

WHY COMMUNICATING ARCHAEOLOGY MATTERS

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We are all familiar with media headlines celebrating the extraordinary finds that our work produces. But the media also tends to associate archaeology with project delays or increased costs. Both are parts of the realities of developer-led archaeology, but the full picture is rarely, if ever, presented.

Away from the headlines, archaeology, and especially developer-led archaeology, remains poorly understood. The planning system is very complex and archaeology's role in it is not usually part of the conversation, until things go wrong or spectacularly well. The technical language and all the details and dates can seem intimidating and exclusive. We get so engrossed in daily tasks that we forget to ask ourselves, 'Why do we do archaeology?'. Of course, it is to learn about the past, but the immense value of this knowledge is only realised if it is shared as widely as possible outside, as well as inside, the sector.

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Archaeology has plenty to offer to society at a time when it faces some enormous challenges. In the previous issue, *The Archaeologist* showcased examples of archaeology contributing information and guidance about addressing the climate change and nature emergencies. Among these, the work of my colleagues at Oxford Archaeology is producing valuable insights into climate change, landscape transformations and human–nature interactions throughout prehistory. Collaborating with diverse experts to address contemporary challenges highlights archaeology's contribution to society and opens up new engagement possibilities.

But there is more to archaeology than this. The events of the last 15 years or so, with a bruising global recession, local wars with global impact, a pandemic, and social justice movements like Black Lives Matter and #MeToo, have shifted public discourse, making social value and public benefit more central; people, as well as governments, now expect businesses to contribute more to creating a sustainable, inclusive and just society.

The face of archaeology: this photo of the site team at Priors Hall, Corby, was one of our most popular posts on social media. Showing the people behind the work is an important part of archaeology. Credit: Oxford Archaeology



Developer-led archaeology is required to engage with public benefit and is very well placed to deliver it. By unearthing and sharing local history, archaeology can foster a sense of unity and belonging within communities. It can promote better understanding and overcome divisions and prejudices by sharing the variety of human experience evidenced by the archaeology of past societies. Sharing heritage narratives contributes to economic growth through tourism and cultural and entertainment initiatives, and can have a profoundly positive impact in areas that lack investment and opportunity. As a multi-disciplinary subject, archaeology encourages children to get involved with STEM disciplines that are often perceived as too challenging.

To achieve this, we must proactively engage with the public, sharing our work and its significance. The first step is to build on the fascination and influence archaeology has in public perception: the headlines about exciting finds create a direct connection with, and wonder about, the past; they are also a great reputational asset for the clients and projects with which they are associated. Instead of waiting for extraordinary discoveries, we should communicate regularly with local media and on social platforms. Even Roman tile can captivate people when shared by those who experienced the thrill of uncovering and touching it centuries after it was made and used.

When sharing these stories, we must consider how to make them relevant to the audiences we are targeting. We all seek a connection with the people of the past, to understand through objects and places that we share similar motivations, despite the centuries or millennia separating us. For example, if there is a local tradition or industry of which people are proud, we should weave it into our work, showing how this latest find is part of that same story. An example of this was my colleagues' approach during the Priors Hall project in Corby, which highlighted the links between the Roman pottery kilns found there and the modern ceramic industry, bridging the historical gap.

There is also a more selfish reason to better communicate our work. Archaeology's role in the planning process is not universally popular and



Shopping with a sprinkle of archaeology: the pop-up museum set up by Oxford Archaeology at the Westgate shopping centre, Oxford, while excavations were ongoing, attracted an impressive 10,000 visitors. Credit: Oxford Archaeology



Bringing the past back to life: visitors to the community excavation at Little Asby, in the Westmorland Dales, eagerly look at reproductions of finds. Credit: Oxford Archaeology

depends on government policy. By engaging communities, sharing valuable knowledge of their history and contributing to an understanding of their past and present, we demonstrate the positive impact of archaeology in creating liveable places, fostering economic growth and strengthening communities. By effectively communicating our work and the value of archaeology, we secure its future within society.

Maria Bellissimo

Maria is an accomplished communications and advocacy expert with a decade of experience spanning various sectors and causes. Her background includes involvement in politics, after which she transitioned to the private sector, offering counsel to clients from diverse industries on projects covering a wide spectrum, including infrastructure, manufacturing, single-issue campaigns and international human rights matters. Over recent years, her primary focus has been on net zero and sustainability, actively collaborating with policymakers and environmental organisations.

Recently, Maria assumed the role of Communications Manager at Oxford Archaeology, to which she brings her deep-rooted passion for archaeology. Over the past five years, she has pursued her interest in the subject through part-time studies in the subject at the Department for Continuing Education, University of Oxford.

