
Friend or enemy? Community Archaeology in the United Kingdom

Don Henson¹



Received: 18-03-2009

Accepted: 30-06-2009

Abstract

There is a long history in the United Kingdom of local people doing archaeology and history for themselves in their own local communities. The earliest local archaeology societies were formed in the 1840s, university classes in archaeology were run for part-time adult students from the 1930s, local metal detecting groups began in the 1960s and national lottery funding has been given to local heritage projects since the 1990s. The attitude of professional archaeologists to these local groups has varied from partnership and support to outright hostility. This paper will look at the importance of archaeology for local communities, how it has developed and changed and how the professional sector has responded. It will cover the latest efforts by the CBA to support community engagement with local heritage.

Keywords: Community archaeology; Local heritage; Professional archaeology.

Resum. Amic o enemic? Arqueologia comunitària al Regne Unit

Hi ha una llarga tradició en el Regne Unit de grups locals dedicats per compte propi a l'arqueologia i a la història de les pròpies comunitats. Les primeres societats arqueològiques locals es van formar cap al 1840; cursos universitaris sobre arqueologia per a adults es van iniciar cap al 1930; els grups dedicats a la detecció de metalls comencen a funcionar cap al 1960, la National Lottery atorga finançament a projectes de patrimoni local des de la dècada dels noranta del segle passat. L'actitud de l'arqueologia professional envers aquests grups locals ha anat variant des de la col·laboració i el suport fins a l'hostilitat. En aquesta aportació es prestarà atenció a la importància que té l'arqueologia per a les comunitats locals; veurem com s'ha anat desenvolupant i modificant i com ha correspost a tot plegat el sector professional. També es mostraran els darrers esforços realitzats pel Council of British Archaeology per tal de donar suport a la implicació de les comunitats amb el patrimoni local.

Paraules clau: arqueologia comunitària; patrimoni local; arqueologia professional.

Resumen. ¿Amigo o enemigo? Arqueología comunitaria en el Reino Unido

Existe una larga tradición en el Reino Unido de grupos locales dedicados por su cuenta a la arqueología y la historia en sus propias comunidades. Las primeras sociedades arqueológicas loca-

1. Council for British Archaeology. St Mary's House, 66 Bootham. York YO30 7BZ-UK. donhenson@britarch.ac.uk

les se formaron hacia 1840; cursos universitarios sobre arqueología para adultos se iniciaron hacia 1930; los grupos dedicados a la detección de metales empiezan a funcionar hacia 1960, y la National Lottery otorga financiación a proyectos de patrimonio local desde la década de los noventa del siglo pasado. La actitud de la arqueología profesional hacia estos grupos locales ha ido variando desde la colaboración y el apoyo hasta, directamente, la hostilidad. En esta aportación se prestará atención a la importancia de la arqueología para las comunidades locales, cómo se ha desarrollado y modificado y cómo ha respondido a ello el sector profesional. También abordará los últimos esfuerzos realizados por el Council of British Archaeology para apoyar la implicación de las comunidades con el patrimonio local.

Palabras clave: arqueología comunitaria; patrimonio local; arqueología profesional.

HENSON, Don. «Friend or enemy? Community Archaeology in the United Kingdom». *Treballs d'Arqueologia*, 2009, núm. 15, p. 43-49.

First, a word about language. Community Archaeology can mean many things. For the Council of British Archaeology (CBA) it is local people coming together as a community to do archaeology for themselves. In the United Kingdom we are lucky that archaeology is not regulated or subject to licensing. Anyone can excavate or survey. Archaeology done by non-professionals is described with various words—amateur archaeology, volunteer archaeology (and we talk about professional and voluntary sectors in archaeology), community archaeology.

Development of archaeology in the United Kingdom

Archaeology in the United Kingdom began as a part-time pursuit by amateurs; antiquarians in the 17th and 18th centuries, barrow diggers in the 18th and 19th centuries, who were often clergymen or doctors, professional people with education

and spare time or landowners and part-time archaeologists in the 19th century who were often businessmen or politicians. Professional archaeologists only appeared towards the end of the 19th century.

Archaeology was organized through societies, from the 18th century onwards: at first at national level, then county level, then in the 20th century through local societies. Most recently have been metal detecting clubs and Young Archaeologists' Club branches.

The first professional archaeologists were employed in museums, as early as 1683, but only a very few of them. Universities began appointing archaeologists after 1851. The state employed archaeologists from 1882 onwards. Local field archaeology organizations began to employ archaeologists after the 2nd World War, but it wasn't until the 1970s that local professional units and local authority services began to grow in numbers.

As late as 1960, there were only 200 professional archaeologists in the UK. The

latest survey in 2008 showed 6,900 professional archaeologists in the UK.

The growth of the profession has led to split between professional and amateurs. The Institute for Archaeologists (IfA) has been an association of the profession while many amateurs are represented in the Council or Independent Archaeologists. Some amateurs feel that the profession has become elitist and looks down upon «unqualified» amateurs. Almost 100% of professional archaeologists have a university degree, getting a job without a degree is nearly impossible.

