The ‘Open Lab Project’: addressing the skills deficit of volunteer community archaeologists in Lincolnshire, UK

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Introduction

This chapter explores an area of concern related to volunteer-led community archaeology projects – and the archaeological assemblages that they sometimes generate – through a critical review of a project designed to strengthen and advance community skills capacity in this area. The possession and processing of assemblages of archaeological finds can present community archaeology groups with opportunities to widen their public engagement and participation levels. Such materials also present a range of issues and problems for such groups, however, particularly in association with the structured transition between post-extraction activity and archival deposition. These problems – often associated with a deficit of particular skills – can, in extreme cases, critically undermine the value of the archaeological activity undertaken. In reviewing a project developed within a university context, this chapter demonstrates not only a method of resolution for such issues but also considers further, sometimes unforeseen benefits that were realised, both for the archaeological process and the participants themselves.

Across the UK, volunteer community archaeologists engage actively and with great enthusiasm in archaeological projects. Many of these comprise an element of archaeological intervention (for a definitional discussion of ‘community archaeology’ in the UK see Thomas 2017). Such interventions, where they involve excavation or field-walking, can...
generate substantial quantities of archaeological materials and artefacts. For professional and academic archaeologists it is self-evident that such assemblages require appropriate processing, conservation, cataloguing, research and archiving. Volunteer community archaeologists, although often knowledgeable within the limits of their projects and clearly dedicated to their success, frequently lack higher level archaeological skills; they thus have a limited conceptual understanding and procedural capability with regard to post-extraction activity. Such a lacuna in archaeological capacity may in the worst cases expose archaeological records and artefacts to damage, dispersal and permanent loss.

Yet these negative outcomes are rarely, if ever, the result of a deliberately cavalier attitude among the project participants. Most often they arise through a genuine lack of knowledge and understanding of the necessary post-extraction processes. A failure to appreciate either the significance or fragility of recovered archaeological material may exacerbate the situation. In addition volunteer archaeologists may lack awareness of wider responsibilities to the finite cultural heritage that should, in fact, direct archaeological project design. In particular, the responsibility and resources needed to engage adequately with professional practitioners and ensure appropriate public archival deposition cannot be met. (For a discussion of this relationship see Isherwood 2011.)

A national survey of community archaeology groups and their activities was undertaken by the Council for British Archaeology (CBA) (Thomas 2010). The survey found that community archaeology and heritage groups facilitated a wide range of relevant activities supported by very high numbers of volunteers. Of more than 2,000 active groups, around 450 identified themselves as participating in archaeological fieldwork and related activities. Within this number, some 200 engaged in activities focused upon a form of archaeological intervention (Thomas 2010, 24–7).

Such interventions can involve excavation on a variety of scales with the concomitant generation of assemblages of finds. In most cases it is likely that appropriate project design, often a pre-requisite to the securing of adequate funding, will support a suitable level of post-extraction activity. On the other hand, inadequate project design or poor budgeting can result in post-extraction steps being shortened or even curtailed on those community projects driven by excavation as the primary participatory activity. A similar scenario can be found in poorly resourced field-walking projects: enthusiasm for the fieldwork activity is often not matched by that for participation in the post-extraction process. In both cases the rationale for deposition of material in publicly
accessible archaeological archives is frequently poorly understood. As a consequence that stage of project design and delivery is routinely under-resourced.

While the above figures from the CBA show that 43 per cent of those UK groups that undertook some form of practical archaeological activity engaged in fieldwork interventions, only 31 per cent indicated that they worked with archaeological finds in a post-excavation or archival context. These figures suggest a disparity between the generation of assemblages of finds and their appropriate processing and archival deposition, producing a ‘failure’ rate of around 10 intervention projects per year between 2004 and 2009. Given that some of the indicated ‘finds’ activities are likely to have been associated with work on material previously deposited in archives (see, for example, Cooper 2011), this figure is undoubtedly an underestimate. Such a model of project completion failure is not unique to community-led projects; professional/commercial interventions can also encounter similar issues. In those cases, however, the incomplete work is more often understood and characterised as a ‘backlog’; future completion remains an inherent assumption within subsequent operational planning. For community groups such assumptions often fail to become established for a variety of reasons, for example resource shortages, inadequate skills capacity, a lack of appropriate professional support or organisational weakness.

