Home Thoughts from Abroad: Some Observations on Contract Archaeology in England

James Symonds
Commentary—

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This paper was written following a recent visit by the author to the United States and Canada. It aims to provide a view of contemporary archaeological practice in England for North American readers and to draw comparisons between the working environment of field archaeologists on either side of the Atlantic. Reference is made to the relatively recent growth of commercial archaeology in England and to tensions that have emerged as a consequence of the re-structuring of the profession. It is argued that despite a substantial increase in the level of funding available from the private sector there has been little corresponding advance in research methods or output. As a result, archaeological theory and field practice have drifted ever farther apart. Attention is drawn to the dissatisfaction of a growing number of senior archaeologists who have chosen to question the orthodoxy of English "Archaeological Resource Management" (ARM), suggesting that current legislation and an over-reliance upon developer-led contracting threaten the integrity of the subject as a research discipline.

Introduction

The inspiration for this paper came while I was attending the 1995 Annual Conference of the Council for Northeast Historical Archaeology at the Fortress of Louisbourg in Nova Scotia. It takes as its starting point my conversations with fellow conference delegates from North America, many of whom make their living as field archaeologists. Louisbourg echoed with talk of economic recession and cuts in federal and state expenditure on archaeology. The general outlook was decidedly gloom-ridden. The majority of those present were in their mid- to late 30s or early 40s and were clearly highly committed researchers. Individual life histories unfolded to reveal an impressive array of qualifications and experience. Academic training typically commenced with a BA in Anthropology. This was followed by time at graduate school, to complete an MA or PhD. Then came the move into contract archaeology, in an effort to broaden practical experience. Frequently this spanned up to 10 years of intermittent and poorly-paid employment, with a variety of private firms, before finally gaining a staff position, or setting up one's own business.
Those that had persevered thus far refused to abandon archaeology in favour of a more secure or lucrative career, and clung on, like Dickens' Mr. Macawber, going to bed each night making a calculation of the expense of putting bow-windows to the house, "in case anything turned up."

**Parallel Lives**

A 1995 survey of North American field archaeologists who subscribe to the newsletter The Underground confirmed that the career trajectory sketched out above is far from atypical (SOPA Newsletter, Vol. 19, No. 10, October 1995: 5). The same employment profile can be transplanted and applied to a sizeable proportion of the present generation of field archaeologists at work in England. A Quality of Work/Life Survey published in the British journal The Field Archaeologist (Anonymous 1995) concluded that archaeologists are paid less than professionals in other disciplines, that they are frequently forced to move to improve their prospects, and that there is little access to flexible working practices.

This, in itself, is not surprising. Archaeology is a small specialized field, and competition for full-time and well-paid posts is frequently intense. But perhaps the most worrying similarity is that on both sides of the Atlantic field archaeologists, at the peak of their professional ability, are becoming dissatisfied with the kind of work they are being asked to do. In England, the most frequently-voiced complaint is that the introduction of free-market archaeology, and in particular of competitive tendering [low bidding], has lowered standards and reduced archaeology to a mundane treadmill of small-scale data collection and description (cf. Swain 1991). Taken to its logical conclusion the schism between those who attempt to understand and those who aim simply to locate and describe the material remains of the past has brought us to a position where the discipline is fragmented into pure and applied archaeology.

**The "Rescue" Movement**

How then, and why, has field archaeology reached the position where the recovery of meaning is no longer part of its mandate? This story began with the rise and fall of the RESCUE movement in the 1970s. This has been fully described elsewhere and need not detain us too long here (Rahtz 1974; Jones 1984). It may, however, be helpful to provide a few pertinent observations for North American readers who are unfamiliar with British archaeology.

