

Crisis? What crisis? Archaeology under pressure in the United Kingdom

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Abstract – Archaeology in the UK is facing a series of challenges which potentially threaten current systems for delivering archaeological services and training new generations of professionals. Some of these are external problems, such as proposed changes to the planning system and the realignment of government priorities for culture and education; others are long-standing internal issues, like the persistently poor profitability of ‘commercial’ archaeology, and the lack of diversity in the sector. However, the profession is often unable – and in some cases unwilling – to develop long-term solutions to these challenges. There are potential opportunities to reshape professional archaeology in the UK for the better, but embedded interests make change difficult.

Key words – archaeology; professionalism; United Kingdom; polluter pays; preventive archaeology; public benefit; university; commercial archaeology; failed market

Titel – Krise? Welche Krise? Die Archäologie im Vereinigten Königreich steht unter Druck

Zusammenfassung – Die Archäologie im Vereinigten Königreich steht vor einer Reihe von Herausforderungen, welche die derzeitigen Systeme zur Erbringung archäologischer Dienstleistungen und zur Ausbildung neuer Generationen von Fachleuten bedrohen könnten. Einige dieser Herausforderungen sind externe Probleme, wie z.B. die vorgeschlagenen Änderungen des Planungssystems und die Neuausrichtung der Prioritäten der Regierung für die Bereiche Kultur und Bildung. Andere sind seit langem bestehende interne Probleme, wie z.B. die anhaltend schlechte Rentabilität der ‘kommerziellen’ Archäologie und die mangelnde Vielfalt in diesem Bereich. Der Berufsstand ist jedoch oft nicht in der Lage – und in einigen Fällen auch nicht willens –, langfristige Lösungen für diese Herausforderungen zu entwickeln. Es gibt durchaus Möglichkeiten, die professionelle Archäologie im Vereinigten Königreich zum Besseren zu verändern, aber immanente Interessenskonflikte erschweren einen Wandel.

Schlüsselwörter – Archäologie; Professionalität; Vereinigtes Königreich; Großbritannien; Verursacherprinzip; präventive Archäologie; Gemeinnützigkeit; Universität; kommerzielle Archäologie; privatwirtschaftliche Archäologie; gescheiterter Markt

Introduction

Archaeology in the United Kingdom (UK)¹ faces a crisis in both professional and academic practice (ALBERGE, 2021; HOARE, 2021). Archaeologists’ talk of crisis is not new, but there seems to be something different about today’s atmosphere. UK archaeology seems trapped between two advancing forces. On one side is a steady erosion of the value of academia: individual status is eroded by precarious contracts and unsustainable research and teaching goals, and collective status is eroded by the nature of the discipline which sits across the humanities and sciences but is not quite part of either. On the other side professional status is eroded – some argue that it was never attained in the first place – by the mechanisms through which the UK deals with the ‘polluter pays’ principles of the Valetta Convention, and in particular the vulnerability of a private sector which depends entirely on public sector regulatory enforcement for its survival. If either the regulation or the enforcement is reduced, then the archaeological market suffers. In practice both enforcement and regulation are under threat, and the artificial market is dysfunctional.

Archaeologists have been able to draw public attention to particular threats to regulations, institutions and individuals. However, there is a lack of coherent or consistent messaging from across the sector. Archaeologists do not always support each other as well as they could, and they are often detached from wider discussions around cultural heritage and the environment. Organisations which should show leadership have sometimes failed to do so. The Covid-19 pandemic has driven some archaeological introspection, part of wider social reflections on some of the imbalances and injustices in society – notably manifesting in movements such as Black Lives Matter, Extinction Rebellion and growing calls for Scottish and even Welsh independence. Inevitably some consequences of Brexit are also playing out – potentially affecting historically close ties between archaeologists on both sides of the border on the island of Ireland, and in the short term, creating a skilled labour shortage in parts of England. The current crisis stems from systemic and structural fragmentation and complexity, which has created inherent weaknesses, leaving archaeology vulnerable to immediate threats on several fronts.

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Systems and structures

Systems for delivering archaeology in different parts of the UK have evolved over many years. As a result, UK archaeology can be characterised as a complex biosphere made up of several ecosystems (BELFORD, 2020a). This arrangement tends to create silos. Despite initiatives to overcome

some real and perceived systemic barriers, the biosphere remains unequal and divided (Fig. 1). Some divisions are perhaps inevitable in a society and culture which has long prided itself on pragmatic ad hoc solutions, and where reluctance to genuinely reform historic institutions is deeply embedded. Cultural and administrative differences between Wales, Scotland, Northern Ireland