Where finds assemblages are generated, even when initial post-excavation processing has taken place, a lack of specific skills and resources can hinder further progress. In particular, without appropriate knowledge or guidance finds tend to be catalogued at only a rudimentary level. More significantly, storage is frequently inadequate in terms of meeting even basic conservation and environmental standards. The dynamic nature of community archaeology groups means that – in a way similar to commercial archaeological contractors, but for different reasons – they are always looking for the next project. Fieldwork activities are often seen as the primary means to attract and maintain a membership that is both interested and active. This can mean that the material results of previous projects become overlooked as resources expire and enthusiasm wains. The resulting finds assemblages become ‘orphaned’. While fieldwork records are, to varying degrees, written up and/or reported, the finds can become either forgotten or, at best, disassociated with the records. The space requirements of such ‘orphaned’ finds, without post-excavation completion and consequently no possibility of archival deposition, means that they are often haphazardly relocated out of sight in the various garages, sheds and attics of the membership.
The Project

In response to such issues, a team of academics and professional archaeologists at Bishop Grosseteste University (BGU-UK), Lincoln took a decision to develop a programme of practical support for post-exavation projects among local community archaeology groups. The resulting project proposal was successful in gaining support from the Heritage Lottery Fund (HLF). The Fund recognised the potential to enhance protection for the moveable heritage in the possession of such groups as well as the opportunities for targeted capacity-building among participant volunteers (for a review of the HLF’s ‘outcomes framework’ see Maeer 2017, 45–7). Known as the ‘Open Lab and Road Show Project’, its key aims were as follows:

• to train and support volunteers in archaeological artefact cataloguing, basic conservation and analysis
• to engage with both established community heritage groups and the wider public through the open lab and road show events
• to establish a group of skilled volunteers who could develop future community participation projects based on the holdings of the Lincolnshire Archaeological Archives
• to deliver a related outreach and schools education programme of activities

Scheduled to run over a two-year period between 2012 and 2014, the project was staffed by Zoë Tomlinson, a professional community archaeologist, supported during the first year by a professional finds specialist; funding limitations meant that both positions were structured as part-time employment. Overall management of the project fell to the author as a member of the academic team at the host university.

Organisation

While in its initiation the project can be defined most clearly as ‘top-down’, it was always intended that a significant level of project direction and management should be placed in the participants’ hands. It is widely recognised that the most successful outcomes are achieved by community archaeology projects that engage volunteers and professionals in a dynamic collaborative structure (for a good example see Rowe et al. 2014). Bearing this in mind, and in order to engage more directly with – and empower the leadership of – the various community groups that
were to be beneficiaries of the activity, a Project Steering Group was formed.

The Steering Group comprised a representative from each group, usually the current chair of the group, together with staff of the university, the City of Lincoln Council city archaeologist, the county’s finds liaison officer for the Portable Antiquities Scheme and the collections access officer representing the Lincolnshire Archaeological Archive, run by Lincolnshire County Council (LCC). The composition of the Steering Group thus provided a very effective mix of academic, professional and voluntary archaeological interests. It met on a regular basis, both to channel information back to the groups’ membership and to air views and concerns arising from the groups. The meetings also provided recurrent opportunities to receive critical feedback on specific activities as the project progressed.

Initially a pyramidal structure was conceived for formal communication between the project staff and the participants. Each group chair was asked to nominate a ‘volunteer co-ordinator’ and an ‘outreach co-ordinator’ from among their membership. These individuals were to act as points of contact between the community archaeologist and the groups’ wider memberships. In most cases this worked well, with information and messages, mainly email based, being relayed effectively via these individuals. With some groups, however, communications came to be channelled more frequently and directly through the chair of the group. This situation arose when no suitable volunteer could be found or as a result of changes in the composition of the group’s active members over the course of the project.

