

# Archaeology and Covid-19 in Scotland – resilience and recovery

*Kenneth Aitchison & Andrew Heald*

**Abstract** – In Scottish politics, Health and Culture are both devolved matters, which means that policies in these areas are the responsibility of the Scottish Government, not the United Kingdom's. Accordingly, the Scottish archaeological sector has developed a distinctive, strategic approach to archaeology, as presented in Scotland's Archaeology Strategy (2015). This paper reviews how this policy nexus and strategic approach have been tested by the Covid-19 pandemic, firstly by exploring how the commercial archaeology sector in Scotland responded from the earliest days of the pandemic in order to protect lives and livelihoods, in an environment where lockdowns and furlough had to be balanced against the needs of clients to continue to deliver crucial construction projects. The paper will then examine the political impact and consequences of the ways that commercial archaeology has continued to work hand-in-hand with the public sector to ensure recovery through delivering Scotland's Archaeology Strategy, looking at how this model approach is matched against Scotland's National Performance Framework (which in turn is linked to the UN's Sustainable Development Goals).

**Key words** – archaeology; Scotland; Covid-19; development-led archaeology; commercial archaeology; sustainable development

**Titel** – Archäologie und die Covid-19 Pandemie in Schottland - Widerstandsfähigkeit und Erholung

**Zusammenfassung** – In der schottischen Politik sind die Bereiche Gesundheit und Kultur beide dezentralisiert, was bedeutet, dass die Politik in diesen Bereichen in der Verantwortung der schottischen Regierung liegt und nicht in der des Vereinigten Königreichs. Dementsprechend hat der schottische archäologische Sektor einen eigenen strategischen Ansatz für die Archäologie entwickelt, der in der schottischen Archäologiestrategie (2015) vorgestellt wurde. In diesem Aufsatz wird untersucht, wie diese politische Verknüpfung und dieser strategische Ansatz durch die Covid-19-Pandemie auf die Probe gestellt wurden, indem zunächst untersucht wird, wie die privatwirtschaftliche Archäologie in Schottland von den ersten Tagen der Pandemie an reagierte, um Leben und Existenzen zu schützen, und zwar in einem Umfeld, in dem Schließungen und Urlaube gegen die Bedürfnisse der Kunden abgewogen werden mussten, um weiterhin wichtige Bauprojekte durchzuführen. Der Beitrag wird dann die politischen Auswirkungen und Konsequenzen der Art und Weise untersuchen, wie die privatwirtschaftliche Archäologie weiterhin Hand in Hand mit dem öffentlichen Sektor gearbeitet hat, um den Wiederaufbau durch die Umsetzung der schottischen Archäologiestrategie zu gewährleisten. Dabei wird untersucht, wie dieser modellhafte Ansatz mit dem nationalen Leistungsrahmen Schottlands (der wiederum mit den Zielen für nachhaltige Entwicklung der Vereinten Nationen verknüpft ist) in Einklang steht.

**Schlagwörter** – Archäologie; Schottland; Covid-19; verursacherfinanzierte Archäologie; privatwirtschaftliche Archäologie; nachhaltige Entwicklung

In Scottish politics, Health, Culture and Planning are all devolved matters, which means that policies in these areas are the responsibility of the Scottish Government, not the United Kingdom's. Accordingly, the Scottish archaeological sector has developed a distinctive, strategic approach to archaeology, as presented in 2015 in Scotland's Archaeology Strategy.<sup>1</sup>

The first COVID-19 case in Scotland was recorded on 1<sup>st</sup> March 2020.<sup>2</sup> By 28<sup>th</sup> August 2022, there had been 2.09m cases and 15,487 people had died.<sup>3</sup> In June 2020, one of the authors (Andrew Heald) spoke at the COVID Historic Environment Resilience Forum (CHERF). Describing a sector battered by the economic effects of Covid-19, in a country where all non-essential construction work had been closed down tight and early, he showed how development-led archaeology was managing to adapt to these difficult times.

