

# Digging Harlaxton: bringing together academia, community and commercial sectors

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Kevin and Lesley take a well-deserved break after assisting participants from the Lincolnshire Community Foundation. Credit: Emily Stammitti

A participant from the Lincolnshire Community Foundation is thrilled to make her first find. Credit: Emily Stammitti

In 2022 Harlaxton College, the study abroad location for the University of Evansville (USA), devised a month-long archaeological field school to enhance the methodological and practical field skills of American university students: Digging Harlaxton. Over the planning process, the project grew from a field school with a research and education objective to one that boasted major commercial and community partnerships and the goal of being one of the most accessible and inclusive digs in Britain. This joint approach united the stereotypical divisions between seemingly divergent practices and with renewed aims brought together educational objectives as well as the provision for anybody to engage in the archaeological process.



A young participant finds a leaf-shaped arrowhead! Credit: Emily Stammitti



Two students enjoy using an upright sieve to get through thicker contexts; using a range of sieves and tools increases the accessibility for all. Credit: Emily Stammitti

*Digging Harlaxton* focused on two areas of archaeological investigation: the courtyard of a Victorian walled garden and a prehistoric ritual landscape, each of which offered participants active dig settings. The project included a broad range of participants from the United States, Canada and the United Kingdom. Archaeological objectives were based on the East Midlands Historic Environment Research Framework, and the project provided inclusive and accessible training for participants.

Members of the *Digging Harlaxton* steering committee worked together to create a broad range of support protocols for participants and identified barriers that disabled people most often face in field archaeology, including

- physical barriers
- difficulty in handling traditional tools
- disability refusal
- invisible disability discrimination
- stigma.

#### Physical barriers

With the landscape site 1km from amenities, participants brought mobility vehicles and other walking implements as required. Trenches were dug with stepped access to assist entry and exit. *Digging Harlaxton* participants were encouraged to choose their own activity each day with no questioning about their rationale. This allowed individuals to naturally differentiate tasks on their own, without shame or expectation.

#### Difficulty in handling traditional tools

*Digging Harlaxton* offered opportunities to participants who struggle to handle traditional tools, eg a trowel. To best accommodate them, the project staff asked how they would best want to be supported on site – whether digging was their preferred activity, or whether they wanted us to amend tools. Trowels were redesigned to help balance weight and strength, and a range of tool sizes of other standard dig kit was also provided. The most important outcome from considering the ergonomic nature of dig kit was that participants were provided with a choice and opportunity to participate however they wanted, without limitation to non-physical roles.

#### Disability refusal

Several of our participants commented that owing to their range of additional support needs, they had been turned away from other summer programmes and summer field schools. *Digging Harlaxton* prided itself based on not turning anybody away for *any* disability needs or disclosures. We all know that archaeology functions best when a range of voices and abilities are involved, and we firmly believe that our project only benefited from the diversity present on site each day.

#### Invisible disability discrimination

The team strived to create an atmosphere of both non-disclosure and full stigma removal. Lone-zone working areas were created to provide participants with a place

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to relax and take time to themselves throughout the day. A range of formats were used in creating recording forms and participants selected the format that suited them best. All participants were offered confidential counselling and time to talk to any of the members of the support and engagement team, the college nurse, college counsellor/therapist, and all members of the dig management team. They could talk about challenges they were facing, discuss pastoral issues, let off steam, raise concerns or offer feedback.

### Stigma removal

Of the biggest issues that *Digging Harlaxton* removed was stigma. There was simply no space for notions of stigmatising participants because of any protected characteristics, let alone disability. Through honest conversation, planning and maintaining a respectful atmosphere, stigmas around disability were effectively removed, and many participants came forward by the end of the project, cathartically discussing issues of disability and former barriers.

The participant body spanned age, ethnicity, LGBTQAIP+ identification, nationality, religion/belief, social background, career trajectory and geographic origins, including British participants, students and school pupils. In total, the project garnered 271 unique points of contact (on-site), broken down as

Participants (credit-seeking and experience-based)	62
Local school pupils (KS2 & KS3)	124
Site guests	17
Visiting professionals	11
Lincolnshire Community Foundation	38
Young Archaeologists' Club	19

Of this entire participant body, 48 individuals self-identified as disabled – 18 per cent, meaning that the project representation was roughly equivalent to the general demographic statistic of individuals with disability in the UK.

*Digging Harlaxton* set out with ambitious goals to provide an accessible and inclusive archaeological training experience. The impact of the project is yet

to be fully realised as data is still being received and analysed at the time of writing. The local community's heritage society has tripled in size; nearly 300 participants engaged with a wide range of activities on site, and an upcoming season promises an even more accessible programme based on lessons learned in

the 2022 season. Participants traditionally excluded from archaeological investigations were welcomed and de-stigmatised, and offered up dependable and important excavation and research skillssets, showcasing that they are both valuable and employable across a variety of sectors.



*A happy and mixed group of students and participants excavate within their comfort zones before the trench gets 'stepped' for better access. Credit: Emily Stammitti*

### Emily Stammitti

Professor Emily Stammitti is a Programme Director at Harlaxton College, University of Evansville. She obtained her PhD, focusing on submerged inland landscapes, at the University of Edinburgh. Emily currently serves as the Education and Outreach Officer for the Enabled Archaeology Foundation and has 15 years of industry and academic experience.



### Holly Carter

Dr Holly Carter is Executive Director and Dean of Harlaxton College. In her role, Dr Carter uses her 20+ years of experience in international education, overseas study centre experience and academic administration skillset to set the future vision of the college and the manor. Originally from Texas, Dr Carter has lived in France, Tunisia, Scotland, and England. Her academic field is medical sociology, which she occasionally teaches at Harlaxton, as her focus of research was the NHS and its transition to a more market-driven service. Outside of her role at Harlaxton, Dr Carter serves on the board of Habitat for Humanity Evansville, is a change leader at the University of Evansville, and is a past chair of the Teaching, Learning and Scholarship knowledge community as NAFSA. She is an avid traveller and volunteer, as well as loving time walking and reading.