The project successfully engaged five local groups. Six were initially invited to participate, but one formally declined to take part, citing a lack of suitable post-excavation material to work on. Nonetheless individual members of that group became involved in the project at a more general level and through participation in the skills development workshops. Groups came from across the extensive rural county of Lincolnshire, although the more active participants were inevitably those geographically closest to Lincoln and the university campus. One group, which had a base over 48 km (30 miles) and about an hour’s drive away, attended sessions on the university campus during the project’s early phases. As their levels of skill and understanding developed, however, most of this group’s members chose to meet separately at a more convenient location. Such an approach inevitably limited the level of support that could be given to the group, in particular denying them the full use of the university’s facilities.
Support from the university

Making effective use of the archaeological facilities and resources of the university was a major driver for the project. Such facilities, while used for teaching and research activity during term-time and weekdays, were far less likely to be used in such an intensive way during holiday periods, evenings and weekends. One of the university’s strategic aims is to engage with the local community on a mutually beneficial basis, and the ‘Open Lab and Road Show Project’ could be located firmly within such a policy. Indeed, an important factor in gaining the support of the Heritage Lottery Fund was the significant in-kind support that the university was able to gift to the project. Such support included the free use of teaching rooms and lab space, as noted above – principally at times when such space would otherwise be underused – and access to the university’s library on a reader-only basis. In addition, a small amount of academic staff input was offered, as was specific support from both the university’s IT and reprographics services.

The range of equipment and resources needed to support a suitably ‘professional’ approach to post-extraction activities was not in most cases readily available to the participating community groups. It was assessed, however, that the archaeological equipment resources of the university had sufficient spare capacity to accommodate a controlled level of community group usage. Such lab-based resources included microscopes of low and high power, studio photographic equipment and general finds quantification and processing equipment: callipers, electronic scales and the like. In addition, the HLF grant supported the provision of a range of basic finds-related consumables that were, significantly, of an appropriate conservation and archival standard. Among the resources most in demand were polythene bags and boxes, silica gel, acid-free tissue paper, Tyvek labels, humidity indicator strips and acid-free archival boxes of standard dimensions.

There were further benefits in utilising BGU-UK’s archaeology facilities. The university provided a suitably flexible yet neutral space for the participating groups to attend. Here they were able to avoid the politics of inter-group rivalries which might have arisen had a group-specific location been chosen as a meeting place. In addition, all the participant groups appreciated the university’s generosity in opening its doors to them. Using the institution’s premises also encouraged individual participants to adopt a positive approach to personal learning and skills development in a psychological echo of BGU-UK’s primary function.
Delivering the project

The project ran for just over the scheduled two years. It principally consisted of regular, lab-based, finds processing sessions that took place on a weekly basis (Fig. 6.1). Finds sessions occurred most frequently on Wednesday afternoons, a regular time at which no teaching was delivered. To enhance accessibility, additional sessions were hosted on evenings and weekends. Each session took place over a period of generally three to four hours with generous breaks for tea and biscuits. While two of the groups preferred evening attendance, the greatest and most regular participation occurred during the weekday sessions. It soon became clear, however, that the additional weekend sessions attracted only a very small number of different participants when compared to the well-attended weekday sessions. As a consequence, during the second year almost all meetings for processing, cataloguing and research were held on weekdays, supported by just one weekend meeting per month.

The skills development workshops were organised differently (Fig. 6.2). These were publicised in advance as one-off events, timetabled on a weekday evening and made open to the general public. Lasting between two and three hours, each workshop was led by a subject-relevant
professional or academic archaeologist. Sessions covered topics such as basic finds conservation, animal osteology, Roman and medieval ceramics, site and finds photography, and environmental sampling and processing. In each case, practical workshop activities enhanced what was often an introductory talk or lecture. Those delivering the sessions were asked to focus on what could be achieved realistically by volunteers, while also drawing attention to those aspects of each topic that remained
firmly within the professional or specialist’s purview. As well as providing an introduction to identification, sampling, processing and analysis, significant emphasis was placed on the ultimate goal of archival deposition.

An early element of the project involved volunteers in the construction of a group of portable display boxes. These were designed to demonstrate the range and scope of archaeological finds that might be encountered across the East Midlands. This activity was formulated to introduce project participants to the appropriate methods of handling, managing and interpreting finds. The boxes formed the core of the archaeological ‘Road Show’, the ostensible purpose of which was to engage the wider public with various concepts of archaeology by focusing on finds-related activities. The ‘Road Show’ presented objects of differing types, materials and periods through the use of a mixture of genuine archaeological artefacts and replicas, some of which were specially commissioned. The process of constructing the boxes and learning to present their contents to the public introduced the volunteers to a number of useful skills. In particular, enhanced knowledge and practical skills related to the demands of object- and material-specific conservation were key objectives.