The growth of metal detecting in the 1960s and 70s led to a campaign by professional archaeologists to try to get it banned —the STOP campaign in 1980. This did more harm than good. Relations with metal detectorists only got better with the Portable Antiquities Scheme in 1997 (Bland 2004).

What kinds of amateur archaeology are there in the UK?

The voluntary sector includes old established county societies, such as the Sussex Archaeological Society founded in 1846, and more recent and more local societies like the Bath & Camerton Archaeological Society established in 1946 or the Great Ayton Community Archaeology Group founded in 2002. It thus seems fairly easy to define where volunteer-led archaeology takes place. On the other hand, some local societies cover more than just archaeology, for example the Isle of Wight Natural History & Archaeological Society, or the Leighton Buzzard & District Archaeological & Historical Society. Furthermore, although many of these societies have a long-established

reputation and good relationships with professional archaeology, there are some groups whose relationship to archaeology has been more problematic. Since the 1960s, there has been a steady growth in groups using metal detectors to explore the landscape for artefacts.

What all these voluntary groups have in common is a concern with recovering archaeological material and information, through survey, excavation, fieldwalking and collection. They are concerned with archaeology as a process, less so with managing, conserving or presenting the historic environment. Concern with management of the historic environment tends to fall within the activity of other kinds of voluntary sector groups, such as the Civic Trust (with c.900 local civic societies), the Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings, the Garden History Society and the National Trust. Of course, it is not just buildings that galvanizes volunteer efforts. There are also historic railways run by volunteers, groups looking after maritime heritage, clubs and volunteer museums concerned with historic vehicles etc. Conserving the past through ownership and management is an increasingly important task of the voluntary sector. Some, but only a very few, archaeology groups have also been active in this kind of work, for example, the Sussex Archaeological Society with its properties like Michelham Priory. All of these groups operate in the sphere of the historic environment and are engaged in a relationship with tangible cultural heritage. There are, of course, many more groups engaged with local history, genealogy, family history and other intangible forms of cultural heritage. Local history is a common interest, as is family histo-

ry and genealogy. When the government placed the 1901 UK census on-line in 2002, the webserver was so overloaded by people logging on that it had to be shut down after just 4 hours (The Register 2002).

Voluntary sector efforts are less prone to respect the boundaries between disciplines than the professional sectors. There has been a growth recently of newer, more intensely localised heritage groups, stimulated by funding from the Heritage Lottery Fund since 1994, and by Local Heritage Initiative funding from 2000 to 2006. Archaeology is often only one component in the activities of such groups. One example of these newer heritage groups is the Badsey Society, a joint winner of the 2008 Marsh Community Archaeology Award. The society covers local history, archaeology, folklore, flora, fauna and geology. Their enclosure map project, for which they won the Award, integrated archaeology with local history through a study of the nineteenth century enclosure maps.

Examples of voluntary archaeology

A winner of the Marsh Awards for community archaeology

North of Scotland Archaeological Society, formed 1998 by students from Aberdeen CE courses, covers a large area of the Highlands, excavations at Glen Feshie 2004, adding to genuine archaeological research in a neglected area: <http://www.nosas.co.uk/projects/project0104.htm>

Winner of the Pitt-Rivers British Archaeological Award for the Best Amateur or Independent Project

Biggar Museum Archaeology Group. The work involved the comprehensive archaeological survey of over 400 square kilometres of Upper Tweeddale and the selective excavation of sites threatened by fluctuating reservoir water levels and forests and was carried out entirely by volunteers. The objectives of the project were clear cut, the work was performed to a commendably high standard and, crucially, publication was timely, thorough and made readily available through an excellent web site: <http://www.biggararchaeology.org.uk/>

There are many ways in which local groups fund their activities. The days of having a wealthy are long over. The main source of funding now is the heritage Lottery Fund, based on the sales of national lottery tickets. Money is granted to specific community projects by the HLF, and many of these have been archaeology projects. Well over 100 projects by since 1994. From 2000 to 2006, there was the Local Heritage Initiative, which funded nearly 250 projects. Some large societies own heritage sites which they open to the public and make an income from this. Other rely on grants from specific trusts, or sponsorship from businesses. Some even take on professional style contract work.

How does the profession feel about the amateur sector?

There are mixed feelings. There is an elitist strand — archaeology is a graduate profession working to high standards within processes of development and planning. It cannot afford to relax its standards, and

amateurs cannot possibly be as good as trained professionals working within a professional framework. Also, we cannot allow amateurs to undercut professional units for work. We've worked hard to be recognized as a profession and we are going to defend that status!

