

Public engagement and the 'new normal'

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Public engagement and outreach have become an increasingly important part of the planning process. The impact of Covid-19 on the standard approach to public engagement has been well documented; however, can we still provide innovative and wide-reaching alternatives?



Site overview with building footings associated with the former workhouse buildings.
Credit: IcenI Projects

IcenI Projects, a dynamic development consultancy that embarked on a foray into commercial archaeology in 2019, strives towards a pioneering approach to community engagement. Our aim is to engage with communities, peers in the archaeological industry, and other contractors and companies within the planning and development industry, to share the public value of development-led archaeology.

IcenI's flagship archaeological project, the Middlesex Hospital Annex, is the site of the Covent Garden Workhouse constructed in the mid-1770s for the parish of St Paul Covent Garden and an associated cemetery that was operational between 1790 and 1853. From 1836, the Grade II listed building became a workhouse of the Strand Union parishes, before transitioning into the Central London Sick Asylum and later the Middlesex Hospital Annex. The ongoing cemetery and workhouse excavation is enabling the redevelopment of the site through the refurbishment of the original workhouse building for mixed-use private residential and public amenity space.

The site's historic interest stems from it being a rare surviving example of an 18th-century London workhouse and its association with the broader socio-economic issues related to the workhouse institution and its residents. During this period, the workhouses were built by parishes according to poor-relief legislation and were often seen as a deterrent to the able-bodied pauper, as their often-terrible conditions meant only the most destitute in society were desperate enough to enter. Dr Joseph Rogers, who played a significant role in 19th-century workhouse reform, was Chief Medical Officer in the 1850s and his experiences at the Strand Union workhouse led to his involvement in the reform of Poor Law healthcare provision, a significant step towards providing more accessible medical care in Britain. Additionally, the abhorrent conditions of the workhouse may have provided key inspiration for the famous workhouses portrayed by Dickens in *Oliver Twist* and

later works, as Dickens resided for a period on Cleveland Street, a few doors down from the Strand Union workhouse.

The engagement scope and delivery for the project undertaken in collaboration with L – P : Archaeology centres around the empowerment of the archaeological team. This approach is focused around a project symposium open to staff of all grades and both organisations, and is born out of an earlier symposium concept that L – P : Archaeology implemented for its *100 Minorities* project. The main objective is about providing opportunity for everyone's voice to be heard by allowing people to suggest new ways to look at and present the archaeological material on site. It involves them taking ownership of the archaeological interpretation, while creating valuable project designs that will be delivered to a wider audience through online blogs, vlogs, local interest group presentations, online school presentations, and other avenues.

Not only does the symposium fulfil the obligations of the planning condition, but it also demonstrates a unique opportunity to upskill, develop, and hopefully retain the archaeological professionals who will become the industry's future supervisors, project officers, project managers and consultants.

The symposium has also provided the opportunity to explore the use of an alternative medium for engagement, initiating a conversation with a local potter to begin using the ubiquitous ceramic sherds excavated on site as a starting point for public conversations on Victorian workhouse society. We also realised that ceramic technology is crucial evidence for any archaeologist working on site and can be used as a tangible proxy of socio-economic conditions, particularly at the birth of mass production of utilitarian wares in the Victorian era. Through social media, publication, and experimental pottery throwing and reproduction, we hope to explore the similarities and differences between Victorian and modern ceramic production, raise awareness of the site, engage the public through a tangible medium, and provide technical training to on-site field staff from a present-day expert.



Retained workhouse. Credit: Icen Projects



TV production crew filming as the excavations are ongoing. Credit: Icen Projects

To complement the other outreach projects, we have commissioned extensive filming on site with a TV production company, who hope to broadcast a documentary relating to the archaeology and history of the workhouse. This will capture interviews with key figures of the archaeological team and members of the construction team on their experiences of,

and contribution to, the archaeological site works. The filming of the site works enables us to demonstrate tangible evidence of how the historic environment can be used as a place-making tool and how archaeological work can be successfully interfaced with demolition and construction works within the development process. Additionally, journalist Sean



Some of the pathology present. Credit: Icen Projects

We felt that the memorialisation should be demonstrated by something illustrative of this major contribution and show a respect that was perhaps not afforded to them in life.

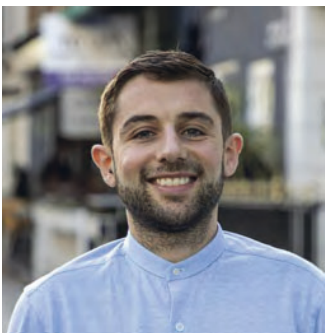


Members of the construction project management team are interviewed in the workhouse. Credit: Icen Projects

Russell – a former archaeological colleague – introduced the site to a wider audience through a publication in *The Independent* about the ongoing excavations, which was a rare opportunity to read an article in the national press written by a former “dirty boots archaeologist”.

Finally, a key component of the planning requirements for the site is appropriate memorialisation of the burial ground. As excavation of the skeletal remains continues, initial observations indicate a high prevalence of medical anatomisation and dissection amongst the remains of former workhouse residents. Although it is not unusual to see this type of treatment amongst burials of this period, the percentages within the cemetery suggest some kind of organised industry around the remains of the deceased. Whether it was occurring before or after the passing of the Anatomy Act in 1832 may be difficult to determine, but regardless, the substantial contribution of these people to contemporary medical knowledge is significant. We felt that the memorialisation should be demonstrated by something illustrative of this major contribution and show a respect that was perhaps not afforded to them in life. Through collaboration with a local artist, Icen Projects is developing a piece of cast bronze public art to tell the story of the people buried in the cemetery through ethical remembrance, to highlight the past legacy of the site and its situation within the contemporary community of Camden.

As we settle into the ‘new normal’, the fundamental changes in society have given us the opportunity to reflect on archaeological engagement and public outreach and enabled us to reframe our approach. By engaging all stakeholders involved in a large development project and empowering the boots-on-the-ground archaeologists to take ownership of – and pride in – their contribution, we have given a voice to the previous inhabitants of the Strand Union workhouse through the very people intimately involved in its present story. We hope that some of our frameworks and approaches will be retained as part of the new normal of public engagement, which also reaches and engages our peers and others in the development industry in a post-Covid-19 world.



Stephen McLeod

Stephen is a senior archaeologist for Icen Projects, a development consultancy that established an archaeology team in August 2019. Stephen has worked within developer-led archaeology for numerous commercial archaeology units in Ireland and the UK over the last ten years. Prior to joining Icen, Stephen was a field archaeologist, predominantly on complex urban sites within London and on large rural infrastructure schemes throughout the UK. Stephen is passionate about interacting with local communities regarding the importance and wide-reaching benefit of archaeology.



Sarah Ricketts

Sarah joined Icen Projects as an archaeologist in October 2020 in the midst of the Covid-19 pandemic. With over ten years' experience working across both the commercial and academic sectors in the United Kingdom, Egypt, Australia and New Zealand, she is enthusiastic about communicating the value of archaeology to contemporary audiences, delivering positive outcomes for developer-led projects, and meeting and working with the diverse groups of people that are brought together for the purposes of archaeology.

*Archaeologist excavating structural remains of the former workhouse buildings.
Credit: Icen Projects*

She has a proven track record of delivering complex fieldwork projects, delivering cultural heritage management solutions, providing advice on heritage policy and legislation, and diverse stakeholder consultation. Her work has had a strong focus on large infrastructure projects and Indigenous heritage management, across both urban and rural settings.