

Excavation for wellbeing – volunteering in the Covid-19 pandemic



Socially distanced site briefings become the daily norm – and also the time to check in with how everyone feels about procedures and safety. ©CPAT

The Clwyd-Powys Archaeological Trust has excavated at locations across the Chirk Castle estate near Wrexham in north-east Wales for several years. Investigating landscapes from early medieval linear earthworks to 17th-century workshops and formal gardens, the project has combined research objectives with volunteer opportunities and public outreach to develop a programme of work that is firmly embedded in the local community and the wider region. Volunteers on the project have ranged from undergraduate archaeology students to National Trust volunteers, Young Archaeologists' Club groups to members of local societies. With a broad age range and some diversity in background, the varied volunteer groups have worked well together on tasks across the site

– some working on their Archaeological Skills Passports, others filling CPAT's own Volunteer Skills Handbook, others preferring a less formal approach. By offering a variety of ways to interact with archaeology in this way, the project can accommodate volunteers with different backgrounds, skills and confidence levels.

Volunteers at Chirk Castle excavations have shared the impact of their experiences with CPAT staff through both formal and informal evaluation, and the outreach team observed significant positive wellbeing and health outcomes from working on the project. There were several members of the regular volunteer crew living with chronic or long-term health conditions, who have shared their observations on how working on site has made them feel



The SoDA (Social Distancing for Archaeology) Toolkit by L-P Archaeology and Prospect Union Archaeology Branch is a vital tool for instantly recognisable, clear signage across the site. ©CPAT



Finds labs move outdoors – in this case in what is usually a covered but open air picnic spot – to allow air to circulate for the safety of staff and volunteers. ©CPAT

and how it has impacted them in the short term. As part of a revamped volunteer programme, in 2019 volunteers were invited to fill in an evaluation including wellbeing indicator surveys based on the WEMWEBS scale, both before and after their time on site, to further establish impacts on mental wellbeing. This kind of quantification of wellbeing impact is the type of evidence and research that is urgently needed within archaeology, to bring it to the levels of Museum Studies and other adjacent disciplines when it comes to building evidence bases for public value, impact and economic benefits.

With the lockdown and restrictions of Covid-19, it was apparent that the project would have to shift approach if any volunteers could benefit from being on site and if

further evidence could be gathered towards assessing impact. Many previous volunteers had been in touch citing the excavation as an important part of their year and a way for them to both connect to other people and to get out of their daily routine; some directly referenced the impact on their mental health as a reason they wanted to come onto site.

Several modifications were made to the usual setup – workshops on health and safety, site history, and project briefings were moved online. Paperwork was abandoned in favour of Google forms and other digital methods. Trenches were made into socially distanced outdoor workspaces, with one way systems and hygiene stations. The Volunteer Skills Handbook was not feasible in a time when



Working in a bubble or in their own, socially distanced spot – volunteers found plenty of space in the trench.
© CPAT

contact with surfaces and having ‘dwell time’ at potential pinch points like break spaces and picnic tables was not a possibility. Instead, evaluation was informal with conversations between CPAT staff and volunteers, as well as follow-on surveys sent by email. With numbers limited further by Welsh government restrictions to movement only within counties, a close group of volunteers formed who acted as peer support for each other throughout the two weeks on site. Shared experiences of getting used to the new one way systems, face shields during finds processing, and finding ways to chat and socialise at lunch break in a safely distanced fashion brought the group closer together. Above all, the nature of working on site – going through the careful process of excavation and recording in a methodical fashion, finding a comfortable and effective pace of trowelling or clearing spoil, and sorting finds in a meticulous fashion – is a way of finding a rhythm that some volunteers describe as almost meditative.

CPAT has only begun to explore the impacts of archaeological fieldwork on wellbeing, both short and long term. While staff can see the immediate impact and gather observation-based evidence, the next step is to gather larger, quantifiable datasets on the impact it can have on a diverse range of people, and how archaeological projects can include this important outcome in their planning and delivery across developer-led, research, and project-based excavations. This evidence will help ClfA and other organisations to deliver important messages to policy makers, project partners and other key stakeholders that the value of archaeology and archaeological outreach is more than the impact on knowledge and understanding of the past; it is also deeply embedded in social and economic impacts on local and wider communities.

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