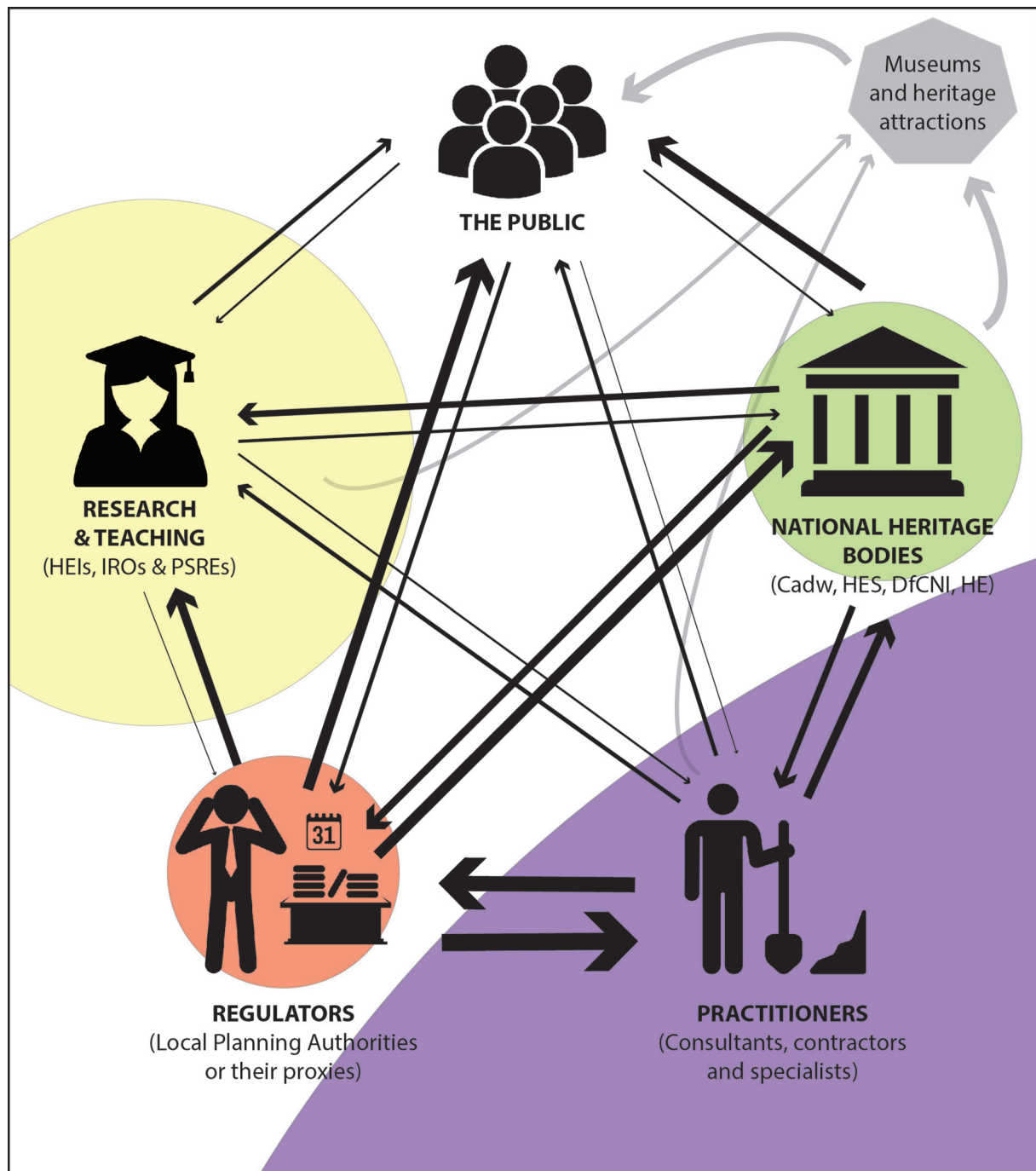


Fig. 1 The biosphere of archaeological ecosystems in the UK (1). Coloured circles show relative size by numbers employed; arrows show day-to-day information flow and communication. See text for details (Drawing Paul Belford; CC BY 4.0).

and England also influence how public benefit is considered and created. These UK-specific attitudes overlies more widely held socio-cultural stereotypes about the relative value and difficulty of public- and private-sector work (DRISCOLL ET AL., 1979; POSNER & SCHMIDT, 1982). These differences potentially isolate individual ecosystems from the larger biosphere.

One of the five major ecosystems are the regulatory mechanisms within which development-driven archaeology (also known as ‘development-led’, ‘planning-led’, ‘commercial’ or ‘rescue’ archaeology) is delivered. UK archaeology has been part of the spatial planning system since the early 1990s, operating an unequal ‘polluter pays’ system in which a large and sometimes bullish private sector is regulated by a small and cautious public sector. Private sector developers are often national or international corporations or consortia; planners are usually local government officials. Arrangements for providing archaeological advice to local authority planning decision-makers are different in Wales, Scotland, Northern Ireland and England; however, all regulatory models are under-resourced. In 2020 there were just 375 archaeologists in this role (AITCHISON ET AL., 2020). Archaeologists providing planning advice tend to have relatively low perceived status in both planning and archaeology sectors. There are also serious flaws in the way the archaeological component is integrated into the wider system of planning consent: it is possible for the archaeological work to be approved (and the development to go ahead) before the full scope of post-excavation is known, and before a proper scheme and the full costs have been agreed and funding secured (BROWN, 2015, 248-250). This has implications for long-term archiving and dissemination of results.

The second ecosystem represents the other side of the same coin. This is so-called ‘commercial archaeology’ – better described as archaeological practice – which undertakes development-driven work. Archaeological practice is the largest of the five ecosystems: 4375 archaeologists work as consultants, contractors or specialists, and the financial value of this ecosystem is £224m (AITCHISON ET AL., 2020). However, except in Northern Ireland, there is no state regulation of archaeologists’ proficiency. Instead, there is self-regulation through the Chartered Institute for Archaeologists (CIfA), where individuals and organisations are voluntarily peer-reviewed to ensure compliance with technical, professional and ethical standards. Only 70 % of archaeologists in this ecosystem have

chosen to become individual members of CIfA (AITCHISON ET AL., 2020; CIfA, 2021). Archaeological companies are generally very small – only seven of the 82 CIfA Registered Organisations have more than 100 employees; most archaeological organisations turn over less than £ 250,000 per year (AITCHISON ET AL., 2020; BELFORD, 2020b; CIfA, 2020; CIfA, 2021). This is partly a consequence of the flawed market inherent in the UK’s social licence version of the ‘polluter pays’ model, in which the client has no interest in buying the product: price is the most important consideration in the procurement of archaeological services (DEPAEPE, 2016, 39; NIXON, 2017, 13). This inevitably has an impact on the long-term resilience and sustainability of the sector.

The third ecosystem is academia, which undertakes research, teaching and training largely outside the spheres of archaeological practice described above. Since 1992 there has been an expansion of Higher Education Institutions (HEIs), with former technical and vocational colleges gaining university status. There are 130 HEIs, of which 128 receive public funding; 42 of these provide undergraduate courses in archaeology and most of these also provide postgraduate qualifications. Together these employ 850 archaeologists (AITCHISON ET AL., 2020). As well as HEIs, a small number of other organisations can also access funding from the UK’s research councils; these have the status of Independent Research Organisations (IROs) and Public Sector Research Establishments (SMITH, 2015; MOREL, 2020). Many of the national museums and the state heritage bodies Historic England and Historic Environment Scotland (see below) are IROs, as is Museum of London Archaeology (MoLA). Changes in funding models have accompanied this expansion. Grants for students’ living expenses (maintenance) were replaced by loans during the 1990s, and since 1998 undergraduate students have been required to pay tuition fees.² The direct impact of fees and loans on student demographics is difficult to measure (BRITTON ET AL., 2020). However, there has been a significant shift by students and administrators towards perceiving higher education in transactional terms. The result is a squeezed academic sector under pressure from administrative management to provide content for consumers in a market for qualifications leading to employment.