The growth of metal detecting led to an angry response among many professional archaeologists (Gregory 1983, 1986; Dobinson and Denison 1995). The STOP (Stop Taking Our Past) campaign of 1980 sought to restrict the use of metal detectors on archaeological sites in highly emotive terms. The use of the word «our» is highly interesting; whose past is under discussion here, the archaeologists' or the public's? The very use of the word seems calculated to be ambiguous. The campaign stimulated a strong adverse reaction among detectorists and many years of poor relations between the two sides. More recently, the impossibility of stopping detecting as a hobby has led to greater acceptance and cooperation, with the Portable Antiquities Scheme being set up with government funding to provide a network of finds liaison officers to work with detectorists and others to record the artefacts being found, which has wide support, and a Code of Practice agreed by both sides. Nevertheless, Gregory's characterisation (1986: 26) of professional and voluntary archaeology as a middle class, university educated pursuit rejecting populist engagement with the working class is still uncomfortably close to the mark for some, as it is a profession whose members are almost without exception possessed of at least one and sometimes two university degrees, and still tend to be drawn from the white middle-classes. The Portable Antiquities reports that the majority of people using its services are lower middle and working class.

Overall, the fieldwork standards of amateurs can be very high. Many individuals have been excavating for 20, 30 or 40 years. Local groups carry out research in areas neglected by development by development work, or by university research. They also know the local area and have built up a great deal of local knowledge and expertise that units coming in from outside do not have.

Many professionals realise they have a public duty as a publicly funded profession and will reach out to the public. Some are genuinely committed to a democratized archaeology. Others feel they have to reach out as a condition of the funding they get. A key to getting professionals to respect the amateurs is to ensure that they amateurs have up-to-date and adequate knowledge and skills. In the past this was provided through universities offering part-time courses to the public in the evenings and at weekends, and in residential summer field projects. Work like this began in the 1930s. It is variously known as extramural studies, continuing education, life-long learning or part-time adult education. Changes in government funding for university education have destroyed this source of education. In 1999 there were 1,327 part-time university courses in the UK for the public in archaeology. By 2009, this has shrunk to 515, and will be less than 400 in 2010.

There are a few community archaeologist jobs in the UK, in units, local authorities, museums or universities—often project funded for 1 to 3 years, who support local groups. There are even fewer independent consultants who support local groups, as, for example, John Kenny in York or Kevin Cale in North Yorkshire; in all, perhaps no more than 10-15 of these people. There needs to be more.

The role of the Council for British Archaeology (CBA)

The CBA's mission is «Archaeology for All». The CBA is the national organisation that represents archaeology in the United Kingdom. We are an independent charity, with over 6,000 individual members and over 650 organisation members. These include professionals and amateurs, universities and field units, local authority archaeology services, national organisations and local societies, and museums and so on. We act as a national advocate for archaeology to government, and as an advocate for public engagement within archaeology. We see our main purpose as enabling more people to get involved with, or to understand and support, the work of archaeology.

We have a fund of small grants we can give to local societies but this is very small. More importantly, we support the work of community groups by direct support.

Website: Community Archaeology Forum where groups can upload results of their work, network with others through an email list, and get access to advice on funding or other matters. <http://www.britarch.ac.uk/caf>

Festival of British Archaeology: events all over the country aimed at reaching new audiences and opening up archaeology to the public. In 2008: 469 events by 300 organisations, over 160,000 people attending. Includes excavation visits, hands —on activities, guided walks, re-enactments, family fun days, exhibitions, talks, demonstrations, finds identification. <http://festival.britarch.ac.uk/>

Young Archaeologists' Club: for young people 8 to 16, national magazine,

residential holidays, competitions, free access scheme to heritage sites, also local branches —73 run by over 450 volunteers. Variety of activity meetings including doing real archaeology. <http://www.britarch.ac.uk/yac/>

Community Conservation project: running workshops and giving advice to groups on how they can get engaged in local conservation matters and local planning.

Community Archaeology Support project: research the nature of community archaeology and develop a programme of training in fieldwork skills

Engaging with the Historic Environment: research into university part-time courses for the public and the needs of community archaeology for new forms of training

We are hoping to build on this to devise a national strategy and framework for amateur «training» in archaeology, and to be able to support the delivery of courses to the public by others.

Conclusion

The UK has a thriving voluntary archaeology sector, actively involved in doing archaeology for themselves. There are barriers between them and the professional sector —commercial, training, academic— and these can be organisational but are often more barriers of attitude. Professional can be very elitist and very defensive. But it doesn't have to be and many professionals and organisations are supportive of voluntary archaeology.

The key to future is making sure that professional and voluntary sectors talk to each other, respect each other and work

together as far as possible. This is happening, and is increasing, but will always need more funding and more direction than is currently available in the profession. Above all it needs a change of atti-

tude among professionals, that archaeology is open to all, and that the heritage we uncover and investigate is not our personal intellectual property but the property of everyone.

References

- BLAND, R. (2004). «The Treasure Act and the Portable Antiquities scheme: a case study in developing public archaeology». In: MERRIMAN, N. (ed.). *Public Archaeology*. London: Routledge, p. 272-291.
- DOBINSON, C.S.; DENISON, S. (1995). *Metal Detecting and Archaeology in England*. London: English Heritage/Council of British Archaeology.
- GREGORY, T. (1983). «The impact of metal detection on archaeology and the public». *Archaeological Review from Cambridge* 2(1): 5-8.
- (1986). «Whose Fault is Treasure-Hunting». In: DOBINSON, C.S. and GILCHRIST, R.L. (eds.). *Archaeology, Politics and the Public*. York: York University, p. 25-27.