The overwhelming majority of archaeologists in Scotland work in development-led and developer-funded archaeology. Most of this work is on

undesignated sites (not legally protected by being Listed Buildings or Scheduled Monuments) in which the scale, quality and significance of the archaeological site is often not fully known before it is considered through the planning process. This links it inextricably to national legislation and local policy. Development-led archaeologists are well integrated into the construction sector and often working side-by-side with other construction industries. Furthermore, many Scottish archaeological contractors are UK-wide businesses working on construction and infrastructure projects both inside and outside Scotland.

This paper examines the contribution that development-led archaeology made to Scotland's recovery from the Covid-19 pandemic that began in 2020. We are extremely positive that development-led archaeology played a major role in the country's recovery and is contributing to the Scottish Government's National Performance Framework.<sup>4</sup> Key areas considered in this document include: economic recovery, health and safety,

sustainability, celebrating our heritage, employment and innovation.

Development-led archaeology has a critical role in delivering a sustainable and green economic recovery, respecting our historic and natural environment. While archaeological fieldwork, prompted by the planning system, dramatically reduced during the Covid-19 lockdown, the Association of *Local Government Archaeological Officers: Scotland* (ALGAO: Scotland)'s members continued to offer advice to Planning Authorities about Historic Environment impacts arising from Planning applications throughout the pandemic. They also continued to work with commercial companies to ensure that archaeological fieldwork could start again with the minimum of delay once lockdown was eased.

ALGAO: Scotland members provide advice in 28 of the 32 council areas in Scotland and each council is represented by a senior archaeologist in the council employ. All members showed a good level of resilience and were able to adjust their working patterns rapidly and within a few days were able to provide continued support and advice at near normal levels. This ensured that commercial archaeological activity (which amounts to 90 %+ of all archaeological work in Scotland) was able to continue at some level.

Although a significant proportion of Scottish archaeologists were placed on furlough (leave with wages part-funded by government support) many others were able to continue to deliver essential services such as work on critical road, tram and offshore wind infrastructure projects. Even during Covid-19 archaeologists continued to contribute to the wider Scottish and UK economy. Archaeology in Scotland continued working through the pandemic. There were many development and major 'oven ready' infrastructure programmes, such as the £26.25m Transport Scotland Archaeological Framework,<sup>5</sup> which includes work on the A9 Dualling Programme between Perth and Inverness; the A96 Dualling Programme between Inverness and Aberdeen; the A9/A96 Project between Inshes and Smithton; and other discrete schemes together with the Edinburgh Tram Extension all of which were either ready to start or restart and so aided economic recovery over the short, medium and long-term. These projects also have significant economic benefit to local supply chains including heavily affected sectors such as hospitality and accommodation across the whole of Scotland, particularly in rural areas.

Rightly, health and safety was everyone's primary focus under the pandemic. From March 2020,

development-led archaeology followed all Scottish Government requirements, together with heeding advice from the *Chartered Institute for Archaeologists* (CIfA), the *Federation of Archaeological Managers and Employers* (FAME) and the Prospect trade union in order to protect lives and livelihoods. The Scottish Government's Coronavirus (COVID-19): construction sector guidance<sup>6</sup> was key to developing local safe Site Operating Procedures.

Our industry immediately initiated Covid-19 risk assessments and procedures to keep archaeology on-site projects going wherever it was safe to do so, and to ensure offices were safe places to work from. On 23<sup>rd</sup> March 2020, the First Minister called for a halt to all non-essential construction work across Scotland,<sup>7</sup> and this was implemented from 6<sup>th</sup> April 2020. This was much more comprehensive than a similar stop on construction work in England, and it led directly to a significant reduction in the amount of archaeological work being undertaken – as much of this would have taken place in parallel with other ongoing construction works. But this did not lead to the universal cessation of archaeological fieldwork. Work on construction projects that were essential continued, as well as preparatory and planning work which included opening some evaluation trenches to begin preliminary assessment in the field – which could be delivered safely, with the machine operator and archaeologists socially distancing to ensure a safe workplace for all.

It remained critical that our industry continued to adapt and adopt any necessary changes in our wide range of workplaces, particularly in relation to social distancing in the workplace and travelling to sites. The sector has spent a huge amount of time on health and safety since March 2020, particularly on active infrastructure projects, and we are happy to share this learning with the wider heritage sector so we can work together to restart the economy in a safe environment.