The fourth ecosystem consists of the national heritage bodies: Cadw (in Wales), Historic Environment Scotland, the Historic Environment Division of the Department for Communities in Northern Ireland, and Historic England. All orig-

inated from the pre-1945 Ministry of Works (originally a military infrastructure organisation), but subsequent devolution has resulted in slightly different relationships with their respective governments. In simplified terms they all share two key functions: advising their respective Ministers on heritage matters, and administering 'Scheduled' or designated (protected) monuments. Except in England, they are also responsible for maintenance and management of heritage assets in state care (such as ruined castles).³ In Scotland, Northern Ireland and England these bodies also maintain archives of historic archaeological and architectural investigations; in Wales this function is undertaken by the Royal Commission on the Ancient and Historical Monuments of Wales (BELFORD, 2020b). There are 275 archaeologists employed at national heritage bodies (AITCHISON ET AL., 2020). Most of these work in an administrative capacity, including 'Inspectors of Ancient Monuments'; few are engaged in fieldwork and research. Funding has been reduced over the last 15 years. Their function as government advisors makes them politically cautious, and this, coupled with large volumes of casework and the nature of civil (public) service employment, mean that national heritage bodies sometimes struggle to provide sectoral leadership.

There are also a further 175 archaeologists working for museums (AITCHISON ET AL., 2020). Most museum archaeologists work in the public sector for national museums – either museums with a remit for the whole of the UK (such as the British Museum), or national museums such as Amgueddfa Cymru/National Museum Wales and National Museums Scotland – which themselves have portfolios of multiple museums. There are very few archaeologists employed by independent museums. Museum archaeologists are often a neglected voice in wider sectoral discussions, yet museums form one of the key interfaces between archaeologists and the public they serve.

The fifth ecosystem is the general public. In many countries the public would not form part of a biosphere of archaeological practice, but the UK has a long tradition of non-professional engagement with archaeology and heritage conservation. On balance this has been a strength, but demographic changes have seriously weakened this important strand of endeavour. Direct engagement with the public varies across the different ecosystems. Larger development-driven projects may have a degree of passive public engagement through open days and presentations; many university departments also have active community outreach programmes

through fieldwork and other initiatives. However, most people get involved in archaeology through projects funded or delivered by local authorities and national agencies and their proxies. The Council for British Archaeology (CBA) – established in 1944 amid concern about the impact of post-war reconstruction on urban archaeology – has historically been an important interface between amateur and professional archaeology; indeed it was instrumental in establishing CIfA (ADDYMAN, 1989; HINTON, 2011). Whilst there appears to be widespread general public support for archaeology in an abstract sense, few non-archaeologists understand the complexities of the biosphere within which archaeology is undertaken.

Inherent weaknesses

The complexity of this biosphere is not intrinsically problematic provided that communication and understanding is maintained between ecosystems. However, archaeologists tend to group together within ecosystems, with more limited interaction between them (Fig. 2). Although both regulators and practitioners are well-represented amongst CIfA members, this is not the case for archaeologists employed by national heritage bodies and academic institutions. Membership of the two 'trade associations' is corporate rather than individual, and so is restricted to regulators for the Association of Local Government Archaeologists (ALGAO), and practitioners for the Federation of Archaeological Managers and Employers (FAME). A few organisations are members of both FAME and ALGAO.⁴ Trade union membership (not shown in Fig. 2) rarely reaches across silos: most academics are members of the University and College Union (UCU), but regulators tend to be members of Unison (a public service union), whilst practitioners – who are mostly not unionised – tend to join Prospect (a professional union).

The strongest pan-sectoral associations exist around shared intellectual interests represented by period-, region- or specialism-specific learned societies. Senior archaeologists across all ecosystems may be elected Fellows of the Society of Antiquaries of London, an ancient learned society with a restricted self-selecting membership. The Society of Antiquaries is exceptional in its scope and membership: most learned societies are open and accessible, and many archaeologists at all levels are members of more than one such society. Traditionally these groups have provided an important way of mitigating professional fragmentation, in

