

REFLECTIONS ON ARCHAEOLOGY, BRITISH ACADEMY, 29 MARCH 2017

SAL VIEW

Nature of SAL

The Society of Antiquaries is a charity whose purpose is to promote understanding and appreciation of the human past through the study of its material remains. Currently there are just over 3,000 Fellows who are elected in recognition of their knowledge and expertise. From its inception in 1707 the Society has embodied a wide range of historic disciplines – currently including art and architectural history, archives, and heraldry as well as archaeology – and our Fellows represent a wide cross section of the heritage sector: academics, professionals in the charitable and public sectors and in commercial organisations such as auction houses and archaeological units, as well as members of amateur and local societies. So it is fair to say that we represent a broad constituency of expert knowledge and opinion.

As a 21st-century charity the Society is required to deliver public rather than private benefit. The Society supports the Fellowship and others in delivering public benefit by giving conservation and research grants, and by communicating the resulting knowledge to a wide and varied audience. In turn Fellows support delivery of our charitable aims through their subscriptions, but also by drawing on their knowledge and understanding to contribute to publications, participate in lectures and seminars, and to mount exhibitions and other events. All of this is facilitated by access to our major library, the largest and most important of its kind in the country, our museum collections, and our property at Kelmscott Manor, the summer home of William Morris.

The delivery of public benefit, rooted in a tradition of research excellence, is thus a central concern of the Society and something which we have been actively promoting in recent years. In doing this we celebrate – and regard as a strength – our diversity of interests.

Strengths of Archaeology in UK

By historical standards we have large and broad academic and professional sectors, the latter (for now) embedded within a commercial market by planning policy and legislation, and a commitment to high standards of training and expertise. Consequent upon this, we have a jobs market and something approaching a career structure for university graduates, and a framework of professional organisation and accreditation through ClfA.

New technologies allow us to address research agendas barely dreamed of a generation ago (biomolecular, scientific dating, GIS, big data, remote sensing) and to engage and communicate widely and immediately in new ways.

Much more important, though, is the extraordinarily wide and deep community of public interest and engagement with the past that exists across the UK. This is evident in many ways: the appetite for TV documentaries; and for exhibitions, public lectures and popular history/archaeology publications; the numbers of paying visitors

to National Trust and English Heritage properties; the success of crowdfunding and community heritage ventures (eg supported by HLF such as CITiZAN project: national community-based network established to monitor, record, and interpret coastal and intertidal sites); in the popularity of metal-detecting; and in the enquiries about public participation that any archaeology or heritage project generates.

Challenges facing Archaeology in UK

We think that archaeology is currently perceived as niche and segmented, and feel that this is not altogether inaccurate. There is a lack of vision and leadership in our discipline resulting in an inability to act cohesively. Organisations all have separate agendas and vested interests to protect; tensions exist between academic, commercial and local authority sectors, and between these and the independent sector. Attempts have been made to address this – The Archaeology Forum (TAF), The All Party Archaeology Group (APAG) and the Heritage Alliance – but despite this our voice is not heard as we would like.

We don't believe that archaeology necessarily needs a single champion, but it has to speak with a common voice, informed by shared values and recognising the breadth and diversity of our constituency. It is difficult to see that this would need some new body when there are already so many whose remit is ostensibly to link-up across the sector and speak for the discipline, but it does need changes in attitude, some of which may be uncomfortable.

In our opinion there is a tendency to take a narrow and inward-looking view, defining archaeology methodologically (ie in terms of techniques such as excavation or field survey) rather than, in the antiquarian sense, as a more inclusive domain that embraces study of all aspects of the material past – from material culture items (including manuscripts and books) to architecture to landscapes. Very often in all this, especially in planning and commercial archaeology, we lose sight of the reason for doing archaeology – to get back to past lives and the human story – and become focussed on practice and process with the result (too often in commercial archaeology) that it becomes a tick-box exercise with little wider intellectual and public value.

The Society considers that greater investment in partnerships between the academic and commercial sectors could make a material difference here. Although there are notable exceptions, such partnerships have not been facilitated by current structures and practices. The Society expressed its views on this recently in its response to national consultation on the future of Local Government Archaeology Services (the Redesdale/Howell Report).

We think that there would be substantial benefit from re-structuring such services on a regional basis. Regional groupings of services would embody a critical mass of expertise, offer economies of scale, and act as centres of professional excellence and as focal points for both academic and third sector involvement. Fewer, regional, HERs with a single data structure would allow broad research questions to be addressed and enable the protection of heritage assets to be considered within a framework of local, regional and national research priorities, giving a clearer understanding of significance and re-connecting it with place.

The preservation and recording of archaeological remains as part of the planning and development process are undertaken for wider public benefit. The real challenge, and one that if tackled successfully has potential to help secure archaeology's long-term future – if not the future of some of its institutions or vested interests – is to mobilise the breadth and depth of public interest and support, recognising that there is an appetite and expectation out there which needs to be met in a mature way that emphasises the common social relevance of what we do and genuinely shares and fosters expertise and insight (not just a packaged heritage experience or a participatory experience handed-down by a professional in community engagement). This requires some modesty from professional and academic practitioners, who need to recognise that the public audience, although it may not necessarily have their specialist knowledge and understanding, consists of individuals who are well-educated, experienced, questioning and expert in other areas. Even some 12-year-olds know a great deal.

As an example of where we are now: while the current commercial regime has undoubtedly been beneficial in many respects, a greatly increased number of excavations offers fewer and fewer chances for volunteers to get involved. We need to look hard at the financial race to the bottom and the aspects of competitive tendering that make it near-impossible to tap into volunteer labour in commercial fieldwork. Commercial site practice isn't so universally excellent that it can afford to sniff at the able amateur, and parachuting in a commercial team (divorcing practice from an understanding of place) does little or nothing to engage those locally who are sympathetic and interested.

Engaging genuinely and meaningfully with the broader public constituency that values and wants to be engaged in the study of the past is the way to ensure that archaeology – in its broadest sense – thrives long-term. Embracing and building an informed and engaged community of interest will help promote and consolidate wider understanding and advocacy of archaeology's public value, and this in turn will embed an understanding of the importance of the historic environment in the electorate. It will also increase capacity. Commercial and academic sectors need to consider the possibility that as resources diminish significant work will increasingly be done by crowd-sourcing, public programmes and volunteer initiatives, and to see the positives in this rather than threats to current hierarchies.

So in conclusion: the Society considers that in thinking about the future we need to move beyond addressing the potential changes to the status quo that currently face some segments of the profession (Brexit, pressures on universities and Local Planning Authorities) and face up to broader challenges. In the Society's view the discipline as a whole needs to up its game in taking a genuinely open, inclusive and forward-looking relationship with those who pay for it. In not doing this to date the Society is as much to blame as other parties. We were once the leading body for archaeology but have not kept sufficiently engaged as archaeology and heritage have developed and changed. Looking forward, though, we welcome the opportunity to engage the Society's collective expertise and independent perspective in helping shape a fresh vision for our discipline.