

Think piece for the re-imagining Scottish Archaeology workshops

Delivery: Putting public benefit at the heart of what we do

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All excavations funded by the public purse should have at their heart public benefit

Public benefit is more important than knowledge generation and preservation by record because these traditional pillars of archaeological fieldwork cannot deliver meaningful, sustainable, transformative social benefits.

Public benefit also cannot be maximised through short-term community engagement. In most cases this won't foster long-term positive changes to people, communities, buildings, and places. In some cases it can do more harm than good.

A focus on delivering public benefit *in all we do* as archaeologists is also key to sustaining the profession but in order to do this, as these workshops explore, we need to transform the ways we operate as a sector.

This must include transforming expectations of what we do and raising expectations about what we can do.

How? We need to reconfigure expectations and requirements set out in the planning and tendering process for developments. We need to be seen to be doing more that directly benefits the public with the privileged position we have within the system. Huge amounts of money are spent on excavations each year in Scotland (although relatively speaking these are small proportions of overall expenditure). Currently many funders don't care what we do as long as we do it quickly and cheaply.

The majority of excavations are undertaken within the commercial sector and I want to emphasise I am not being critical of that sector. It operates within a competitive environment where, for the most part, value for money and lowering costs, are given primacy over encouraging innovation, creativity, and risk-taking. Commercial heritage businesses and professionals do a better job than ever in terms of quality and community engagement – but this does not mean that we cannot do much more in terms of public benefit, raising the profile of the sector, and ensuring resilience into a complex future.

University-led fieldwork projects could also do much more in this respect, but exist within a different funding dynamic and form a significantly smaller proportion of fieldwork and so have much fewer opportunities to generate impact at the trowel's edge. The commercial sector, through its scale and reach, should be viewed as a fundamental driver of social change and a force for good in Scottish

society but as things stand most people don't even know how the system works. We need push back against 'destruction' tropes, and demonstrate the creative power of excavation.

But transformation will not be happen unless we make it happen. This has to be done through evidence-based arguments, examples of best practice, and much better communication. Archaeological fieldwork must include funding for, and then delivery of, elements that will transparently and demonstrably place archaeology at the centre of any new development, for the benefit of the users and communities impacted by the development.

To explore challenges and opportunities around public benefit, I want to focus on a specific category of archaeological work – evaluations and excavations ahead of school development projects.

Since the establishment of the Scottish Parliament in 1999, successive Scottish governments have overseen a massive school building and refurbishment project. In that period, initiatives such as Scotland's Schools for the Future¹ programme have committed billions of pounds of largely public expenditure (both national and local government) on this endeavour. During the period 2007 to 2019 over 900 schools across Scotland have been completely refurbished or new school buildings constructed². 118 school development projects delivered by the Scottish Futures Trust on behalf of the Scottish government involved £1.8 million of investment alone.

As we know in the heritage sector, each of these new build schools requires an archaeological evaluation. Recently University of Glasgow student Mar Roige Oliver carried out research on the archaeological and social benefits of some of this work. She looked at 116 schools across Scotland where development happened since 1999 and found 60 (53%) resulted in the discovery of archaeological features. I have not been able to quantify the cost of these archaeological interventions yet, but it would be fair to put the total investment in the £millions.

The archaeological knowledge generated here is clear. A Roman temporary camp found in advance of construction of the new Ayr Academy. Neolithic and Anglian timber halls on the site of the new Lockerbie Academy buildings. A medieval settlement site found as Kinross High School was being built. Sites and material from the last 6,000 years have been found.

But what about the benefit to the school communities? Mar and I contacted various schools and teachers to ask them about awareness of excavation results. There was very low awareness of even significant archaeological discoveries. My old school, Larkhall Academy, was rebuilt in 2006 and during

¹ <https://www.scottishfuturestrust.org.uk/page/current-schools-for-the-future>

² <https://www.gov.scot/news/new-schools-and-campus-for-scotland/>

that work a Neolithic pit cluster was identified³ in a location I used to walk across every day to get to school. It is now under the new building. I spoke to staff and they knew nothing about this.

Results of these excavations are generally published promptly, professionally, and some are even available open access online. But these are almost all written in technical language, and it remains unclear how pro-actively these reports are shared with teachers. None of this makes any impression on school webpages or social media.

In other words, a huge amount of archaeological work has been done, at taxpayers' expense, but pupils, teachers, and parents are in almost all cases not benefitting.

If we do not make the most of what we do, why should we expect others to? Funders do not seem to see the social value of this work. There is nothing on the Scotland's Future Trust website about archaeology and heritage. Nowhere does the Scottish government make a virtue of the rich range of archaeological discoveries they have in effect funded at great cost through school building programmes alone.

Archaeology has become relegated to a behind-the-scenes tasks that needs to be endured like ground improvement and de-toxification works.

But archaeology is not and should not be regarded as an obstacle to development. Archaeology is not a burden like polluted ground.

It offers the opportunity to discover exciting things about the recent and ancient past, and should be celebrated as an integral part of the development process by both clients and heritage professionals. Archaeology can and should add value to the development process.