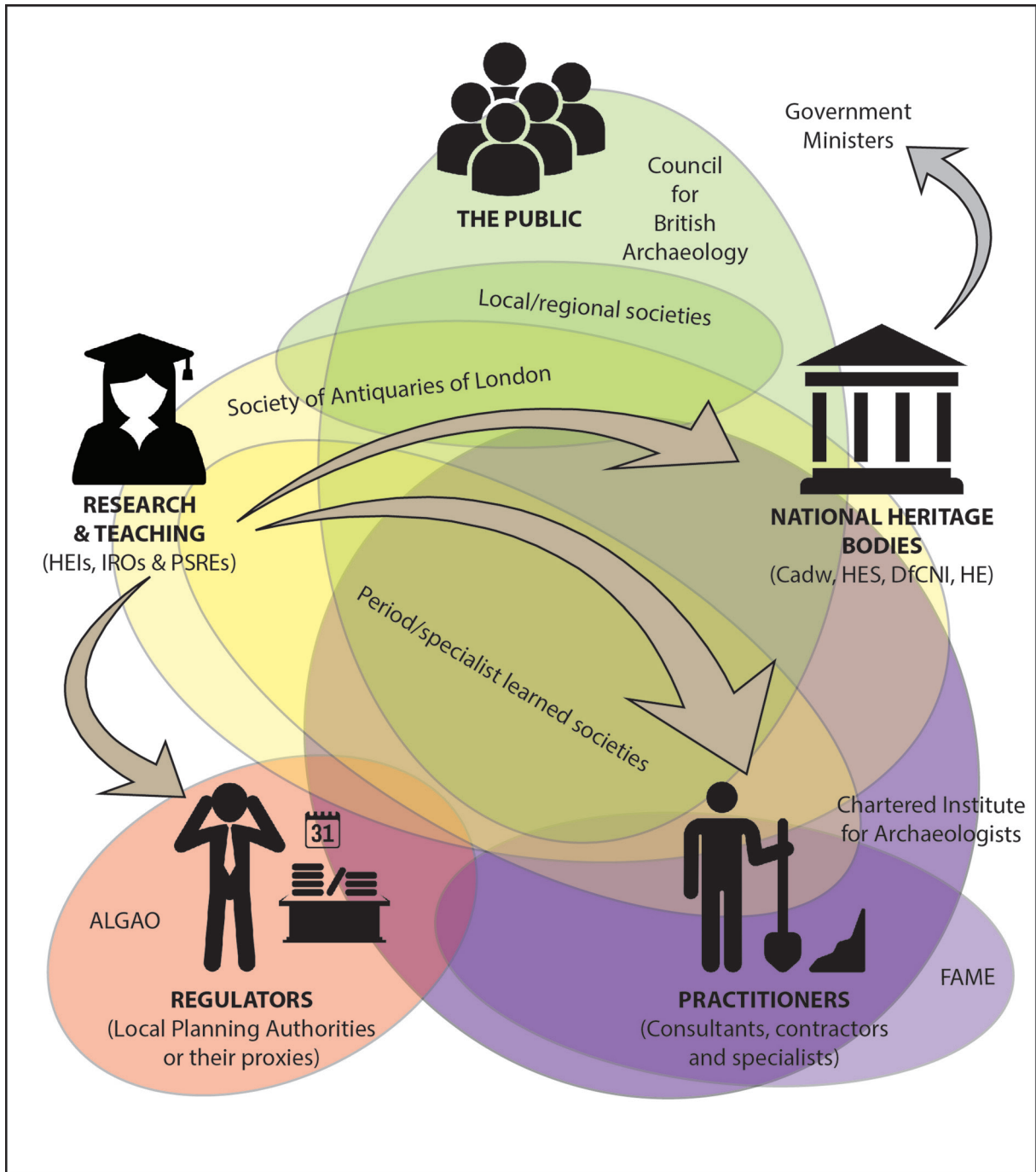


Fig. 2 The biosphere of archaeological ecosystems in the UK (2). Coloured circles show professional associations (purple), specialist learned societies (yellow), and local societies and groups (green). Arrows show the influence of academics through alumni and other networks. See text for details (Drawing Paul Belford; CC BY 4.0).

particular enabling closer engagement between academics and other professionals. They also help facilitate archaeological engagement with the wider public; however, their membership is typically increasingly elderly and lacking diversity.

Academics have wider sectoral influence through alumni working in different parts of the

biosphere. However, their own positions are increasingly insecure. As noted above, the last 20 years have seen a significant shift towards a transactional approach to higher education. Students become consumers, and institutions compete to attract them. These consumers judge the quality of universities through league tables which show

quantitative measurements of research and teaching excellence. University administrators' constant juggling to maintain league table rankings results in a precarious workforce, with academics required to deliver unsustainable levels of teaching and research. Around one-third of academics are employed on fixed-term contracts, with 41 % of teaching-only contracts 'hourly-paid', which may mean zero-hours and part-time, with limited holiday, sickness and other entitlements (UCU, 2021, 8-12). Many post-doctoral researchers are only ever offered short-term contracts; junior roles attract disproportionately more administration and teaching than senior ones (HALL, 2021). In turn, senior academics are under extreme pressure to secure research grants and publish within the constraints of the Research Excellence Framework – one of the mechanisms for quantifying HEI outputs to inform funding. Despite heroic efforts by individual academics and departments, the majority of research-led archaeology undertaken by HEIs remains disconnected from the training and development needs of UK archaeological practice.

Archaeological practice in the UK is set within the common law tradition, where society is self-regulating (social licence) – as opposed to the Roman law tradition where regulation is by the state (BELFORD & WAIT, 2018, 56-58). The social licence model assumes that private entrepreneurial efficiency works best with public regulation. However, as noted above, regulatory authorities are weak and poorly resourced, and procurement of archaeological services is entirely in the hands of the developers. Proponents of the system argue that development-driven archaeology delivers public benefit despite these constraints. Evidence for this is usually drawn from a handful of exceptionally large and well-resourced projects – notably large infrastructure projects such as roads, railways and airports – most of which actually take place outside the planning system and are ultimately publicly-funded, even if the direct procurement of archaeological services is by private-sector developers (Aitchison et al., 2020; Carver, 2013). The reality is that most development-driven archaeology is designed to enable clients to discharge regulatory obligations, rather than produce knowledge and understanding for wider public benefit (Nixon, 2017; Wills & Bryant, 2019a; 2019b). Whilst it is true that information from such work is in the public domain – in the sense that grey literature reports and underlying data are available through Historic Environment Records and other archives (such as the Archae-

ology Data Service) – it is not easily accessible to non-specialist audiences.

This forced market, together with voluntary self-regulation, means that despite its scale, commercial archaeological practice provides very poor returns. The average surplus (profit) for UK firms engaged in development-driven archaeology is 2 %. In contrast the average profitability of the UK service sector is 15 % (AITCHISON ET AL., 2020). As a result, many archaeological organisations struggle to invest in meaningful staff development, research and training. This situation is partly a result of the way that the system encourages priced procurement, but this is only part of the story. Organisational structures and cultures also play a role. A long-standing issue has been the way in which many junior roles in archaeological practice involve short-term contracts, limited non-salary benefits, and flexible working practices which require frequent relocation and working away from home. This is a result of embedded leadership and management structures, a factor which is rarely mentioned in sectoral discussions. Yet most organisations employing archaeologists – in all five ecosystems, and across both public and private sectors – tend to adopt conventional hierarchical models of leadership and management, and lack capacity for internal democratic accountability and decision-making. This weakness exists at all levels, but is most evident and damaging in governance and executive leadership.

Governance is about setting strategic aims and providing leadership, delegating authority and ensuring accountability. This function is undertaken by a board of non-executive directors ('trustees' in a charity context). Non-executive boards should reflect the networks and communities that an organisation serves. This means that boards need to represent a wide range of skills and experiences, and to do this they should include people from diverse demographic, gender and ethnic backgrounds. Unfortunately, non-executive boards of most UK archaeological organisations are drawn from a small pool of retired or semi-retired archaeologists – a self-selecting inward-looking group of usually white, middle-class people who often lack skills and experience in administration, fundraising, finance and marketing. Similar issues are evident elsewhere in arts, culture and heritage (TREMML, 2021; TUSA, 2020). Some archaeological organisations are part of larger public bodies. Many of these – such as national heritage agencies and national museums – have boards which do contain the necessary skill sets, but for various reasons have more limited diver-

sity of background and experience (CORNFORTH, 2003; FARRELL, 2005; SCHILLEMANS & BOVENS, 2019). Awareness of good governance models may be limited, and the different roles and responsibilities of trustees (non-executives) and managers (executives) are often poorly understood.