Development-led archaeology supports the Scottish Government's Sustainability and Climate Change agendas, particularly through work on infrastructure and energy projects. The Crown Estate Scotland three-year Corporate Plan which was published in 2020,<sup>8</sup> with renewed commitment to sustainable development and reinvigorated energy sector windfarm development, both on- and off-shore is seeing a significant push towards a sustainable economy. Development-led archaeology as a sector also looks to make continual improvements in its use of digital technology, enabling movement towards 'greener' and more sustainable ways of undertaking archaeological work.

It is taken to be a universally acknowledged truth that sustainable economic growth cannot, by definition, be achieved at the expense of shared environmental resources and this includes our heritage. Our existing curatorial systems ensured that economic development continued to always be archaeologically accountable and socially responsible when work restarted and we emerged from the pandemic conditions.

It is development-led archaeology that excavates, studies, publishes, and disseminates over 95 % of the archaeological investigations in Scotland every year. It is this archaeology that tells Scotland's archaeological story. Commercial archaeology is best placed to continue to share and celebrate the story of Scotland's past, encourage people to visit Scotland, and educate the next generation in their shared history. Many projects being worked on by the commercial sector will continue to add and elaborate new chapters to our Scottish history. Thus, developer-led archaeology will continue to contribute to key objectives of the Scottish Archaeology Strategy,<sup>9</sup> particularly Delivery Archaeology, Enhancing Understanding and Encouraging Greater Engagement.

Our sector can have a critical role to play in another government objective: getting people back to work and offering new employment opportunities. With a potential rise in unemployment that the current economic downturn will bring, our sector is very well placed to help with youth employment, new apprenticeships and future training and development. Following the Great Recession of 2008-09, and in times of public austerity (such as the 1980s, and again in the early 1990s), the sector has managed to rapidly get the number of archaeologists in work back to levels higher than before the recession. And we can do it again.

In times of crisis and recovery we need to innovate. In recent years most of the major innovations in archaeological practice have been founded (and often funded) in the development-led sector. Our sector is agile and adaptable. After the last economic downturn, we matured as a profession, worked together, shared ideas and formed new collaborative partnerships. In the coming years there will be more mature discussions of how we can collaborate and work together whereby every member of society can celebrate their heritage.

Whether it is the economy, youth employment, education or green agendas we have a huge amount of confidence in development-led archaeology's ability to contribute to our country's recovery.

There are threats to our sector - the economic consequences of the 'No Deal' Brexit, the global

impact of the Russian invasion of Ukraine and rapid rise in inflation rates being obvious ones. These will undoubtedly affect market confidence and some of our main clients may decide to defer developments or move them to other regions. But, with the pipeline of work in infrastructure, energy, forestry, extractive industries, and some housing markets the development-led archaeology sector in Scotland is feeling positive.

However, there is a threat to an often overlooked, key client group: public and third sector bodies such as Historic Environment Scotland, the National Trust for Scotland, Forestry and Land Scotland, the National Heritage Lottery Fund, and the LEADER Programme. Many organisations working in development-led archaeology rely on funding from these bodies and we don't yet know what the long-term consequences and effects of the Covid-19 pandemic on these key funding streams will be.

The archaeologists who advise local planning authorities – our archaeological curators – facilitate development work that then employs a significant number of archaeologists working for commercial companies. This supports economic growth whilst balancing our society's interest in protecting and enhancing our cultural environment. Often in times of stress thoughts are aired of reviewing processes that are (wrongly) perceived to 'hold up' development. There should be no attempt to kick start the economy in a way that contravenes our longer-term commitments to our shared heritage.

The financial value of this work has been demonstrated - every £1 spent on Local Authority Planning Archaeology leads to £15 being invested in development<sup>10</sup> – and its ability to continue to deliver in the most challenging of circumstances has been confirmed.