Prior to 1980, rescue archaeology was largely carried out at local level. A loose network of territorial units served England and Wales (and to a lesser extent Scotland) and carried out excavations in response to specific threats from development. These units took a variety of forms, but most often operated either as a service of the County Council or as an independent charitable trust. An example of the latter is the York Archaeological Trust for Excavation and Research. Like the archaeological research committees that preceded them in historic cities such as London (Grimes 1968) and Winchester (Biddle 1974) in the 1950s and 1960s, these units fed upon civic pride and a sense of place. They saw themselves as providing a public service, rescuing the vestiges of the past from the jaws of destruction. In this way the story of a long-lived town (the "fossilized chapters of a local saga waiting for its tongue to be loosened by the trowel" [Carver 1993: 15]) could be re-discovered and celebrated by the facts teased out of the ground.

Problems with the unit system, which had grown up in a piecemeal fashion, began to emerge in the early 1970s. New threats, including the construction of motorways, quickened the rate of destruction of archaeological sites and extended the need for rescue to rural areas (Fowler 1974). Funding from central government increased steadily throughout the 1970s until at its peak, some 80 archaeological units in England received core funding (Thomas 1993: 138). The desire to rescue archaeological data, any archaeological data, led to poorly-defined research objectives and to a serious publication backlog. In 1980 an estimated 85% of the budget for rescue archaeology in England was absorbed by grants toward establishment costs, covering post-excavation studies (Thomas 1993: 138).

The system had by this point become choked and inflexible, but the fact that the
rescue movement at its peak did not coalesce into a unified State Archaeology Service is arguably the greatest failure of the movement, and one that was to presage the sweeping of a new broom through British politics.

The Emergence of Contract Archaeology

Contract archaeology emerged in England in the late 1980s and was shaped, if not actually created, by far-reaching changes in public policy. From 1979, 16 years of uninterrupted Conservative government have promoted free-markets, deregulation, and privatization. The cumulative effects of these changes have fundamentally altered conditions for the routine performance of archaeological tasks. Similarly, by encouraging low bids, the pro-market policies of the Reagan years had an equally detrimental effect upon the standards of archaeology procured by US federal agencies (Cleere 1993: 120).

This radical shift in policy was underpinned by the premise that archaeological remains are finite and should, wherever possible, be preserved, a philosophy which borrowed heavily from the work of American scholars (see Schiffer and Gumer 1977). The concept of Cultural Resource Management (CRM) was first advanced in the UK by Henry Cleere and Peter Fowler, following their visit to the 1976 meeting of the Society for American Archaeology in Dallas (Cleere and Fowler 1976). Their suggestion that archaeologists should see themselves as the managers of an irreplaceable cultural resource was greeted with thinly-veiled skepticism (Fowler 1993: v).

More than a decade elapsed before this perspective gained common currency. A milestone along the way was the passing of the Ancient Monuments and Archaeological Areas Act in 1979. This act designated Areas of Archaeological Importance within several historic towns and allowed developments to be delayed for sufficient time for significant archaeological remains to be excavated. Perhaps more important, the act stipulated that developments likely to affect Scheduled Ancient Monuments (i.e., sites of designated national importance) must receive the consent of the Secretary of State for the Environment. The vast majority of archaeological sites remained unprotected, however, and received no formal consideration within the planning process.

Archaeology, Environmental Assessment, and PPG 16

When it eventually happened the change occurred not because of any strong pressure from the archaeological community but tangentially, as a result of the adoption of European Community environmental law. Article 3 of EC Directive 85/337/EEC (introduced to the UK in 1988 as Town and Country Planning [Assessment of Environmental Effects] Regulations 1988 Statutory Instrument No. 1199, see Environmental Assessment Regulations 1988) required “cultural heritage” to be considered as part of the Environmental Assessment (EA) of major development schemes. The holistic approach to land-use planning advocated by EA allowed English archaeologists to participate for the first time as equal partners in debates over environmental planning, albeit almost 20 years after comparable legislation had been adopted in the USA (National Environmental Policy Act of 1969).