Executive leadership is the art of managing the strategic, tactical and operational activities of an organisation. Traditional pyramidal hierarchies have been challenged in other areas of creative, artistic and scientific endeavour, but surprisingly less so in archaeology – perhaps reflecting precarious organisational survival. Most UK archaeology organisations tend to sit somewhere between transactional and transformational leadership models. Transactional leadership is responsive, working within existing organisational cultures: behaviours and objectives are achieved by performance-led systems of reward and punishment, and the emphasis is on maintaining the status quo (CHAUDHRY & JAVED, 2012; HARGIS ET AL., 2001). In contrast, transformational leadership is proactive; it encourages change in organisational cultures and structures, and seeks to motivate employees by appealing to higher-level moral, ethical and social values. Individual creativity and innovation is encouraged (JUDGE & BONO, 2000). Good outcomes in both models depend on leadership personalities; they tend to encourage autocratic or heroic leadership styles, which can become toxic and disempowering for those who don't fit cultural stereotypes (RUBIN ET AL., 2005; OPUKU ET AL., 2015). Alternatively, so-called democratic leadership encourages wider distribution of employee responsibilities and flattening of organisational hierarchies to improve group decision-making (GASTIL, 1994). This seems well-suited to archaeological project management, although perhaps less easily applied to existing archaeological organisations. Other high-skill industries have successfully deployed a combination of approaches to improve leadership and decision-making (HILTON ET AL., 2021). However, there is no literature or training on leadership and management theory in archaeology.

The result is an unsustainable profession – economically, structurally and socially. The enthusiasm of early career archaeologists becomes increasingly offset by obstacles to progression. Managers and leaders are promoted on the basis of qualities unrelated to their management and leadership abilities. It might be expected that an insecure and poorly resourced profession would seek to work as closely as possible together to provide a united voice to resist some of these pressures. However, these very factors actually

mean that there is fierce competition for resources within each ecosystem, leaving very little time and energy for positive engagement between them – let alone for the biosphere as a whole to develop secure external networks. This includes engagement with the general public.

Immediate threats

This fragile system, at times deeply at odds with itself, is now facing a series of external threats which have real potential to diminish – and perhaps even extinguish – the flames of scholarship, enterprise and engagement which have long characterised the contribution that the UK has made to the global archaeological family. These threats are the result of current UK government policy – although they are exacerbated by the inherent systemic weaknesses noted above, and the failure of archaeology to engage meaningfully with the general public. In addition to the general cultural isolation and economic decline that will result from Brexit, there are three main threats.

1. Planning reform

The first is planning reform, first hinted at in 2019 and formally proposed in a government White Paper in 2020. The proposals only directly affected England, but their influence would be felt across the UK. The premise for reform was a perception that regulatory 'red tape' – in the form of environmental protection – was delaying or even preventing house-building (JOHNSON, 2020). The reality is more complex. The government's own analysis showed that the low 'build-out rate' – the extent to which land available and permitted for development is being turned into houses – is actually a result of developers keeping supply low to maintain house prices, and therefore profitability (BELFORD, 2020b, 8-9). Archaeology is a consideration in only 0.5% of planning applications; the cost of archaeology is on average less than 0.15% of overall construction costs (ROCKS-MACQUEEN & LEWIS, 2019, 15-22). In responding to the planning reform proposals, archaeologists made these and other economic arguments, such as highlighting the fact that the archaeology sector was worth over £250m to the UK economy. However, planning reform was delayed for political reasons, specifically anxiety from Conservative MPs about the impact of centrally-allocated developments on their affluent constituencies. This fear manifested itself in 2021, when (non-archaeological) concerns about planning reform caused an MP

from the ruling Conservative party to lose their seat in a by-election (PICKARD & PAYNE, 2021).

Large-scale planning reform has been deferred, at least for the time being (SKOPELITI, 2021). Nevertheless smaller-scale reforms have been enacted in England which impact on the wider historic environment, if not directly on archaeology. For example, there have been changes in the way that historic buildings in urban centres can be re-developed, with greater flexibility around demolition and modification. There have also been changes in the way that the significance of particular statues and monuments is considered (see below). Planning policy in Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland has not been subject to the same pressures, but the vulnerability of archaeology has been highlighted. The situation in England is not unique. Governments elsewhere in Europe have used recovery from Covid-19 as a rationale for reducing protection for archaeology in the planning system, for example in Andalusia and Madrid in Spain (ALMANSA-SANCHEZ, 2020).

2. Pressures for academic archaeology

Another threat is present in the academic ecosystem. The commodification of university education has resulted in three inter-related pressures for archaeology. The first is that the management of universities is increasingly driven by the measurement of quantities, rather than social and cultural qualities. Second, labour market returns are becoming the dominant measure of the value of a university education, instead of being part of a suite of values which benefit society as a whole. Moreover, this employment must generate sufficiently high salaries to ensure that government loans for fees and maintenance can be repaid – an area where archaeology has traditionally struggled. This is a deliberate policy: in May 2021 the then education minister publicly urged HEIs to ‘pivot away from dead-end courses that leave young people with nothing but debt’ (WILLIAMSON, 2021). This has created the third pressure, which is the government’s strategic decision to focus HEI funding on so-called STEM subjects (science, technology, engineering and mathematics). A proposal in February 2021 to reduce support for HEI provision of non-STEM subjects was widely criticised; in the end archaeology gained a reprieve, but other subjects did not (KERNOHAN, 2021; SHAW, 2021). The practical implementation of this policy ignores the full value of research and teaching in subjects like archaeology, whose interdisciplinarity and polyvocality reaches across arts, humanities, social sciences and applied science.

Government pressure on non-STEM subjects also produced specific threats to individuals and institutions during 2021. For many months the spectre of redundancies hung over staff at the University of Chester – including those in the Department of History and Archaeology – before being withdrawn over the summer after street and online protests attracted thousands of supporters (HANSEN, 2021; PORTER, 2021). In May 2021 the Executive Board of the University of Sheffield announced a proposal to close its hugely influential and long-established archaeology department, with a global reputation for research excellence. Within a few weeks nearly 50,000 people had signed a petition objecting to the closure; formal letters of objection were sent by international scholars, CBA and CIfA, and because of the department’s strong record of community engagement there was widespread local and non-professional concern too. Despite this, the closure was confirmed in July (ADAMS, 2021a; BBC, 2021a; BEARDMORE, 2021). A similar scenario subsequently played out at Worcester University, where a thriving department was closed with little notice to staff and students; postgraduate students remain uncertain about being able to complete their courses in 2022-23 (BBC, 2021b). All three cases were driven by issues specific to their particular university administrations; but archaeology was identified as an easy target.

