

Archaeology in the community:

the Lower Thames Crossing and public engagement

'Road schemes' and 'engagement' – major buzzwords in the archaeology sector and often opportunities for change. In April 2023, Place Services embarked on the design and delivery of an exciting programme of outreach events within the corridor of the Lower Thames Crossing development.

The highlight of the project was the community excavation at Weald Country Park, Brentwood, in 2024. Place Services commissioned Oxford Archaeology to

The main body of the project was the provision of individual events, and we worked with schools and community groups to reach a wide and varied audience. We believed it was important for the workshops to be locally focused, presenting the heritage on the public's doorstep. Technical sessions included our

The 'interest'-type events were successful in promoting the rich and diverse heritage of the area. 'Defending London', a walk along the Thames foreshore, highlighted the origins of the settlements and defences adjacent to the river and the vantages that have made Thurrock strategically important for defence over the past 500 years. Turning to more modern history, a public tour of the former Bata Estate and Heritage Centre shed light on the part Thurrock played in a global shoe industry.



Volunteers excavating the bath (centre photo) at Weald Country Park. Credit: Place Services

The involvement of libraries and community centres contributed to the success of the public events because of their connections with the local community. Non-profit charity Thurrock Play Network hosted two events at their scrap centre, which encourages the reuse of items that would normally end up in landfill. Sessions run in collaboration with Saffron Walden Museum gave attendees the opportunity to handle archaeological finds from Thurrock Museum and create their own interpretations of the objects, making a banner and dioramas to tell their own stories. Working alongside Thurrock Young Carers, the Home School Network and Quarry Hill Academy, the project has created three exhibition pieces to be displayed in Thurrock. These events allowed the individual exploration of artefacts, encouraging an atmosphere of imaginative learning while allowing attendees to steer the sessions. Interestingly, parallels were made between the development of prehistoric material culture and modern technological items such as laptops and tablets, linking local heritage with existing interests.

Overall, the project was a great success, and it was a joy to see people enthused by the heritage of their local area. From the excavation, the volunteers left with new skills and experience of public archaeology. Even more significantly, some of these new-to-sector trainee archaeologists have already found employment in professional archaeological units. The training

workshops developed and enhanced individuals' skills in undertaking excavations, building recording and research – the skills needed to be future stewards of their local heritage. The project has cemented relationships between archaeological groups, curators, metal detectorists, museums and PAS officers to help overcome the ever-growing challenges of funding and archiving.

The key benefit of the public events was making the archaeology of the Lower Thames Crossing area visible and accessible, helping local people discover what is on their doorstep. Using craft and intangible heritage – such as storytelling to explore archaeology – made concepts that are sometimes difficult to understand more relatable.

This collaboration between Place Services and National Highways will hopefully have a lasting legacy in the local community. The Lower Thames Crossing has now achieved consent and will be the UK's largest ever road tunnel. Its construction will provide the opportunity to demonstrate what can be achieved through a programme of 21st-century archaeological fieldwork, undertaken as mitigation in advance of this major road scheme. As a result of this project, members of the local community will now be better placed to engage with the process, and organisations within the local heritage sector will be able to maximise the public benefits that the scheme presents.



Attendee recording small find in Identifying Objects workshop. Credit: Place Services



Volunteers with finds at our outreach excavation. Credit: Place Services



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Katie is a Historic Environment Consultant at Place Services with a background in fieldwork, curatorial advice and archaeological outreach. Place Services were appointed as Essex Community Archaeologists for the Lower Thames Crossing development, which provided the opportunity for Katie to engage the public in the heritage of south-east Essex.