The need for archaeology to be considered in the planning process was reinforced by the Department of the Environment’s Planning Policy Guidance Note 16: Archaeology and Planning (DoE 1990). The influence of PPG 16 has been profound. It is no exaggeration to say that this short (21-page) non-statutory document has single-handedly transformed the structure and working practices of professional archaeology in England since its publication in 1990. Not all of these changes have been welcomed, however, as Martin Biddle (1994: 4) has commented:

England now has a system of archaeological constraint which is draconian in its requirements...this was introduced by Mrs Thatcher’s government, in the month of her fall—although the two events may not be directly related.

The advice contained within PPG 16 was formulated by English Heritage (statutory advisors to the Secretary of State for the Environment) in an effort to reduce the near-anarchy of the late 1980s, as local planning
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authorities struggled to implement different policies to curb the destruction of archaeological sites by development. As an aside it may be noted that the announcement of PPG 16 followed hot on the heels of the partial excavation and subsequent re-burial of the remains of Shakespeare’s Rose Theatre, a controversial affair that attracted criticism in the national and international media (Biddle 1989).

A key principle enshrined within PPG 16 is that archaeological remains should be assessed at an early stage in the development programme, and that archaeology should be regarded as a material consideration in the planning process. In 1990 this was welcomed by the majority of archaeologists as a timely antidote to the large-scale and indiscriminate destruction of sites in previous decades. The theoretical re-alignment from a philosophy advocating rescue excavation to one urging preservation was laid out in Paragraph 6:

Archaeological remains should be seen as a finite, and non-renewable resource, in many cases highly fragile and vulnerable to damage and destruction. Appropriate management is therefore essential to ensure that they survive in good condition. In particular, care must be taken to ensure that archaeological remains are not needlessly or thoughtlessly destroyed.

The proper management of this resource would be achieved within a framework of cooperation among developers, archaeologists, and local planning authorities. The driving force behind this radical re-alignment was the mechanism of developer-funding, a green concept based upon the principle of “the polluter pays.” Henceforth, when a site seemed likely to contain potentially important archaeological remains, the planning authority would require the developer to fund a programme of archaeological evaluation before reaching a decision on the development proposals. PPG 16 even went so far as to set out a staged procedure for site evaluation. Stage 1 comprised desk-based assessment of existing information, and possibly geophysical survey; Stage 2 served to characterize and delimit the extent of remains by means of “a rapid and inexpensive operation, involving ground survey and small-scale trial trenching” (para. 21); Stage 3 pulled the evidence of the first two stages of evaluation together to identify the extent and significance of the remains. Thus high-quality archaeological remains could be deemed worthy of preservation in situ. If this was not possible, or if the archaeological potential was of a low grade, arrangements could be made for the site to be excavated and published so as to ensure, in the words of the now-famous solecism, “preservation by record,” i.e., controlled destruction by archaeologists (para. 24). This structured approach, involving several stages of assessment compares closely to the system used to determine whether a site is eligible for inclusion in the National (or State) Register of Historic Places in the USA.

As a consequence of PPG 16, more money was made available for field archaeology in England (some £31,000,000 was spent in the year 1992–1993), and the archaeological advisors to local planning authorities were invested with an enhanced professional status. The general alacrity that greeted this fait accompli masked the fact that in one deft move the central government had succeeded in transferring responsibility for the funding of the bulk of archaeological work to private individuals and companies, while at the same time down-loading responsibility for the monitoring of archaeological impacts within the planning system to local authority level. Here we may identify a fundamental difference between the function of archaeological legislation in England and the US. In America, the federal government has far less influence over private property. The National Historic Preservation Act (1966) and other CRM legislation are intended to regulate the actions of federal agencies, to ensure that government fulfills its legal and moral obligations, rather than seeking to call private individuals or companies to account (Burrow and Hunter 1990: 195).

The advice contained within PPG 16 is applicable to both public and private sector developments, but few central government agencies (other than English Heritage) employ archaeologists. As recently as 1989 it was possible to witness government departments openly disregarding the advice of English Heritage, and denying any responsibility for the funding of archaeological work arising from their actions. In the face of a massive
programme of road-building the amount spent on archaeology by the Department of Transport was forced to increase from £329,000 in 1989–1990 to more than £3,000,000 in 1994; this occasioned Robert Key, sometime Minister for Roads, to comment that “Spending on archaeology has got out of hand” (The Observer “Archaeologists told to curb new road digs,” by Amanda Baillieu, 8th May 1994). The road bonanza that kept many English archaeological units afloat through the worst years of the recession has now largely dried up. The government has been forced to withdraw its ambitious plans for motorway renewal in an effort to reduce public spending and to deflect increasingly vocal criticism from environmental campaigners.