Yet currently archaeological work done in advance of school construction projects, despite being largely paid for by the taxpayer, only benefit academic archaeologists, heritage managers, and the commercial units who undertake the work. The archaeological information and new sites discovered may 'enhance the record' but they play no role in enhancing the life of the school communities where those discoveries were made.

Examples of pre-development excavation results becoming part of the life of a school are very rare indeed. At Crieff High School and adjacent primary school discoveries such as a cursus monument and cremation cemetery have been highlighted as part of an archaeology trail in the playground and used

³ <https://canmore.org.uk/site/283916/larkhall-academy>

in the classroom⁴. Yet this initiative was driven by a local enthusiast and the headteacher, an opportunistic unplanned outcome of major developer-funded excavations. This has been a labour of love but shows what should be possible across scores of schools with the right investment and in a context where such creativity is a fully-funded industry standard, not an unexpected bonus.

Current practice in the sector *has* shifted towards 'community archaeology' and this is to be welcomed. But I would argue that we need to move beyond tokenistic methods of public engagement and interaction. Budgets just now can be made to cover public talks, posters, social media dissemination, school visits, open access versions of excavation reports, exhibitions, and even workshops.

But we know these measures mostly reach a self-selecting audience of the 'usual suspects', are not sustainable, and are often passive. Furthermore, little or no mechanisms are in place as standard to measure the impact of archaeological excavations in advance of developments. We have no real sense of how the public engage with online materials, whether that be a tweet, blog post, or pdf of a data structure report.

Budgets do not currently stretch for the most part to truly sustainable, transformative, long term interventions in communities and in the developments our work precedes.

Schools are indicative of broader problems and opportunities within the sector that I hope these workshops will address.

How do we ensure the resilience of the sector in the face of growing social and economic pressures? What do we need to do to make sure that archaeology is viewed as a necessary and beneficial part of the development process, and not a burden on economic development as the Tories will surely come round to branding our role in the planning process? In what ways do we measure the social value of archaeology? Surely this cannot simply be demonstrated by dusty boxes of stuff, dots on distribution maps, obscure technical reports, and short-term one-off community events?

How do we move forward? Practice-based research is urgently needed to understand the impact of developer-funded archaeology in Scotland since its inception. Not just in terms of knowledge gained as in the recent Darvill et al volume⁵. But also, measuring actual and potential social benefit, documenting public engagement practices (or lack thereof), and analysing long-term impact of developer-funded archaeological fieldwork projects.

⁴ <https://www.thecourier.co.uk/fp/news/local/perth-kinross/980006/perthshire-towns-invisible-history-is-rediscovered-with-new-archaeology-trail/>

⁵ *Archaeology in the PPG16 Era: Investigations in England 1990-2010*, Oxford: Oxbow Books.

Schools would be a good place to start, a manageable dataset in terms of quantifying and documenting practices, outputs, and outcomes since, say, 1990. Exemplars could be identified, events and workshops held in schools like Lockerbie and Larkhall, materials co-produced to show what is possible, recommendations made for future practice. Another £1 billion of funding for school improvements has recently been announced through the Learning Estate Investment Programme⁶. We need to proactively propose the rules of engagement for all future archaeological aspects of this programme.

What if every tender for work at a school development included a requirement as a basic minimum for discoveries made during evaluations and excavations to become beneficial to the school community? Education resources co-produced with teachers as standard. Accessible content for school websites and social media. Recommendations made for school building design to include details from the excavation, from artwork, to names of rooms, to markers in the building atop locations of past activity. Bespoke archaeological information that could transform the school building and the identity of the school. If you want to know about how this can work, ask staff, pupils, and parents, at the Amesbury Archer Primary School, Wiltshire⁷, who have the slogan 'Aim High'.

Such requirements could and should become part of the planning and tendering process for other types of development as standard, in the public and private sector.

Each excavation in advance of a hospital or health centre should generate outputs and outcomes that will benefit patients, staff and visitors.

Each excavation in advance of housing construction should generate outputs and outcomes that benefit, educate, inform, and invigorate the people who will live in those houses.

Each excavation in advance of a road development should generate resources that benefit communities: along that road, by-passed by that road, connected to the grid by that road.

Of course, in some cases nothing will be found. But that is the same risk inherent in all evaluations. We know how to cost risk and mitigate for it.

As a sector we do well within our current constraints. But risk being squeezed into irrelevance, and acquiescence to the current system is not sustainable.

Changing expectations of what archaeology can do for public benefit can only happen through a unified approach, HES leadership, research, and evidence-based examples that demonstrates the

⁶ <https://www.gov.scot/publications/scotlands-learning-estate-strategy-connecting-people-places-learning/>

⁷ <https://www.amesburyarcher.wilts.sch.uk/>

benefits, opportunities, and social necessity of archaeology as set out in *Scotland's Archaeology Strategy*.

The resilience of our sector, and the future of our shared past, depends on our collegiate ability to argue for archaeology – and excavation - as a force for good. Not something to be consigned to the background and spreadsheets. But an integral part of the future of our communities.