



Seeing is believing

a call for public engagement in our everyday work

In the recent groundswell of discussion around public benefit and how professional archaeologists can effectively deliver it, there has been a noticeable focus on large-scale, often high-profile infrastructure or city centre projects and grant-funded works. These are unquestionably valuable case studies, but there is a concerning absence of the evaluations and smaller excavations that form a significant proportion of commercial archaeology projects.

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*Local primary school visiting
a multi-period excavation on
the edge of their village.*

Credit: WAAS

ClfA SIG for Voluntary and Community Archaeology

Does this mean that there is negligible public benefit to be achieved from small and medium-sized projects? No – that is very much not the case, as we argue below, but our discussions and case studies require broadening to avoid this perception unconsciously developing. Case studies matter, as it's harder to draw lessons when there are significant differences between them and your own work. If archaeology is to increase the level of public benefits it generates, a wider range of case studies and open discussion of the barriers faced by smaller developer-funded projects are required.



Two of the Warboys Archaeology Group volunteers involved in the evaluation of the site. Credit: Oxford Archaeology East

The largest single share of the commercial market in archaeology is housing (generating 36 per cent of the sector's income in 2017–18), ranging in size from watching briefs on property extensions through to new towns with tens of thousands of residents. Many developers have a strategic focus on being socially responsible as well as commercially driven, choosing to prioritise sustainability, sense of place and community. Place-making, strengthening community links and wellbeing opportunities are just some of the public benefits archaeology can deliver, alongside potential publicity boosts and improved community relations for the client. Yet how many housing developers draw on archaeology to achieve these aims?

In the worrying days of planning reform, it is more vital than ever to demonstrate our true value to policy makers, clients and the public. Many residential developers already undertake work to fulfil their corporate social responsibilities, making this an open door that we could and should be walking through. Together – as unit managers, site staff, consultants, planning advisors and community archaeologists – we can expand the benefits archaeology brings to many more people in many more places.

Tales of potential

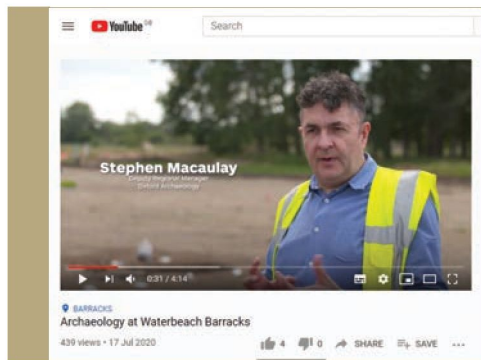
During the evaluation of a site for a housing estate in Warboys, Cambridgeshire, Bellway Homes agreed to members of the local archaeological group getting involved under supervision from and in addition to the archaeological contractors. The volunteers learned new skills and benefited from the physical, social and mental wellbeing of working outdoors as part of a team. Members of the group continued to volunteer during the excavation and assisted with a 'pop-up' exhibition of the findings after the excavation finished. The group advised on the best date and location to hold the exhibition and where to advertise it. They also helped source extra tables and came along to support the archaeological team – even bringing along bunting to put up outside the



The pop-up exhibition at Warboys Methodist Church, held in July 2019. Credit: Oxford Archaeology East

church, creating an air of festivity! Warboys Archaeology Group took ownership of the event, which helped to engage other residents and foster a sense of pride in the heritage of their area.

Opportunities have changed but by no means diminished with the impact of COVID-19, and recent months have demonstrated that there is considerable potential and appetite for off-site engagement. This year, Urban&Civic, the masterplanner for Cambridgeshire developments at Waterbeach Barracks, Wintringham, and Alconbury Weald,



A screenshot of the 'Archaeology at Waterbeach' video recorded and released in summer 2020. Credit: Urban&Civic

has released videos and podcasts to share the findings from archaeological excavations, not only informing neighbouring residents about the areas where they live, but anchoring new communities with a sense of the past.

Rebecca Britton, Head of Communications, Communities and Partnerships for Urban&Civic, said:

“Bringing forward a new community is a very complicated process – both technically as you work through the planning process, and also in how you engage people with it from early planning, through delivery, sales and marketing and then community development. Heritage is literally the gift that keeps on giving in that it consistently engages people in the process: from vision and identity, through to the digs on site and work with local schools and communities, and in to place-making and connecting new residents together, to their new home and to local communities. The heritage of all our developments is really key to putting heart and soul into the new communities coming forward, and the rich tapestry of stories, finds and information from the archaeology in and around our developments is a fundamental part of how we bring that to life.”



Promotional shot for the launch of the Alconbury Weald Stories podcast episode on the heritage of the site, featuring Raksha Dave (left), who presents the podcast, with Clemency Cooper (centre) and Rebecca Britton (right). Credit: Urban&Civic

Sharing the good and the bad

These sorts of case studies are all too often not shared, despite examples existing of the impacts public engagement can achieve on smaller commercial projects. Besides a lack of resources for smaller projects to be formally evaluated or disseminate their own outcomes, there is perhaps a perception that case studies need to be 'impressive' and sizable to be shared. As a profession, we are also poor at recording the benefits clients receive from a project's public engagement. Anecdotally, there are cases of houses being sold more quickly due to public engagement and publicity of the archaeology brought to light during development. We need to be collating and sharing this evidence, so that all can see what there is to be gained – and lost, by not doing more.

Public engagement does not have to be costly or time consuming to be effective – a site noticeboard, primary school visit or short finds session can have a big impact. We are not advocating for weeks of open days on every site, but for more projects to include meaningful public engagement that is proportionate to the scale of work and archaeological significance. How do we determine what is 'meaningful' or 'proportionate'? Whilst there isn't an easy answer, we shouldn't ignore the potential medium- and smaller-scale projects have for generating public benefits. After all, part of ClfA's role is to 'maximise the benefits that archaeologists bring to society'.

Just as it is important to showcase studies of good practice, we also need to better understand the barriers to embedding public benefit in all developer-led projects. There are short turnarounds, the concern of losing tenders due to public engagement costs, fear of negative publicity, sensitive sites, and other such barriers to open and direct conversations with developers. These hurdles are real, and will only be overcome through open, frank discussion and closer collaboration.

Do you have any thoughts to add or case studies to share? Join us on Wednesday 24 February at 10.30am, when we'll be continuing the conversation over a ClfA Digital Tea Break. As practitioners of community archaeology and members of the ClfA Special Interest Group for Voluntary and Community Archaeology, we welcome ClfA's commitment to maximise the value that archaeologists bring to society in its next strategic plan. We are working with the central ClfA team to develop a web resource with a variety of case studies that demonstrate the range of ways archaeologists deliver public benefit. If you wish to find out more or can't make the tea break discussion, please get in touch by emailing admin@archaeologists.net



Clemency Cooper

Clem is the Community Archaeology Manager for Oxford Archaeology, leading public engagement projects in partnership with community groups and educational institutions, and outreach activities as part of developer-funded archaeological investigations. She has worked in archaeological public engagement for ten years, previously in the university and museum sector.



Nina O'Hare

Nina is a Community Project Officer for Worcestershire Archive & Archaeology Service, where she previously worked as a field archaeologist. She runs grant-funded projects alongside a wide range of outreach activities, working across the unit's unique combination of commercial archaeology, HER and archive services.