Losing a Tradition?

The seeds of downfall for field archaeology in England were sown, according to Martin Biddle (1994: 6), by a few fateful words.

Where nationally important archaeological remains, whether scheduled or not, and their settings, are affected by proposed development, there should be a presumption in favour of their physical preservation in-situ. (DoE 1990, para. 8)

Though agreeing with the tenor of PPG 16 and welcoming the new powers available to planning archaeologists, Biddle contends that by over-emphasizing in situ preservation the document has contributed to the decline of research-led excavation. Part of the problem lies in the way PPG 16 has been indiscriminately applied by some local planning authorities. The qualifier “nationally important” is frequently ignored as individuals struggle to reach their own interpretation of the value of archaeological remains. The end result is often that all material residues (which 20 years ago would have been worthy of universal “rescue”) are now considered worthy of universal in situ preservation. The frantic scrabbling of the “rescue” years has thus been replaced by a positive reluctance to undertake open-area excavations, and we have retreated to a position of self-doubt and indecision (Biddle 1994: 16). For most of us, “field archaeology” is now largely a matter of Stage 2 evaluation, involving geophysical prospection, surface collection, and trial trenching. Because the important sites defined by Stage 2 evaluations are preserved in situ, excavation rarely takes place. The paradox here is that the mediocre or poorly preserved sites which are sacrificed to the trowel are of insufficient quality either to answer our existing research questions or to help us formulate new ones.

At the same time, the preservation ethic is itself fraught with archaeological inconsistencies. As Biddle (1994) has demonstrated, some universally accepted “preservative” methods, such as the piling of deeply stratified waterlogged sites, are more destructive than is generally accepted by English archaeologists, a point supported by persuasive evidence from Scandinavia (Biddle 1994: 8).

The oft-heard mantra that remains are being left for the future, when better techniques will be available for investigation, itself reveals a flawed logic: excavation is an acquired skill, yet the opportunity to take part in large-scale excavations is now so limited in England that the next generation of field archaeologists is already an endangered species. This point has also been made by John Barrett (1995), in his recent address to the Institute of Field Archaeologists. Barrett argues that the practice of archaeology is a historical enquiry that exposes the importance of archaeological residues not as remains with some inherent value (for few of them have that) but as the means to explore how the past may have been. It is surely of greater importance that we preserve the practical and intellectual traditions of that enquiry for future generations than it is to preserve material remains whose possible significance will have been long forgotten (Barrett 1995: 12, emphasis mine).

Free-Market Archaeology

Biddle (1994) lays much of the blame for the current absence of a research culture at the door of PPG 16. Yet this document is less the cause of our problems than an inevitable corollary of the emergence of a free-market archaeology. In a passionate statement entitled “Archaeology: a casualty of the market?” Richard Morris, Director of the Council for British Archaeology, argues that the inherent
instability of the market system makes it difficult to develop and sustain a body of archaeological expertise within a research-led environment, especially during a prolonged recession:

We have arrived at the stage where governmental policy requires the presence of archaeologists, but disavows responsibility for the general health of archaeology (Morris 1993: 1).

At the same time, our knowledge and skills are so specialised that it is frequently impossible for outsiders commissioning archaeological work to evaluate the quality of our proposals. Faced with a research design that sets out a strategy for field evaluation, the majority of clients are likely to pass over the detail in search of the bottom line, i.e., the price. The client-provider relationship is formed not because of any intrinsic interest in archaeology or benign concern for the advancement of knowledge on the part of the sponsor. It exists because it enables a barrier within the planning process to be removed and makes development schemes more publicly acceptable.

