

Current barriers for disabled people in accessing archaeology

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Dutch hoes can be used for trowelling for those that cannot bend down. Credit: Sarahjayne Clements

Historically, archaeology has been an inaccessible discipline for many marginalised groups of people. Although the field has arguably become more inclusive in recent years, particularly due to the vital interventions of individuals from underrepresented groups, such as disabled people, members of LGBTQIA+ communities, people of colour, and people from working class backgrounds, there is still much work to be done. This is especially the case for making archaeology more inclusive for disabled people, who are currently underrepresented in the field. Only 11 per cent of archaeologists in the UK identify as disabled in a society where 20 per cent of the population identifies as such (Aitchison et al 2021; Scope nd).

This brief article summarises some of the major barriers still in place preventing disabled people from fully accessing archaeology. To end, we provide several calls to action for our fellow colleagues to work with us towards ending ableism in the field and creating a more equitable and accessible field for everyone.

Barriers to archaeological fieldwork

Although the term 'archaeology' has become much more expansive in relation to what actually constitutes archaeological practice, excavation is still arguably the heart of the discipline. This makes its continued inaccessibility even more

disappointing, as many disabled archaeologists are often unable to participate due to an overall lack of reasonable adjustments available on site. Fieldwork is, by nature, often labour-intensive and sometimes requires working in less-than-ideal climates with tight schedules and even tighter budgets. As such, it may be somewhat understandable that providing reasonable adjustments is sometimes difficult; however, there has already been work done to develop inclusive practices in excavation (Philips et al 2012; O'Mahony 2015). Although some excavations have adopted these practices, there is still much to be done to make this more normative across the field (Hunt and Kitchen 2022). On top of a lack of accessibility options for those who need additional support to excavate, there is unfortunately a pervasive and ableist attitude that celebrates suffering in the field as a 'rite of passage' for archaeologists (Everill 2009), where the worst possible outcome for anyone excavating would be to seem 'weak' or 'a burden' to everyone else. This attitude is arguably one of the reasons why only 30 per cent of disabled archaeologists disclose to their employers and site supervisors (Aitchison et al 2021), and it can also ultimately impact the mental health of other archaeologists, particularly those who are already disabled and/or have mental health conditions (Fitzpatrick 2019).

Issues in the recruitment and retention of disabled field archaeologists

There have been some recent improvements in the sector in relation to recruitment and retention as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic. Disabled people were able to interview remotely, work remotely and work flexibly in some cases. It proved that it was in fact possible. However, as things return to the 'new normal' the sector must make sure not to lose these advances and retain/recruit diverse talent. A 2018 report showed that benefits of hiring disabled people included improvements in business, for example profits and cost-effectiveness, turnover and

retention, reliability and punctuality, employee loyalty and company image as well as competitive advantages (Lindsay et al 2018).

Disabled people may need to work part-time, remotely and flexibly for a variety of reasons. For example, a chronic illness which causes fatigue means that an individual may need to build in rest days to their working week. Part-time positions are often not offered, meaning that disabled people can be excluded. Job shares could be beneficial but are not ideal as it puts pressure on the disabled person to find a potential candidate to share with and it can limit flexibility around working patterns and hours.

'Part-time senior positions are even rarer, meaning there is a lack in career progression for disabled people in the sector, meaning they may be forced to leave. This was my personal experience and the lack of career advancement meant I had to leave archaeology for another position in the wider heritage sector'

Sarahjayne Clements

This is also true in the general population, where working disabled people are less likely to work in higher managerial positions and less likely to work in higher-skilled occupations, whilst being more likely to work part-time (UK government 2022).



'Buddy' pair at Harlaxton excavation. One archaeologist with a pelvic condition records, whilst the other takes measurements. Here they are checking records. Credit: Sarahjayne Clements

Those that are unable to excavate can take part in tasks such as sieving if they wish. Credit: Sarahjayne Clements





Those that are unable to excavate can take part in tasks such as finds processing if they wish. Credit: Sarahjayne Clements



Those that cannot bend down can use litter pickers to take part in field walking. Credit: Sarahjayne Clements

According to the UK government there is clear evidence that ‘good work’ improves health and wellbeing across people’s lives and protects against social exclusion (UK government, 2019). ‘Good work’ is defined as having security and good working conditions and hours, as well as supportive management and opportunities for training and development. Investing in workers’ health and wellbeing leads to a more productive workforce and can help the employer to retain talented staff (Health and Safety Executive 2022). A healthy workplace should offer a decent living wage, development opportunities, flexibility for work–life balance and protection from conditions that damage health (UK government 2019). Currently, archaeology is not providing all these things, with short-term contracts and working away from home being just two examples. There are many more issues at play which create barriers for disabled people to be involved in archaeology.

Call to action

Overall, we call for archaeologists – particularly our non-disabled colleagues – to join us in doing the difficult but necessary work to make archaeology more accessible for everyone. As a bare minimum, this will require listening to disabled archaeologists and understanding that there is still much to be done to create a more accessible and equitable discipline.

We call for project supervisors to recognise that the frameworks for making excavation more accessible already exist, and it is their responsibility to adopt these measures when needed. There must also be further understanding of the diversity within disability, and that disabled archaeologists will require different forms of support and accommodations.

We call for employers to provide part-time, flexible positions with clear progression pathways which will ensure better equity for disabled people in the workplace. We encourage employers and their staff to train in disability awareness and removing unconscious biases.

We call for archaeologists to recognise the ways in which their attitudes and assumptions may contribute to ableism in the field, and that by continuing to fail to provide adequate access to archaeology, we perpetuate ableist standards of who can be an archaeologist.

The EAF’s mission is to empower, enable and combat negative attitudes to disabled people’s involvement in heritage. If you would like to book training for your organisation or further information or advice as an individual or a company, please contact the EAF via our website: <https://enabledarchaeology.com>.

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Abigail Hunt

Dr Abigail Hunt is Associate Professor at the University of Lincoln, Director of the Enabled Archaeology Foundation, Public History Editor for the *Oral History* journal, and an editorial board member of the *International Journal of the Inclusive Museum*. Her broad research interests span history, archaeology, and heritage management, but all have one thing in common – the recognition and application of inclusive practice. She is particularly interested in how diverse contributors to the collection and curation of narrative and objective-based histories can give us new accessible and inclusive perspectives on well-covered topics.



Alex Fitzpatrick

Dr Alex Fitzpatrick FSA Scot is a zooarchaeologist and current Research Officer for the Enabled Archaeology Foundation. Alongside her diversity and inclusion work, Alex is also the host of the ArchaeoAnimals podcast on the Archaeology Podcast Network. Her work can be found at her website www.animalarchaeology.com.