

ARCHAEOLOGY ON PRESCRIPTION:

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Archaeology on Prescription is a social prescribing project based in York and run by York Archaeological Trust (YAT) that uses archaeology to improve wellbeing for those who are struggling with their mental health. They may be lonely or isolated, have one or more long term-conditions or complex social needs. The project seeks to help them foster meaningful social connections and build self-esteem and confidence.

The project is based at Willow House, a redundant care home owned by the City of York Council that lies just inside the medieval city walls at Walmgate. Participants undertake a broad range of activities designed to maximise accessibility. The most important consideration is providing a safe and inclusive environment where participants can choose what they want to do.

The *Archaeology on Prescription* project aims to have a positive, meaningful impact on the wellbeing of all participants by providing new pathways to learn, access training and find opportunities for employment; to contribute to the community and the economic, social and environmental wellbeing of all of York's communities; to increase the diversity of participants in archaeology by working directly with new audiences, creating offers that will encourage those who may not have engaged with heritage before to take part; to work in partnership with organisations across York to act as a bridge between arts, culture, heritage and

health; to put accessibility at the core of all engagement work in order to ensure that there are as few barriers to participation as possible; to inspire a sense of connection with place in all participants.

The project was initially funded through the Community Renewal Fund, together with a range of local funders, including the Assura Community Fund, the Ed de Nunzio Charitable Trust, City of York Council, Make It York's Culture and Wellbeing Fund and the Arnold Clark Community Fund. In summer 2022 a successful National Lottery Heritage Fund application secured core funding for the next three years.

We engaged with Social Prescribing Link Workers through the York Ways to Wellbeing team to offer places to NHS patients with low-moderate mental health needs. To date, ten individuals have taken part through this route. Additionally, we partnered with local non-statutory organisations active across a range of wellbeing needs, including access to learning resources, people recovering from addiction and young adults with learning difficulties. In 2022, 59 participants were recruited in this way.

Following the successful 2021 pilot, we delivered 24 weeks of sessions from April to October 2022. Sessions ran twice daily



The Archaeology on Prescription site at Willow House, York. Credit: York Archaeological Trust



Participants experience archaeological recording as well as excavation. Credit: York Archaeological Trust

social prescribing in York

for two hours Monday–Thursday, with up to six participants per session, plus support workers if required. Staffing ratios were high to ensure a safe, supportive environment. All staff received Mental Health First Aid training.

Several participants have additional mobility and learning needs. To improve accessibility we ensured that a broad range of activities was always available, including excavation, sieving, finds processing, recording, and creative activities. Participants were free to take part in as many or as few activities as they wished.

We commissioned an evaluation of the 2021 pilot from CERT (Converge Evaluation and Research Team) at the York St John University. For the 2022 season, we undertook internal evaluation using the UCL Wellbeing Umbrellas and via two participants’ focus groups.

- Participants reported a positive change in their mental health
- Supportive and knowledgeable staff were crucial to making participants feel welcome and confident
- Participants expressed the importance of feeling immediately part of the

archaeological team

- The variety of activities was appreciated, from digging and recording to finds processing and creative artistic work
- Participants felt they had learned a great deal and that information was made freely available
- Participants spoke about a sense of discovery and increased self-confidence.

This supports anecdotal participant testimony, some of which was very open and profound.

YAT intend to embed *Archaeology on Prescription* as a long-term, sustained social prescribing offer in York, providing a secondary service for the NHS to refer individuals who might benefit from taking part in archaeology. Building on 2022 we are developing new pathways into volunteering, training and peer supporter roles and continuing to engage with social prescribers in York to explore new opportunities for participants. Finally, we are researching the social prescribing landscape in other regions, in response to interest in delivering *Archaeology on Prescription* beyond York.

Ian Milsted

Originally from Orkney, Ian completed the MA in Field Archaeology at York University in 2003 and joined York Archaeological Trust as a junior field archaeologist, eventually becoming Regional Manager in 2017. From March 2022 Ian has been Head of Community Engagement, which includes oversight of *Archaeology on Prescription*.



Katrina Gargett

Katrina is currently the Community Partnerships Manager for MOLA (Museum of London Archaeology). Until October 2022, she worked as the Community Engagement Manager for York Archaeological Trust, where she developed and delivered YAT’s social prescribing project, *Archaeology on Prescription*. She completed her MA in Cultural Heritage Management at the University of York in 2018.



Alongside excavation and recording, participants can undertake creative activities. Credit: York Archaeological Trust

Staff to participant ratios are high to facilitate close supervision. Credit: York Archaeological Trust