

# Placing the needs of individuals first, for deeper social impact

Leigh Chalmers, Heritage Inclusion Manager, and Stu Eve MCIfA (5246), Chief Executive, Wessex Archaeology

*Participant from HMP Erlestoke prison takes part in archaeological excavation during the Digging for Erlestoke project. Credit: Wessex Archaeology*

**Understanding stories from the past can help make sense of the world we live in today.**

**Archaeology, therefore, gives us a direct opportunity to play an impactful role in helping people to explore what it means to live in a place and to coexist.**

At Wessex Archaeology, heritage inclusion projects always begin by identifying a need within a community and an understanding of the impact our work might have. Replacing the words 'social' and 'public' in 'social value' and 'public benefit' with the word 'individual' makes better sense of the work we deliver. That's where our focus lies – in the difference we can make to individuals which, in turn, can affect a community.

Projects such as Well-City Salisbury, Digging for Erlestoke and the Romani Community Archaeology project focus on just that. Particular attention is placed on the experiences, needs and outcomes of individuals and how these are mapped to wider community aims, understanding the underlying value and benefits the projects bring.

Now in its fourth year, Well-City Salisbury is a cross-sector partnership project, based on a social prescribing model. Designed to

support individuals with mental health needs, the project utilises the combined strengths of our experts and that of our partners, ArtCare, Wiltshire Wildlife Trust, and Wiltshire Creative, to give participants access to archaeology, heritage, nature, ecology, creativity, and performing and visual arts. The partnership also provides participants with a pathway between organisations leading onto more opportunities for sustainable engagement. These pathways also introduce participants to choices and experiences they may not have considered before, with many engaging with archaeology for the first time.

The project has grown over the years, responding to the needs of the participants and community, and is now seen as an integral part of the social prescribing offer in Wiltshire. An ongoing programme of accessible and inclusive courses, events, workshops, talks and volunteering opportunities means that participants can choose to engage with the project for as long as they need to. They are invited to identify what they would like to achieve by attending a course where they plan their own journey to improved wellbeing.

*'I feel my mental health has improved, enabling me to have purpose and structure to my day. Anxiety and low mood have improved, and I no longer feel lonely.'*

*Well-City Salisbury participant*

The Romani Community Archaeology project, supported by the National Lottery Heritage Fund and led by Wessex Archaeology Chief Executive Dr Stu Eve and Romany archaeologist John-Henry Phillips, explored the history of the Gypsy Rehabilitation Centre at Thorney Hill in the New Forest. In the 1920s, Romany Gypsies were denied free access to the Forest where they had been living for over 500 years and were mandated to live on seven compounds set up throughout the area.

Following the Second World War, a semi-permanent 'rehabilitation centre' was created by the local council as a way of 'getting the Gypsies ready' to move into permanent housing.

The project saw descendants of the original compound inhabitants still living in the area archaeologically excavate and record the buried remains of

the original prefabricated houses, in the first archaeological excavation in the UK of Romany Gypsy heritage. As well as excavation, the descendants co-curated an exhibition in the New Forest Heritage Centre. The project gave participants a sense of ownership of their heritage and

the ability to shine a light on a dark part of history and one which is extremely relevant to today's Romany Gypsy communities throughout the UK.

Digging for Erlestoke is a community dig with a difference, the difference being that the community was a group of prisoners from HMP Erlestoke, a category C men's prison in Wiltshire.

*'I have been in and out of prison since the age of 13 and this was the first time I have actually learnt anything.'*

*HMP Erlestoke prisoner*

Designed and delivered over 18 months by Wessex Archaeology and supported by the National Lottery Heritage Fund, the project set out to improve wellbeing through access to archaeology and heritage. In the

process, the project took on its own unique energy; a small band of men found meaning and fulfilment and experienced a profound change in their mindset and outlook on life.

Working as part of a team, treating with kindness and respect and meeting the men where they are, not judging them for who they were, the project went beyond wellbeing and became a significant part of the men's rehabilitation as a restorative experience. The project also greatly impacted and benefited the staff members involved across Wessex Archaeology and the prison.

This person-centred approach is adopted across all our heritage inclusion projects and puts individuals at the heart of our work. People feel valued and they benefit from access to and engagement with archaeology and heritage – we just need to provide that opportunity.



*Romany volunteers Louise and Destiny Cash and Katie Witcher. Credit: John-Henry Phillips*



*Dr Stu Eve excavating alongside compound descendant and archaeology student Katie Witcher. Credit: Eszter Halasi*

#### Dr Stu Eve

Stu is the Chief Executive of Wessex Archaeology. With more than 25 years of experience developing archaeological and heritage practices in the UK and internationally, Stu is an innovative leader with a focus on collaboration and creativity. Stu's specialist area of expertise is digital applications for archaeology.



#### Leigh Chalmers

Leigh is a Heritage Inclusion Manager at Wessex Archaeology and is responsible for creating and delivering heritage inclusion and wellbeing projects. With a background in arts and heritage participation, Leigh has found meaningful ways for a range of groups to engage with heritage, including prisons, hospitals and third-sector organisations.