The rationale for the Sheffield and Worcester closures were declining student numbers in the context of graduate employability. Of course archaeology provides transferable skills with excellent employability, and indeed all of these threatened institutions had excellent graduate employment figures. However, because archaeology is difficult to characterise, and because graduate archaeologist salaries are low, it becomes vulnerable when HEIs are seeking to realign themselves in the current political and funding climate. Ironically, the government itself has recognised that there is an archaeology skills shortage across the UK – indeed it was the potential risk to the construction industry rather than an explicit recognition of cultural value that led to the reversal of the funding cut noted above (HOOK, 2017; KERNOHAN, 2021). As a result, archaeology is classified as a ‘shortage occupation’ where less stringent post-Brexit visa requirements are applied. This includes a reduced salary requirement (UK GOVERNMENT, 2021). This raises a very interesting paradox. Conventional economic wisdom would suggest that where staff retention is relatively poor, and where there is a shortage of skilled staff, salaries should rise. Archaeological

employers should increase salaries to attract the best and brightest staff, justifying this to clients through their ability to better deliver regulatory requirements. The poor profitability of most archaeological employers should also be a driver for increasing fees and salaries. Universities should then be able to attract students in larger numbers. Yet this does not seem to be happening, which perhaps reinforces the point that UK archaeology operates in a failed market.

3. 'Culture war'

Changing approaches to higher education and planning reform are part of a wider philosophical shift by the current UK government which has been characterised by supporters and critics alike as a 'culture war'. This represents the third threat. In June 2020 a controversial slave trader's statue in Bristol was pulled down by protestors and thrown into the harbour. This action sparked national debate about the commemoration of slavery and imperialism. In September 2020 the National Trust – a conservation charity responsible for over 500 historic buildings and nearly 2,500km² of land in Wales, Northern Ireland and England – published a report on the connections between its properties and colonialism and historic slavery (HUXTABLE ET AL., 2020; ADAMS, 2021b). Two months later the Welsh Government published a wide-ranging audit of buildings, statues and place-names across Wales associated with imperialism and the slave trade (WELSH GOVERNMENT, 2020). These and other considered responses have been met with an uncomfortable resistance from some sections of society, and from the government, whose stated policy of 'retain and explain' is seen by some as a way of avoiding uncomfortable truth and reconciliation. A related issue is the restitution of the cultural heritage of other nations acquired through imperialist violence, including both human remains and artefacts such as Nigeria's Benin Bronzes. This is another long-standing and polarising debate. Some institutions have started restitution processes, such as the University of Aberdeen (Scotland) and Jesus College Cambridge (England); others, notably the British Museum, remain resistant (HICKS, 2020; BAKARE, 2021; KHOMANI, 2021).

Although few fronts in the so-called 'culture war' are directly aimed at archaeology, they do concern the broader cultural heritage sector of which archaeology is part. A threat to any research which challenges official histories is a threat to archaeology – after all, excavation is the only way we have to directly engage with peo-

ple who lived in the past but who left no written record. Archaeology gives a voice to women and children; it speaks of poverty, oppression and disability – stories that are often hard to find in mainstream patriarchal historical narratives.

Planning reform and university funding challenges are evident in other parts of Europe too. Brexit, however, is unique to the UK. The so-called culture war and associated threats appear to be related to the social and political developments which resulted in the UK's departure from the EU. Freedom of movement – of ideas and people – are at the heart of practical, emotional and intellectual identities for many archaeologists, the majority of whom voted to remain in the EU in the 2016 referendum. Nearly 70 % of UK archaeologists have spent their entire working lives within the Maastricht framework of the modern EU; the careers of more than 97 % have taken place in a UK that was part of the European project. On a purely practical level, 11 % of archaeologists working in the UK in 2020 came from EU countries (AITCHISON ET AL., 2020). Brexit creates a series of short-term logistical and practical challenges, particularly seriously on the island of Ireland. These are probably surmountable, but the longer-term loss of collaboration, support and engagement with European colleagues has been a deep psychological blow for many UK archaeologists.

What next?

Naturally and understandably, archaeologists are concerned and angry about the changes that are taking place around them. They are also mindful of the wider social and political contexts of their work. Archaeologists are well aware that many of the arguments of populist politicians are ill-founded and poorly evidenced, especially around immigration and cultural exchange. They are particularly sensitive to the need to improve diversity – both of and in the profession, and in the audiences with which it engages. However, views are mixed about what to do next. There would seem to be two possible options.

The first option is to continue to fight a rear-guard action for the survival of the current system, seeking ad hoc opportunities for reform. This means fighting against further HE cutbacks, although even well-run campaigns have not succeeded. It also means constructively engaging with government consultations on the proposed changes to the planning system – again in the

