

The use of archaeology to promote better mental health to a veteran community:

a reflective summary of **Operation Nightingale** and future directions for research



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Archaeology and historic landscapes have been used in many imaginative and ingenious ways to promote better physical and mental wellbeing. Kiddey and Schofield's pioneering work in 2009 and its use of archaeology to gain a better understanding of temporary homelessness in Bristol (Kiddy and Schofield 2011), Nolan's work on how the historic landscape can help create existential wellbeing (Nolan 2019), and the use of a historic landscape to promote 'self-therapy' through metal detecting, by Dobat et al (2022), are all excellent examples of this type of work. Each project is unique in its approach, yet their desired outcomes are the same – to promote better wellbeing (or whatever it is that they have determined 'better wellbeing' consists of).

Green spaces have long been linked to wellbeing and we have been incredibly lucky with the MOD estates being an exemplar of this. Credit: Harvey Mills



Bones that can heal. It was on Barrow Clump that many a personal journey began; it was also where we fully realised archaeology as a valid tool for recovery. Credit: Harvey Mills

It is with this backdrop that we measure what we do as a project and how we look to engage with our disparate audience, an audience that comprises individuals of all ages and genders, with backgrounds and interests that are diverse. Some individuals don't have a care in the world and are keen to 'have a go' at archaeology as a 'bucket list' adventure, but most participants aren't that fortunate. The largest cohort of our participants are either struggling with life in

general (finances, ageing, loss of identity, no sense of purpose, unemployment, relationships, etc.) and/or psychological or physical ill-health (amputations, chronic pain, traumatic brain injury, common mental disorders, PTSD, etc).

Identifying realistic and achievable outcomes for all participants in light of their challenges is difficult and burdened with complexity but this is what we as planners

enjoy. We have freedom to explore our creativity in developing projects and project content, armed with over a decade's-worth of experience in what we do and safe in the knowledge that we have the support of a plethora of specialists that are all keen to lend their expertise to help in this good cause.

It has been demonstrated time and again that, when developed and staffed correctly,



Adapting an individual to a site and a site to their needs. Sites are developed to facilitate those with complex needs, thus enabling complete exposure to the benefits of participation. Credit: Harvey Mills

Bonding exercises have proven to be crucial when introducing new participants onto a project. Making individuals feel like they are part of a team can build self-confidence, promote feelings of belonging and feeds nicely into the peer support narrative. Credit: Harvey Mills

engagement in projects can be the catalyst for incredible change. These might be changes in the physiological sense such as increases in wellbeing and decreases in anxiety and depression, or improved feelings of belonging, with a renewed sense of purpose (Everill, Bennett and Burnell 2020). Or they might be lifestyle changes, the changes that show a reignition of an internal spark, a change from being in self-imposed isolation, housebound with no sense of a future, to becoming a mentor to other participants that are newer on this journey, once again in control of one's own future.

It cannot be stressed enough that goodwill alone is not enough to deliver a successful project. There are finally some fantastic resources out there to help plan a successful project, such as the AMPHORA

guidelines (AMPHORA 2022) and there are other incredible agencies that are approachable for advice, such as the Enabled Archaeology Foundation (EAF 2022).

With best practice guidelines for heritage wellbeing interventions now in place, it is time to consider carefully what we mean by 'wellbeing' and subsequently, what changes for those engaging in these wellbeing projects and why. With the absence of a reliable definition for wellbeing, as an industry could we have been confusing 'wellbeing' with 'quality of life' or 'happiness'? And if so, does that actually make a difference? In order to fully understand the impact of these projects I

would argue that it does make a difference, so a robust definition of what we mean by wellbeing in this context must be reached. Without this, we are unable to determine what we are measuring, what has changed within participants, and why. The challenge of defining 'wellbeing' in a heritage context and identifying causality and rationale for change through participation will be the focus of Breaking Ground Heritage's research over the next few years, and we look forward to sharing our results with you in due course.

Dickie Bennett

After a medical discharge from the Military, Dickie entered academia, studying archaeology at Exeter before undertaking a master's in Archaeology then a master's in Research in Psychology. For over a decade, Dickie has been developing and delivering community engagement projects that utilise archaeology and heritage to promote wellbeing for those suffering mental ill-health and/or physical limitations, especially within the veteran population.

Dickie's current research is looking to identify what we are actually talking about when we use the term 'wellbeing', and what aspects of 'wellbeing' change, and why, when engaging in heritage wellbeing interventions.



References

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