Perhaps archaeology has become more like other professions than some would care to admit. Should we not accept this fact, set aside our soul-searching, and get on with earning a living? One successful English Unit Director would seem to advocate this approach.

Traditionally, archaeologists have not sought to make profits from their work. However, profit is what enables commercial companies to weather temporary lulls in their markets, to research and develop new ideas, to improve working practices and standards and to allow for capital investment. If archaeologists are to survive in a commercial milieu they must embrace this concept of profit. (Lawson 1993: 157)

This may be so, but it is not, in my opinion, a cause for celebration. Competitive bidding inevitably pushes prices down, and once a profession is locked into a process of bidding and counter-bidding, standards have a tendency to slip towards the minimum acceptable to fulfill the written contract. In this way, the emphasis has shifted from a rationale that once actively sought to understand past events and behaviour, to one that seeks simply to determine the presence, absence, and potential of archaeological remains within an area under investigation.

I feel sure that this scenario will be well known to archaeologists in North America (see for example Elia 1989). In this context I am reminded of a comment made by Michael Schiffer, about contract archaeology in North America, in the late 1970s (1979: 1).

A sizeable fraction of the profession considers archaeology to be a business activity, where rote 'research' designs are churned out like the inter office memos and operationalized like plumbing specifications. In this view, an archaeologist is someone who spends 40 hours a week 'at work' recovering and describing artefacts.

Conclusion

And so we find ourselves, more than half way through the 1990s, with more money than ever being spent on field archaeology in England. Our discipline has matured from its days as an antiquarian pursuit to become a fully-fledged, albeit out of the ordinary, profession. An Institute of Field Archaeologists, established in 1982, exists to advance the conservation, management, and study of archaeology, and to promote professional standards and ethics. Some 1,250 members in good standing are bound by a code of practice as rigorous as the hippocratic oath, and archaeology continues to be a material consideration in the planning process. We should have little cause for complaint.

Yet, faced with the problem of balancing research and conservation, or "curiosity" and "control," field archaeologists have become increasingly introspective and self-serving. As we have seen, the role of English Heritage has also changed. The organization now casts itself not as the paymaster, but rather as the strategic advisor for field archaeology. The titles of two prominent recent publications are indicative here: Exploring our Past—Strategies for the Archaeology of England (English Heritage 1991a); and Management of Archaeological Projects (English Heritage 1991b), a guide to project management in field archaeology. This concern for managerial efficiency and budget forecasting is mirrored in other professional publications (cf. Managing Archaeology Cooper et al. Routledge 1995). Sadly, the same concern
is not shown when it comes to presenting the fruits of our research to a wider audience.

There is a growing feeling among English archaeologists that we have over-reacted to the conservation ethic. By not excavating we threaten a loss of curiosity and skills within the profession and risk a withdrawal of support from our ultimate sponsors, the general public. We must re-invigorate ourselves, and re-discover why we do archaeology, and for whom.

Similar concerns, as I learned at Louisbourg, are also being raised in North America. Louisbourg itself—the starting point of this paper—seems to me to be a place where the balance between excavation, conservation, and the need to tell non-patronising stories of the past to an interested general public has been achieved with considerable success. But here too, of course, excavation has been scaled down in recent years, as a combination of fiscal cuts and the desire to conserve have taken hold. In England, some of us have raised the uncomfortable question, which came first? Whether, in other words, "conservation" may have been in some measure an egg laid by a fiscally-minded chicken. As Biddle has forcefully argued (1994: 17), the contemporary conservation ethic—whatever its origins—catches us between a rock and a hard place.

Increasingly, at present, we seem to be saying, "Not for us the race, only the handing on of the trust." I very much doubt whether the profession can easily survive the current unwillingness even to want to know, or the sadly stumbling turgiversations by which it seeks to avoid its first duty, which is to the study of the human past. In the last resort, we cannot conserve what we do not understand. It is a paradox we might ponder.

Indeed it is, a paradox that is increasingly being pondered and discussed by English field archaeologists.

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