

# ‘You’re going to be famous!’

## Archaeology and the intrusion of the media



**A few weeks ago, lockdown took a new turn for me. I had been asked to help HS2 with a story that could be put out in the press to tie in with the launch of the Festival of Archaeology. Working with the HS2 HERDS team, we decided that the site known as Wellwick Farm was the best candidate. Over the course of a week or so I put together a description of the site, its (outstanding!) archaeology, and gathered a selection of the showiest photos. This I dispatched to HS2 confirming I was happy for the text I had written to be quoted but otherwise without much of a second thought.**

Then the day of the press release came around. I got a call from the HS2 communications team to say that it had generated an enormous amount of interest and would I be happy to talk to any journalists who requested it. Not long after I found myself giving a Zoom interview to ITV News Central to be shown in their weekend bulletins. The articles were made public the following day and I woke up to find that I had been quoted in everything from *The Guardian* and *The Bucks Herald*, to online news platforms

in Edinburgh, Belfast, Miami and Berlin. The article was even number three on BBC News most read – beaten only by President Trump and Will Smith’s marital dramas. Career peak reached?

Over the following week I spoke to several magazines, from those covering the construction and railway industries to both *British Archaeology* and *Current Archaeology*. I was asked questions about the detail of the press release: Could I confirm what date the skeleton in the ditch was? Do we know how he died? Is it unusual to find someone ‘buried’ that way? Do I really think he was murdered? The conversations with the archaeology magazines were, as expected, more specialised and less focused on the sensationalist burial. I really enjoyed having these conversations as it was great to hear the fascination and enthusiasm of archaeological and non-archaeological journalists.

Despite the enthusiasm, the experience was initially immensely stressful, but in a very exciting way. I have never been involved with the press to this extent before and throughout my career, and had never been provided any kind of training for answering these sorts of questions. That said, the HS2 communications team did a fantastic job of briefing me for each conversation and making sure the journalists were going to stick to the archaeology, leaving the politics of the scheme out of it. It is the sort of situation where common sense goes a long way. Keep the client at the forefront, consider what you say before saying it, and stick to the facts!

Dr Rachel Wood  
MCifA (9442),  
Archaeological  
Consultant,  
AECOM

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*The much-featured Iron Age skeleton found at the bottom of a ditch in no discernible or deliberate grave cut. Credit: INFRA-JV; © HS2 Ltd*



*A view of some of the archaeology at Wellwick. You can see a large enclosure surrounding a horse-shoe funerary monument. This was just part of the very complex landscape uncovered at the site. Credit: INFRA-JV*



*The surprise feature of the site – a large circular monument made up of post-holes that would have held timber posts. The monument is over 65m in diameter. This is one of the earliest features on the site and later versions of a trackway can be seen to be respecting the centre. Credit: INFRA-JV; © HS2 Ltd*

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Throughout my time with Fusion, I have worked with a documentary company, Lion TV, who are producing a piece on the construction of HS2. This has been a completely different experience to the news outlets. Essentially every time we find something interesting or are working on a site that we know has a great story, a film crew with a camera and microphone boom attend site. They ask us and the site teams to have conversations about what we are doing and our current interpretations of the features. Often, we've just had this conversation off camera and are asked to repeat what we've just said. There is nothing quite like finding yourself in front of the camera to make your mind go completely and utterly blank. All professional words and information vanish! After a few stumbled sentences though you soon remember that 'I am an archaeologist and I know what I'm talking about!' and the camera isn't so intimidating. It's something about knowing that what you are saying is going to be broadcast around the country for the whole archaeological profession and general public to watch and judge. I know, I've done it myself for other similar documentaries. You sit there and think: 'Well, I know they're saying it's a villa, but it really just looks like they've got a ditch and one piece of Samian...', quickly followed by, 'I'm sure it makes much more sense on site'.

What you don't get to see from being an armchair observer is the amount of work that has gone into the site before the film crew turn up. Nor that the bit that makes the final cut was actually the twelfth time the archaeologist had said that to camera, and the seventeenth time they had pointed out that piece of Samian in the ground. Turns out making TV comes with an awful lot of repetition. Whilst initially annoying for those making their bid for stardom, the experience I have had with Lion TV has been extremely positive. This is not their first archaeological gig and their team members are really knowledgeable without ever having worked as archaeologists – they are like sponges for information! Just like the news journalists, they are also extremely enthusiastic and a captive audience for the archaeologists who love to explain what they are doing.

Of course, having extra people on site with TV cameras comes with additional issues these days. The global pandemic caused by COVID-19 has meant that we have had to reassess and change every approach we have to on-site health and safety. Measures such as additional welfare cabins, staggered break times, extensive cleaning and 2m social distancing have meant that we have been able to keep going throughout. We have worked closely with all our archaeological subcontractors to ensure the highest levels of cleanliness and protection for all staff, both on-site and back in the labs. It has certainly been a challenge and we continue to adapt, keeping in line with all government advice.



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Whilst the involvement of the media and film crews can initially be an intrusion, I view it as an exciting and engaging side of the job. I would never have predicted that I would need such diverse skills as an archaeological consultant. I certainly never thought I'd be giving interviews to the national news! While it is not something I do every day, it has come to be something I enjoy. I see it as a

crucial part of the engagement we do with the local public and opportunities such as TV documentaries provide the chance to reach a much wider audience. Above all else, archaeologists love nothing more than enthusiastically sharing our findings with anyone who will listen!

Lights, camera... dig!



*Lion TV filming the excavation of a lead coffin burial at Wellwick Farm. Credit: Fusion JV; © HS2 Ltd*



**Dr Rachel Wood**

Rachel is an Archaeological Consultant for AECOM. For the past two years she has been seconded to Fusion JV as a Historic Environment (HERDS) Manager. Fusion is an enabling works contractor working for HS2 Phase 1 Central, London to Birmingham. In her role as HERDS Manager, Rachel is responsible for the archaeological investigation of a section of the central route of the scheme. The Fusion HERDS team works with archaeological subcontractors to deliver the wide range of investigations necessary in the construction of HS2. They liaise closely with stakeholders such as County Archaeologists and Historic England to ensure the highest standards of archaeological work. Before joining AECOM, Rachel worked as a field archaeologist after gaining her PhD from the University of York in Roman landscape archaeology, investigating the Crambeck pottery industry in Yorkshire.



*Filming underway whilst a feature is recorded using photogrammetry. Credit: Fusion JV; © HS2 Ltd*