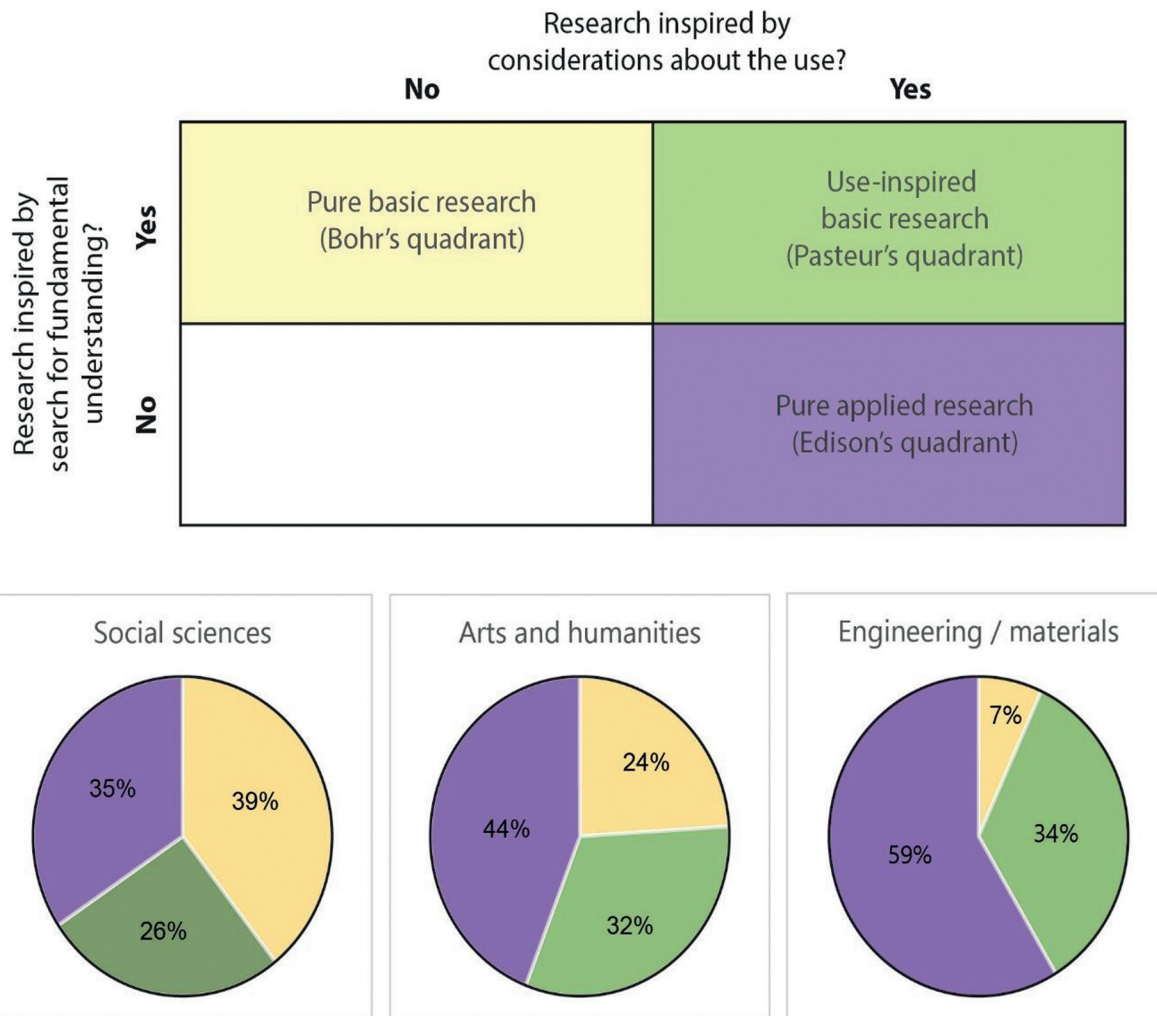


Fig. 3 Stokes' quadrants (after STOKES, 1997) and how UK academics classify their own research in social sciences, arts and humanities and engineering and materials sciences (data from ABREU ET AL., 2009, as shown in ROYAL SOCIETY, 2010, 16). See text for details (Drawing Paul Belford; CC BY 4.0).

hope that reasoned argument will prevail. There is of course a great deal of information to support the economic case, but supposedly rational economic arguments don't necessarily win the hearts and minds of political decision-makers. Explaining how archaeology is funded, and why it is not a drain either on public or private resources, is worthwhile. However, in recent years the logic of rational argument has often been overshadowed by popular appeals made on emotional grounds. Fishing provides a good example. Between 2014 and 2020 the UK fishing industry was worth around £ 989m per year. This represented 0.12 % of UK GDP, around one-tenth that of heritage tourism, and a tiny fraction of the 4 % of the automotive industry; around 40 % of the fishing industry's income came through the EU Common Fish-

eries Policy (UK GOVERNMENT, 2019; TAYLOR, 2020). Despite this, fishing played a prominent part in the ultimately successful campaign to leave the EU. The perceived social, cultural and strategic benefits of this industry outweighed its marginal economic importance. Fishing has a deep resonance in public imagination: the romance of the seafaring island spirit, treasured memories of collective working-class identities, tangible change in close-knit communities, and a powerful sense of belonging and identity.

Campaigning to preserve the status quo may help to bridge the gaps between some ecosystem silos. It may also create some individual successes: minor amendments to planning regulations, perhaps, or (temporary?) reversal of cuts to university courses. Technical arguments can be supported

by good evidence for economic and social benefits. However, the underlying systemic issues would remain, and archaeologists would still tend to retreat to their own silos once immediate threats had been dealt with. This approach would also largely fail to engage with the public. Of course, people who have been directly involved with archaeological projects, or who maintain a passionate amateur interest in the subject, will continue to be active supporters of professional colleagues in the different ecosystems. However, the wider public will remain unengaged – and largely unaware – of the issues. Archaeologists themselves will be wary of adopting a populist approach that lacks a secure evidence base. Nevertheless, a wider appeal could be gained by arguing for archaeology as cultural enrichment. As the fishing industry (as well as agriculture, steelmaking and others) demonstrated, emotive arguments – based on culture, landscape and way of life – have been made by sectors which have a relatively small economic footprint but a significant cultural one. In so doing they have engaged widespread public support, based on intangible factors with a deep resonance.

The second option is to radically reform the whole system for doing archaeology. There is a good philosophical case for doing this. The UK approach is an outlier in a European context, where the state is more closely engaged with archaeological endeavour, including ‘preventive’ archaeology. Indeed, there is already variation within the UK that covers a spectrum from relatively proactive state engagement in Northern Ireland, to the *laissez-faire* approach prevalent in most of England. The Society of Antiquaries recently suggested a scheme of regional hubs as ‘umbrella bodies’ for research, practice and training in England (ANTIQUARIES, 2020). This was partly inspired by the role of the Welsh Archaeological Trusts, which partly rely on public funding to deliver their full range of services. There was much of value in the Society of Antiquaries Manifesto, and few would argue with its key findings – although the one-size-fits-all approach did not account for local and regional variations and nuances. However, its value was diminished because it was published and promoted in a non-discursive and non-consensual way; it also excluded Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland.

