest and engage. The new house owners can travel back in time by simply connecting them to what was found underneath their feet. All it would take is a two-page glossy summary included in the developer’s welcome pack, and additional public value is immediately added to the discovery. Connect the pit to a wider research framework, where commercial archaeology provides randomised sampling of the landscape, and entire communities can learn with us how our understanding of the past expands and changes with each new discovery.

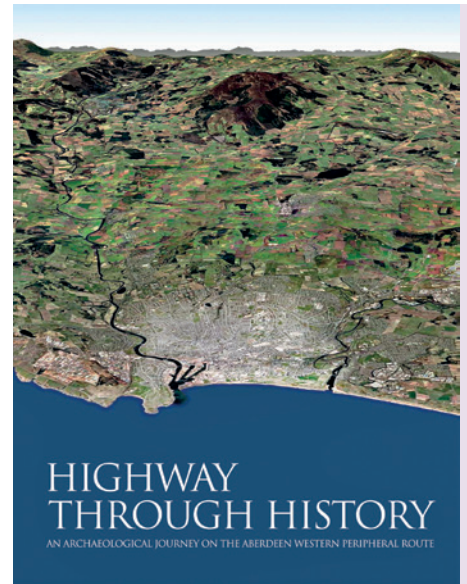
This is the crux to the answer we’re looking for when we ask, ‘Why are we doing what we do?’ We do it not to understand and explain the narrative of our history just for our own elitist satisfaction, but rather so that we can help everyone understand their past. Public engagement is critical to our profession, for without their support and interest there are no legacies from what we do. The primary reason that archaeology and heritage is in the planning system in first place, following its long journey

from the post-World War II rescue days, is because the public told our politicians that it was of value and must be recorded before it was lost. If we don't communicate the stories we unearth, we undermine the benefits we must deliver as part of our public responsibility, and we shouldn't limit ourselves to just sharing the big discoveries. The values of the narratives are relative; the story of a pit underneath a person's house will have more meaning to them than any story about a nationally important coin hoard found in a different part of the country.

I'll hold my hand up at this point and confess that I regularly fail to practise what I preach. While we have a completion rate of over 99 per cent for developer-led archaeology projects, few watching-briefs, evaluations or excavations will have had their results shared with the immediate local community other than via the Historic Environment Record. Even fewer members of the public will have heard why the excavations happened in the first place. I won't have told anyone in the community that the repurposed old buildings, drystone walls of former field boundaries or other surviving historic assets included in their new housing estate are a result of hard-fought negotiations at the pre-planning stage, or indeed the reasons why I fought for them in the first place. The contributions that individual local sites make to regional or national synthesis are obscured by appearing in specialised publications that emerge long after the memory of the original excavations has faded. The box of finds lies safely tucked away in a museum store, available for future study but never displayed in the location they were found.

For decades now the profession has of course undertaken hugely successful public engagement projects. The live television event of the raising of the *Mary Rose* still resonates with me from my childhood. It is time though for a step change in our approach. We should take traditional mechanisms of open days, public lectures, press releases and publications, and combine them with the opportunities offered by social media, live streaming, 3D printing, virtual reality and eco-museums. Even start at the basic level tomorrow by not only taking photographs of trench sections and features, but also action shots of your colleagues working. Connect the story of what is being found to the people making the finds – marketing and media will always thank you afterwards. We should consider as standard the production of primary dissemination of information in traditional reports alongside secondary dissemination of information to the public in innovative ways. Academia and commercial archaeology should engage more to construct the contextual narratives around discoveries.

Collectively we should aim to tell each and every archaeological story we unearth to the local community. By doing that we place our profession at the heart of place-making. We're not just a transient good news story about discovery, but rather a science that meaningfully contributes every day to people's lives.



Aberdeen Western Peripheral Route – free booklet for the public explaining what was found, and how it was found, during the construction of the bypass (Copyright Headland Archaeology Ltd)



Victoria Primary School, Newhaven – mural painted by the children to celebrate the 2015 discovery by AOC Archaeology Ltd of the 'Newhaven Pirate' (Copyright John Lawson, Edinburgh City Council)