While the country returns to full economic engagement, there will be thousands of new archaeological finds, digital and paper records, and samples from working on Government-backed infrastructure projects. If curators and museums had been unsupported in this crisis what would have happened to these archives, finds, and results from the new work that is in the pipeline? Who else is there to use this information to embed and celebrate the results within Scottish schools?

Development-led archaeology is so much more than just facilitating or delivering planning applications for private developers and we cannot lose sight of this bigger picture in our wider sector recovery discussions. Scotland's Archaeology Strategy recognises that archaeologists work in part-

nership with developers to ensure that they are delivering public benefit, and development-led archaeology contributes directly to both Aim One of the Strategy, Delivering Archaeology and to Aim Three, Caring and Protecting. The current system, which marries decades of local authority and commercial sector expertise, is very well-placed to help Scotland recover from Covid-19 and deliver many of the Scottish Government's National Performance Framework Objectives.<sup>11</sup> Our sector is already helping with the economic recovery and will support work towards key medium and long-term objectives thereafter.

\* An earlier version of this paper was published at <https://landward.eu/blog/development-led-archaeology-and-covid-19-in-scotland/> [3.11.2023] on 20.8.2020.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Scottish Strategic Archaeology Committee (2015). Scotland's archaeology strategy. <https://web.archive.org/web/20230107174214/https://archaeologystrategy.scot/wp-content/uploads/sites/8/2015/08/ScotlandsArchaeologyStrategy.pdf> [10.12.2023].

<sup>2</sup> Coronavirus: First case is confirmed in Scotland. Scottish Financial Review, 1.3.2020: <https://scottishfinancialreview.com/2020/03/01/coronavirus-first-case-is-confirmed-in-scotland/> [3.11.2023].

<sup>3</sup> Estimated cumulative excess deaths per 100,000 people during COVID-19. Our World in Data, Aug 8, 2022: <https://ourworldindata.org/explorers/coronavirus-data-explorer> [28/08/2022].

<sup>4</sup> Scottish Government: National Performance Framework: <https://nationalperformance.gov.scot/> [3.11.2023].

<sup>5</sup> Public contracts Scotland (2020). Framework for Archaeology Services at Transport Scotland: [https://www.publiccontractsscotland.gov.uk/search/show/search\\_view.aspx?ID=JUL390464](https://www.publiccontractsscotland.gov.uk/search/show/search_view.aspx?ID=JUL390464) [3.11.2023].

<sup>6</sup> Scottish Government (25.2.2021): Coronavirus (COVID-19): construction industry open letter: <https://www.gov.scot/publications/coronavirus-covid-19-construction-industry-open-letter/> [3.11.2023].

<sup>7</sup> Scottish Government (23.3.2020): Coronavirus (COVID-19) update: First Minister's speech 23 March 2020 <https://www.gov.scot/publications/first-minister-covid-19-update-1/> [3.11.2023].

<sup>8</sup> Crown Estate Scotland (2020). 2020-23 Corporate Plan. <https://www.crownestatescotland.com/sites/default/files/2023-07/2020-23-corporate-plan.pdf> [10.12.2023].

<sup>9</sup> Scottish Strategic Archaeology Committee (2015). Scotland's archaeology strategy. <https://web.archive.org/web/20230107174214/https://archaeologystrategy.scot/wp-content/uploads/sites/8/2015/08/ScotlandsArchaeologyStrategy.pdf> [10.12.2023].

<sup>10</sup> ALGAO:UK (2019). Archaeology in Development Management – its contribution in England, Scotland & Wales. [https://web.archive.org/web/20220408153344/https://www.algao.org.uk/sites/default/files/documents/Archaeology\\_in\\_Development\\_Management.pdf](https://web.archive.org/web/20220408153344/https://www.algao.org.uk/sites/default/files/documents/Archaeology_in_Development_Management.pdf) [10.12.2023].

<sup>11</sup> Scottish Government: National Performance Framework: <https://nationalperformance.gov.scot/> [3.11.2023].

Kenneth Aitchison  
Landward Research Ltd  
[kenneth.aitchison@landward.eu](mailto:kenneth.aitchison@landward.eu)

<https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6594-1408>

Andrew Heald  
Scottish Strategic Archaeology Committee  
AOC Archaeology