

# LOST & FOUND

Leigh Chalmers, Heritage Inclusion Development Specialist, Wessex Archaeology

In early March 2020, I was employed by Wessex Archaeology as their Heritage Inclusion Development Specialist, an innovative new role created to explore the mental wellbeing benefits that engagement with archaeology and heritage can bring to individuals. Six days after I started the country went into lockdown. By the end of that month, I had begun to plan what I now know was the pilot that formed the foundations for a seven-month project, *Lost and Found*.

Funded by Historic England's Covid-19 Emergency Response Fund, *Lost and Found* is a digital heritage wellbeing project. A museum created by the public for the public, *Lost and Found* gives participants a unique insight into the work at Wessex Archaeology and presents them with an opportunity to meet some of the experts who work there. A number of groups each met for a designated number of sessions and participants were invited to curate an interactive digital museum using some of the objects and artefacts from the vast archive collection at Wessex Archaeology.

In addition to and complementing the live sessions, participants were also given the option to take part in creative activities that reflected the theme of each session. Their responses in photography, drawing and the written word were also added to the museum, so the result is an immersive project that facilitates not only learning and discovery but allows for personal response and reflection.

I am not an archaeologist, so my relationship with archaeology is new and fascinating. I remember the day I first saw the archive facilities at Wessex Archaeology Head Office – boxes and boxes of unearthed objects, each object associated with a story, each story linked to a person, each person a conduit for a connection. This is a dream room; every object is the beginning of a new story.



*Digital Flower. Credit: T. Yeates and Tom Westhead, copyright Wessex Archaeology*

The experts are also the greatest resource because they are the ones who can bring the stories of the objects to life. This tracks all the way back from the archaeologist who found the object in the first place, to the creative team who enable it to be shared through photography or detailed drawing or 3D scanning. The journey of the object after it has been found and the care that goes into recording and looking after it are as inspiring as the history of the object itself.

These two simple ingredients, objects and experts, were present at every *Lost and Found* session and they were the two things that the participants commented on week after week.

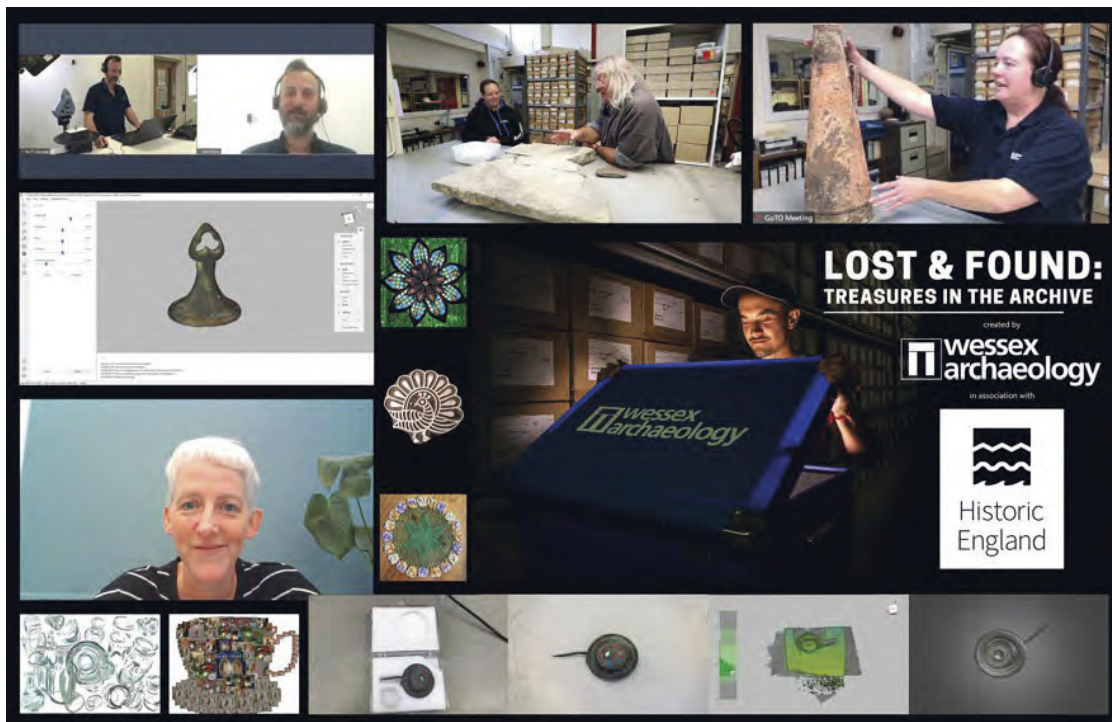
*'I felt a connection with those objects emotionally. I loved their stories of what they were and how they were found...'*

Over the duration of *Lost and Found* we worked with such broad groups of people that every time we ran a session, we learnt something new. Although the bare bones of the project were the same, how these bones were fleshed out very much depended on the groups we worked with. This archaeology project was as much about the community participants as it was about the archaeology itself. We were diversifying our engagement.

