Looking for a lifeboat when drowning in data

We all know what we are supposed to do but what happens when you can't?

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Leaving aside our interminable proclivity to disagree on the minutiae, I think we can agree that most of us are in it for the 'greater good' – our jobs depend on it. We have worked hard and we have created a Code and a fine set of Standards, in which we all retain a stake. Yet despite our amaranthine backwards gaze, we don't seem to be collectively good at planning for the future.

We in the commercial sphere are required to do business, and make no mistake we are accountable to our stakeholders as well as the historic environment, but we are also responsible for our employees – no business is no jobs and no jobs is no business. Reeling on this wheel of fortune at the mercy of providence and fiscal policy, like any business our fortunes are tied to those of our customers and some of them have failed, and some more will fail. This can be at any point in a project's progress, but the onus on completion lies with us. Strange then that the concept of business was not even remotely addressed in *The World after PPG16* (Wills 2018). Given that most information is generated by business, by organisations operating within an arguably unsophisticated commercial sector, where are the risk strategies that will safeguard the 'greater good'? And what do we do when we cannot achieve the Standard and remain solvent?

A case in point

In 2010, still the nadir for many of us, we were commissioned to excavate a site in Coventry's historic heart. We excavated evidence for a series of building plots that had been set out in the 13th century but were not developed until the 14th century. In the 15th century two plots included stone-founded, timber-framed rear wings used as artisanal workshops. These were dilapidated by the 17th century but were redeveloped around 1711.

Shortly after the post-excavation process was underway, unpaid invoices alerted us to the fact that our client was not going to fulfil their side of our contract – they had over-extended and gone out of business. To our dismay the relevant planning condition was discharged. Surviving in a local authority undergoing mass redundancy meant we were not able to incur a debt and we stopped work forthwith.

Some years later, when out of the woods, we began to think about how we might do restitution. Completion to the requisite Standards was and remains out of reach. Instead, we took the decision to self-fund dissemination focusing on a few key research themes (Egan 2007; Hunt 2011), presenting the nub of what makes the site stand out in a report that would cater for the widest range of readers.

Our report (Soden 2020) focused on an early-16th-century occupant of the site, a pinner – probably John Garton – his workshop, his diet and the end of his career when the tools of his trade, debris and stock were strewn about his workshop. The pottery he used at table and in his kitchen is barely discernible from that of his immediate predecessors and his successors, but a dearth of popular drinking mugs suggests he may not have been much given to drinking. The presence of chafing dishes suggests he or his neighbours were nevertheless acquainted with fashionable contemporary dining habits. Garton's next door neighbour was a skinner, lining garments with rabbit and squirrel fur, in the difficult, uncertain economic swell of the 1520s. Jet beads from a (probable) rosary suggest that he was suitably pious at a time when religious observance – both its public and private face – was to come under close scrutiny and eventually undergo great change.

The report is, we think, engaging and informative, an illustrated narrative centred in one of the UK's principal medieval cities. Whilst it is certainly arguable that the site is of sufficient importance that the Standards should be met, and perhaps one day they will, for the moment we have put into the public domain something worthy and good for which there is currently no Standard.

I doubt that we are alone in having similarly unrecoverable projects that have a significant heritage benefit. Isn't it time then that collectively, as a profession, we provided practicable pathways for the realisation of what is likely to be a considerable dormant resource?

Our report is currently hosted online alongside this edition of *The Archaeologist* at https://www.archaeologists.net/archaeologist but is available for publication.

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A cache of 109 unfinished pin shafts and 450 unused pin heads; scale 10cm. Credit: Archaeology Warwickshire

'Three Lions' harness pendant. This item was discovered at the very beginning of the English football team's 2010 World Cup campaign. A somewhat tongue-in-cheek press release was concocted to the effect that the discovery of an item which was so obviously the prototype for the team's three lions emblem presaged victory for the national team. We thought it might be picked up by the red-top press (not noted for their coverage of archaeology) if we were lucky; in the event it went viral, being picked up by media all over the world including Brazil and Australia. (https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/ 10327864) One of our most successful press stories ever! Credit: Archaeology Warwickshire

Two typical chopped, sawn and modified pinner's bones from the site, one copper-stained; scale 10cm. Credit: Archaeology Warwickshire

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Stuart began his archaeological career on an MSC scheme in 1982 and subsequently directed and published the results of a wide variety of excavations before providing local expertise to the West Midlands Regional Research Frameworks. Stuart took the reins at Archaeology Warwickshire in 2011 and has successfully led the team as Principal Archaeologist and Business Manager to become a valued and sustainable traded service at Warwickshire County Council.