

# OPINION

## The ‘platform approach’, and a response

In the last edition of *The Archaeologist* (110) Brendon Wilkins’ article *From pipeline to platform: redesigning archaeology’s place* provided an insight into how, by reframing the social purpose of archaeology, legacy can be in-built from the outset. In response to this, Mark Samuel has provided the following opinion piece.



*Better late than never! Tracery from Merton Priory found in 1959 goes on display in 2002 after analysis. Credit: Museum of London, Hazel Forsythe*

**S**ocial media platforms are a natural way forward for widening engagement in archaeology, allowing the young to have a direct input into excavating, processing, interpreting and publishing sites, but ‘not as we know it’. Archaeology field schools around the country have, however, been running active courses for decades. The Kent Archaeology Field School tapped into this appetite for learning on the job early on. Many other units have had a relatively informal ‘field school’ element but usually as a pro bono method of public engagement. The Kent Archaeology Society (very much alive) has an annual field school.

Social media enables civic participation in archaeology and heritage projects and every participant gets an archaeological qualification approved by CIfA. Furthermore, the reach and sophistication of the use of social media as a method of self-funding is unique.



*Experience in map regression allows a major urban excavation to be correctly sited (just!). Credit: Mark Samuel*





Office provision for post-excavation analysis has to be built into projects, although an old airfield may do. Credit: Mark Samuel



An updated project design is vital to ensure unexpected finds are properly dealt with. Credit: Mark Samuel

*Young people see themselves confronted with an ecological catastrophe and naturally wonder 'How did we get here?' and 'How does my archaeological experience fit into the bigger picture?'*

Perhaps a disruptor such as DigVentures was called for? The traditional 'Levels of publication' were not invented by Barry Cunliffe. The truth is more complicated. Yes, Cunliffe chaired at a joint working party of the Council for British Archaeology and the Department of the Environment in 1983, but the complications introduced by developer-funded archaeology were not addressed until 1992. The challenges posed by digital publication were addressed at a workshop as recently as 2017 with Sir Barry as workshop facilitator. It remains a live issue, not some past and outmoded form of restriction.

DigVentures enlists as replacements: 'Publishing hubs, online learning resources, e-commerce crowd-funding payment systems, and a read/write recording system enabling project participants to collaboratively produce archaeological data'. Are these satisfactory? Observe that the language used is that of the market. The excavation report is seen as a consumer product. The phrase 'pipeline workflow' is repeatedly used to describe the traditional process of report writing.

It is inevitable that archaeologists serve an increasingly political and advocacy role. The changed role of archaeology in an increasingly polarised present is an interesting aspect of what DigVentures potentially offers. In my own experience of

excavation in the 1980s, the personal view was scrupulously avoided; now it is as scrupulously demanded. Young people see themselves confronted with an ecological catastrophe and naturally wonder 'How did we get here?' and 'How does my archaeological experience fit into the bigger picture?'

Taryn Nixon has validly called upon 'our very human need to connect to other human stories and understand how we belong'. The *Power of Place* document (2000) has, however, introduced some confused thinking into DigVentures. Is it always desirable that the receiving population acquire a stronger sense of bounded, local identity? Recent events suggest this is not always a desirable outcome. Sometimes emotional responses must be guarded against.

The presence of qualified archaeologists and experts on site is advertised on the DV website, but will user feeds determine whether certain types of finds are to be retained? Some finds such as worked timber and architectural fragments are a nightmare to remove, conserve and store and can as a result end up on some units' spoil heaps! Unfamiliar classes of find may only emerge as important long after excavation. What happens when such unexpected and demanding discoveries are made? Can the paying 'participants' cope? What about



conservation and storage costs that can stretch indefinitely into the future? The Prittlewell princely burial was excavated in 2003 (under Taryn's aegis). This required a world-class MOLA team both for excavation and publication (2019). This permanent staff had access to their own museum laboratories staffed by experts.

Ruptions occurred when outside bodies started seeing *Time Team* as a satisfactory competitor to established and highly equipped units working under pressure to excavate very difficult archaeology. DigVentures risks going down this path if its role is not better defined and its limitations better understood.

**Mark Samuel** PhD FSA MCIFA (2175)

#### Further reading

CHAT, 2018 *CHAT ACT: Agency, Action and Advocacy*, School of Culture and Society, Aarhus University, Denmark (Moesgaard Museum, Friday 26–Sunday 28 October 2018)

English Heritage and Historic Environment Review Steering Group, 2000 *Power of Place: The Future of the Historic Environment*. London: Power of Place Office

Gadano, P, ed, 2018 *Eco-Visionaries: Art, Architecture, and New Media after the Anthropocene*, Hatje Cantz Verlag, Berlin

Jones, S, MacSween, A, Jeffrey, S, Morris, R and Heyworth, M, 2003 From the Ground Up The Publication of Archaeological Projects: a user needs survey. A summary, *Internet Archaeology* 14, <https://doi.org/10.1114/ia.14.4>

Oxford School of Archaeology, 2017 *21st-century Challenges for Archaeology Workshop 6: 'Challenges for archaeological publication in a digital age Who are we writing this stuff for, anyway?' 7 December 2017*, <http://www.arch.ox.ac.uk/contact.htm>

## Response to Mark Samuel

**T**hanks for taking the time to read and respond. You're right – despite Cunliffe being principle author on the cited 'levels of publication' paper, it would be unfair to lay the blame for this concept at one person's feet – no matter how big the professorial boots.

The broader point is that framing archaeological knowledge production as a series of six ascending steps was a sensible way to bring order to the Rescue Revolution, but the unintended consequence was that this became an organising principle for the marketisation of over 90 per cent of all subsequent archaeological excavation.

The question in my article was therefore, in this scenario, how much, if at all, do the public benefit from how archaeology is currently organised?

The market logic of these predominantly client-funded investigations is to understand a site's formation processes, reporting results in 'grey literature' (levels 2 and 3). When research occurs, it is usually conducted by a much smaller academic sector and paid for by research grants (level 4). We may enjoy writing and reading these specialist publications, but the wider public benefit of archaeology is assumed to be achieved when results are finally made digestible for a non-specialist public and media (levels 5 and 6).

Fifty-two per cent of people working in the commercial sector in the UK are employed by charities with a social

and educational mission, so it is ironic that the sum of community, public archaeology and educational work undertaken by archaeological organisations in the UK was calculated at just 2.1 per cent of those organisations' annual turnovers. Seemingly bucking the trend, *The Prittlewell princely burial* is undoubtedly a major contribution by a world-class team, but the fact that this gold-plated case study took 17 years to publish rather illustrates my point.

In stepping forward as a 'disruptor' and redesigning archaeology as a digital, peer-to-peer platform, our question was simple: what if archaeology could do more?

Our answer is that it can and should do more, and our role (and its limitations) within that is extremely clear to us.

As a Cifa Registered Organisation, the archaeological work performed by our team is quality assured, in the same way as every other organisation so designated. A more urgent worry about the standards being delivered on site might actually be to examine the 'established and highly equipped units' excavating difficult archaeology and ask what they're doing to help advance the practice of archaeology and future-proof the profession? I hope that this helps allay your concerns, though I fear that if you believe that the rot set in with *Time Team*, we are unlikely to see eye to eye!

**Brendon Wilkins** MCIFA (4494), Projects Director, DigVentures