

Experience and enthusiasm... linear archaeological projects and lateral thinking

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Searching for mass graves in Bosnia using aerial photography, botany and geophysics.
Credit: Costain; © HS2 Ltd

The successful management of an archaeological project requires a number of skills most people would not associate with archaeology. I quizzed a number of colleagues on exactly what words spring to mind when archaeology is mentioned... answers included 'Fossils', 'Romans', 'Discovery' and 'Ancient bones' and all but the first are true; nonetheless, no-one mentioned the practical skills or preparation behind the activity that leads to the latter three.

Working in professional and research archaeology for 20 years, I've fulfilled a number of roles including the completion of three post-doctoral positions and work on five large-scale infrastructure projects, thereby bridging the worlds of academia and commercial archaeology in the UK and abroad. All of this has furnished me with a diverse skillset and is a world away from my first role as a delicatessen supervisor at Sainsbury's. However, all of these roles, even

my time at Sainsbury's, have contributed to the management skills I apply to the day-to-day running of archaeological works on major infrastructure projects.

Under pressure...

To this day, one of the most challenging jobs I have ever had was working for Sainsbury's and it is this role that laid the foundations for the way I tackle many of the challenges I face on a daily basis. The job was highly pressurised; not only did it involve the obvious – serving customers (client facing) – but also an eye for detail, ensuring the product looked attractive (delighting the client), that cleanliness was maintained to a high standard (COVID-19!), rigorous health and safety protocols were adhered to (risk assessments and method statements), stock and waste managed (quality control) and value considered (commercial).

The specialist

The basis of my technical knowledge is firmly rooted in my first degree and its emphasis on

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geomorphology and applied ecology. I went on to develop this further at Master's level, studying palaeoecology and geoarchaeology – further enhanced by my PhD on palaeoentomology. It was also at this point I began to learn the basics of field archaeology. The diverse post-doctoral work refined my skills further and provided me with the ability to critically analyse the data sets I was presented with rather than accepting data at face value.

Stafford Area Improvements Programme (SAIP)

This project was my lesson in never saying 'no' and my second role on a large-scale infrastructure project. Staffordshire Alliance saw the construction of 6km of new railway between Yarnfield and Norton Bridge in Staffordshire. The challenges were mental and physical. I worked with a hugely talented multi-disciplinary construction and heritage team. In doing so I gained an appreciation of a dynamic evaluation/mitigation strategy and how best to manage the historic environment across such a large tract of land. If Sainsbury's gave me the basis for management, this work provided the knowledge to think laterally and challenge preconceived ideas. It also taught me how important it is that the archaeological works are seen as part of the construction process, not ancillary to it.

Walking the (railway) line

SAIP probably had the greatest impact on the way I manage my works and sites today as it encouraged me to be more tenacious and not afraid to take responsibility and make

difficult decisions. Developing my specialist knowledge and excavating in challenging environments provided me with the skills to design bespoke and highly specialised strategies.

From activities as 'simple' as micro-siting a river channel to preserve the archaeology in situ (this required the presentation of a convincing case for not undertaking the archaeological works to the curator, but also convincing the construction team, hydrologists and other specialists that we could make this work) to devising an excavation after complex waterlogged deposits were encountered on the commissioning critical pathway of the same project. Again, my response was a distillation of confidence in my own specialist experience, an eye for detail and planning, and an earnest desire to do the best job I could, to the highest standards possible.

Working with Costain Skanska JV also introduced me to the concept of LEAN. I had not realised how LEAN my work was at Sainsbury's until I came into contact with this practice last year. This technique of streamlining works and eliminating waste is now applied on our rural sites for HS2 enabling works in Area South to expedite the programme and ensure seamless working. Similar to ensuring the deli was well stocked and supplied, this simply boils down to ensuring that the archaeologists have everything they require to do the job efficiently, the process has been considered and the correctly skilled individuals are deployed to carry out the correct tasks.

The ability to work as part of a changing team is another key skill, along with promoting diversity and a culture of trust and reliance within that team. Having worked in the UK, Europe and Middle East with teams from nations as diverse as Eritrea, Brazil, Barbados, New Zealand, Fiji and Nepal gave me the perfect grounding in this, where skills such as compromise, tolerance and adaptability come to the fore.

Another much under-rated skill possessed by many archaeologists is resilience. The ability



Excavating peat deposits in Staffordshire. Credit: Costain; © HS2 Ltd

to move from work site to work site, live away from home, make new friends, support new colleagues and learn new approaches should not be forgotten or overlooked. All of these contribute to the ability to support the wider team's well-being and mental health when projects become complex and deadlines are tight.

My personal experience of this was during an emotionally and mentally challenging project in Bosnia. Maintaining morale, openness and the ability to communicate problems within the team and providing a forum to do so are also key to the successful and timely delivery of a site.

There are so many more experiences I could write about that have contributed to how I successfully manage complex projects within wider portfolios of work. And when I left Sainsbury's, I could not have envisaged the job I do today. My plan is to keep learning from my experiences – positive and negative – and keep on improving all of the skills that contribute to archaeology... and writing this has made me reflect that most of them are not linked to wielding a shovel or a trowel!



Clyde Wind Farm 2010. Credit: Kate Bain. Credit: Costain; © HS2 Ltd



Archaeological Clerk of Works, Clyde Wind Farm. Credit: Costain; © HS2 Ltd



Auger survey, Qatar. Credit: Costain; © HS2 Ltd

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