There would be merit in developing a series of regional bodies. Local authorities could outsource planning services, and so create better economies of scale. Legislative change could make regulators responsible for procurement on the basis of quality and the ability of an organisation to deliver the full

sweep of an archaeological project – right the way through to archiving and publication. This is the situation in Sweden today. Discharge of planning conditions could be more closely related to archaeological outcomes, as part of a shift to considering the longer-term environmental impacts of all development. In such an environment not-for-profit regional teams could focus on producing knowledge and understanding, rather than reporting to discharge their clients’ legal responsibilities. Collaboration with HEIs would result in a synergy of fieldwork, research, training and synthesis. Such a radical change would seize the initiative and open the way for a more useful archaeology. Of course, it would require some top-down shifts in mindset, and a willingness for existing organisations to consolidate. This would mean giving ground as well as taking it – and this is where the vested interests of so-called commercial archaeology will be most resistant to change. In the adversarial context of the UK capitalist system, it would probably be impossible to achieve consensus and therefore such an initiative would collapse.

Both survive/reform and radical reshaping are essentially inward-looking options. They assume that archaeology is essentially good, and is of benefit to society. This may be true, but it would be worth asking what society values about archaeology. Unfortunately, it is probably true that most of the general public see archaeology as a sideshow that creates occasional ‘wow’ moments. Even at a professional level archaeology often fails to make an impact outside its own bubble. Archaeologists have made very good arguments about the role that archaeology could play in supporting the delivery of climate change adaptation, for example, but archaeologists’ voices are barely heard in the wider cultural heritage sector, let alone outside it. This means rethinking where archaeological research fits within broader paradigms of public benefit in research.

Donald Stokes (1997) identified four quadrants to categorise scientific enquiry on the basis of whether a contribution to human knowledge is made by fundamental understanding or pragmatic present-day applications. These quadrants, and the balance between them in some disciplines with which archaeology has some overlap and engagement – are shown in **Figure 3** (ABREU ET AL., 2009; ROYAL SOCIETY, 2010, 16).

Much of the archaeological research undertaken by HEIs and their counterparts would probably fall into Bohr’s quadrant, being largely inspired by a quest to enhance fundamental understanding. It may also have a wider public benefit, but this is not likely to be the primary research motive.

In contrast, most development-driven archaeology work would fall into Edison's quadrant – it is largely determined by the end use (in this case delivering planning outcomes) rather than a desire to improve the sum of human knowledge. Again, human knowledge may be improved, but this is not the primary driver. Some archaeological work – including projects which fall into both camps – will also fit into Pasteur's quadrant, including much of the excellent collaborative interdisciplinary work noted above. Without measurement it is impossible to say what the proportions might be. However, worryingly, it seems likely that a significant proportion of UK archaeology could fall into the 'empty' fourth quadrant. In other words, it is neither designed to increase fundamental understanding, nor to deliver meaningful use. Clearly any work being done under such circumstances is of no public benefit – and is of very limited benefit to the discipline of archaeology and archaeologists.

This creates a problem. If a large proportion of archaeological work is essentially pointless, then how can it possibly be justified asking anyone – public or private – to pay for it? In the face of rising sea levels, mass extinctions and unsustainable pressures on the National Health Service, it is difficult to articulate the value of a few different coloured bits of mud in a random field. A third option therefore is to use this moment as an opportunity to completely rethink archaeologists' engagement with the various systems which they occupy. Archaeologists tend to embrace the diversity of their respective ecosystems rather too much. For example, those providing archaeological planning advice to local authorities – or those working for national heritage agencies – identify themselves as public servants; those working for HEIs identify themselves as academics; those in archaeological practice tend to identify themselves as being part of the construction industry. Whilst they may be all of these things, their primary identity should be as archaeologists. Otherwise, archaeologists risk becoming simply apologists for archaeology, rather than its protectors and visionaries.

Conclusion

Archaeology in the UK is in crisis. The first thing archaeologists need to do is to recognise that this is a crisis that will affect all of us. Individual campaigns are essentially rear-guard actions to defend a system which is structurally fragment-

ed and systemically weak. Whilst the small size of the sector could foster collegiality, in practice personalities have a disproportionate influence on relationships between organisations. Joint advocacy is difficult to co-ordinate. The status quo is philosophically difficult to defend, but radical restructuring – however desirable – is practically impossible. There are too many vested interests in maintaining the current system, including some of the myriad of bodies that purport to represent archaeology and archaeologists. UK archaeologists do not speak with one voice, and there is no coherent end game in sight. Archaeology is too small and weak a sector to afford these divisions. Whilst diverse perspectives should be embraced, the lack of a clear and united focus for advocacy means that individual threats could collectively create an existential crisis. On the face of it this is a picture of despair, but there is hope.

Arguably archaeologists have been too precious about archaeological detail at the expense of the bigger picture. They have also been firmly anchored in their particular ecosystems. Perhaps it is time to let go of some things, to make the most of others. Post-excavation analysis, publication and synthesis need to be central facets of every project – if this can't be justified then why are we excavating in the first place? Practitioners and regulators should be standing alongside each other arguing for the value of the work they do. There is huge potential for HEIs and IROs to help deliver much greater synergy between the academic, practitioner and regulator ecosystems – at the level of individual projects, and also developing broader frameworks and research programmes. As long as it remains grateful for the crumbs from someone else's table, archaeology will always be a victim. Archaeology is meaningful research that deploys a wide range of approaches from 'hard' science, social science, arts and humanities. Archaeology is also a deeply practical human response to the need to know where we came from and where we are going. Archaeology is a prickly subject and will be hard to eradicate. But archaeologists need to take charge of their own destiny. This is a crisis, and there is not a moment to lose if we are to safeguard the future of the profession.

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Notes

¹ The UK is 'the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland'. Great Britain consists of Wales, Scotland and England. Since the 1990s Wales and Scotland have had partly devolved administrations, whose responsibilities include planning, heritage, transport, health and education. England, and English practice, tends to dominate awareness both inside and outside the UK. However, there are important differences between the 'home nations' in terms of policy, practice and culture.

² Undergraduate tuition fees in UK universities are currently capped at £ 9000 per year in Wales; £ 1820 in Scotland for Scottish and Irish students and £ 9250 for students from Wales and England; £ 4030 in Northern Ireland; and £ 9250 in England.

³ The two functions were separated in England in 2015, with 'Historic England' as an advisor/regulator and 'English Heritage' as a charity (with government endowment) managing properties.

⁴ In a few cases regulatory and practitioner functions are undertaken by two sides of the same organisation. Examples include the Welsh Archaeological Trusts and a handful of English local authorities, including Worcestershire and Warwickshire.

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