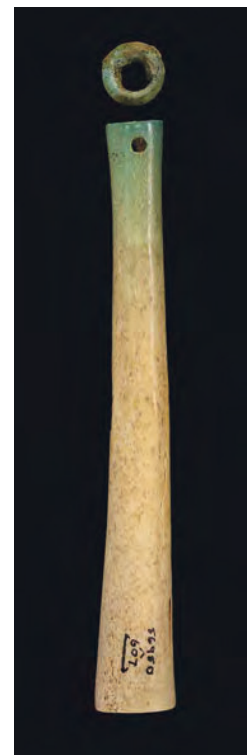
The success of the project was the triangulation between the participants, the resources and the technology. The project was delivered digitally because we had no other option; the pandemic forced these things together at an opportune moment, and the lack of choice meant that we had to be innovative.

We have achieved a great deal. We have reached new audiences and we have embedded this work within our company. The sharp edge of crisis has given a clear focus for activity; these innovations have been fast and have been funded. Quick progress has been made in a time of need. A simple idea has reached new and more diverse communities. The possibilities of digital technology have shone a spotlight on the objects in our archive, and the incredible voices of our staff.

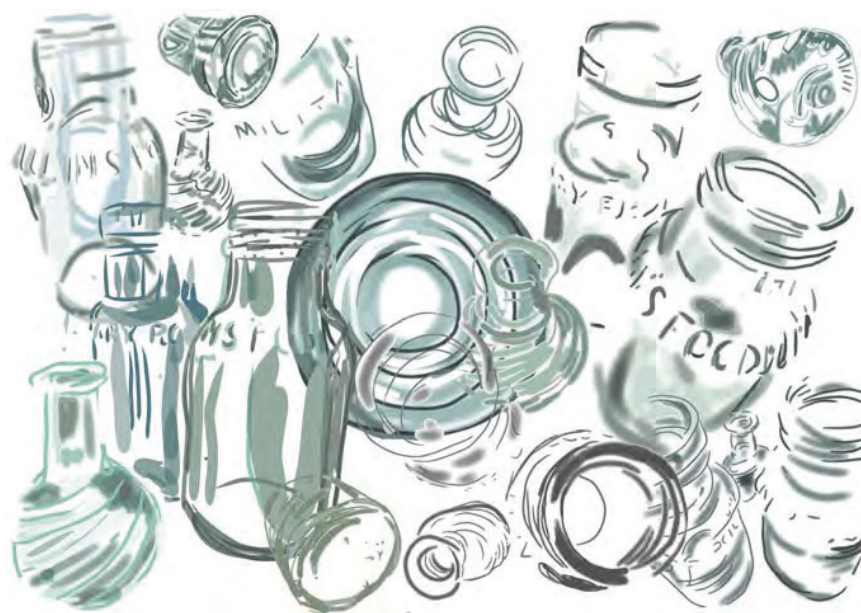
I was new to this post before the pandemic, but the last year has shown with such clarity the direction the work should take. If diversification within the heritage sector is to be embraced, then roles such as mine need to be nurtured. The very nature of who engages has so much potential to reach far beyond those who are already interested, to those who will benefit from engagement, resulting in a step change for the sector.



Montage showing Will Foster, Graphics Officer; Erica Macey Bracken, Finds Supervisor, Phil Harding (pictured with Erica) and Leigh. Alongside these are images of scans and objects from a series of the courses. Credit: Wessex Archaeology



Bone pendant. Credit: Tom Westhead, copyright Wessex Archaeology



This drawing is by one of the group participants, Lesley Self, who was part of our NHS group, and this was a response to a home task of drawing an object from several different angles. Credit: Wessex Archaeology



**Links**

Animated and downloadable toolkit for heritage wellbeing projects:  
<https://www.wessexarch.co.uk/our-work/thousand-lost-and-found-stories-how-run-your-own-wellbeing-project>  
 The Museum of the Lost and Found: <https://www.wessexarch.co.uk/museum-lost-and-found>

**Leigh Chalmers**

Leigh works for Wessex Archaeology as their Heritage Inclusion Development Specialist. Here she develops and leads the heritage wellbeing programme of work. Prior to working at Wessex Archaeology, Leigh had a broad and varied career working in community, heritage, early years, mental health and tourism. She has extensive knowledge and first-hand experience of creating and delivering creative arts and heritage engagement projects for underrepresented groups. She was the Outreach Officer at Salisbury Cathedral and created and delivered their mental health community support offer. She has run several projects at Erlestoke Prison including *Unearthed*, a project about archaeology and identity. She also has worked in heritage tourism and in early years education.

Leigh is also the founder of TEDx Salisbury and continues to lead its work in ideas worth spreading.