Over the two years of the project the volunteers, and the groups they represented, made significant progress in the cataloguing, stabilisation (which included very basic conservation measures), packaging and analysis of their respective finds assemblages. A number of key skills were developed and all participants gained valuable additional knowledge and confidence in the post-extraction process. Through that process a range of project outcomes were achieved that were clearly associated with the original project aims. However, a number of unforeseen archaeological outcomes and personal developments can also be associated with the project.

**Foreseen outcomes**

It is clear that with reference to the aims of the project, as stated in the preceding section, all were achieved to a greater or lesser extent. Individual volunteer community archaeologists were engaged in a learning and practice exercise in relation to the post-extraction processing, cataloguing, analysis and archiving of pre-existing artefact collections previously identified as ‘orphaned’ finds assemblages. They engaged with the project not directly as individuals, but either as current members of one of the participant groups or by joining a relevant local
group before taking part in ‘Open Lab’ activities. Through this process they came to develop an enhanced degree of ownership and hence responsibility for the finds on which they were working. This also had the added benefit for the groups of increasing their membership; as a result the project strengthened group membership. It was seen as a critical factor for the sustainability of the project, both generally and with regard to the specific ‘orphaned’ finds assemblages that individuals developed a close association with the material on which they were working. This not only encouraged a personal sense of responsibility among the participants; it also, most significantly, instilled a desire to ensure that the finds would eventually reach the archive.

Processing, cataloguing and packaging

The project staff directly supported the local groups in processing and cataloguing their various assemblages of archaeological materials. In particular, steps were taken to review the packaging and hence archival stability of differing classes of artefact and materials. This stage of the project made direct reference to meeting the required conservation demands of the finds, with groups being invited to bring their assemblages for temporary deposition at the university’s archaeology lab. The project was able to purchase secure, dedicated storage cabinets within which the material could be housed; it could also be accessed easily by volunteers during lab sessions. On arrival the material was assessed by the project staff and a plan of action agreed with each community group.

The majority of the finds were found to be inappropriately packaged using a wide variety of containers. Metal tins, often of the biscuit variety, and small (non-airtight) plastic boxes, often re-used take-away food containers of random shapes and sizes, predominated. In addition, finds were stored in various bags including plastic shopping carrier bags and freezer bags; artefacts were cushioned using cotton wool and patterned kitchen paper towels. Moreover, a great variety of writing implements had been used to label the packaging with a range of outcomes; some labelling was clearly visible, but other labels were faded or illegible. Furthermore, while some groups had used acceptable terminology in labelling others had devised their own systems, which in some cases were inappropriate for coherent cataloguing.

As a consequence, volunteer training during the first few months of the project focused on repackaging and re-labelling the material and reviewing conservation conditions for each class of finds. Lincolnshire benefits from a standardised published manual for archaeological practice,
but this was principally written with commercial projects in mind. Although available freely online, it is framed in a way that most community-based archaeologists found inaccessible (LCC 2012). Because of its significance for archival deposition, the project staff adhered closely to this guidance. They worked to extract and simplify relevant information to ensure the participants not only followed best practice, but understood it in an appropriately contextualised way.

It is with reference to this first phase of the project’s activity where perhaps the greatest – although apparently most mundane – success was to be found: the instillation of a professional approach among the volunteers regarding the correct packaging and labelling of archaeological finds. Following relevant conservation standards and guidelines, all the material was systematically assessed, repackaged and labelled consistently. In particular, use was made of the First Aid for Finds publication to provide an easily accessible yet authoritative source of basic conservation information for the volunteers (Watkinson and Neal 1998).

The first stage in the repackaging process was to make use of new polythene bags of an appropriate standard, with ‘write-on’ strips, to repack most of the finds. Such finds consisted primarily of ceramics, building material and animal bones. In a number of instances it was agreed that additional cleaning was required as part of this process. This step was followed by ensuring that labels were only written using permanent marker pens, either directly on packaging or on Tyvek labels. Ensuring the consistent use of such indelible markers by the volunteers had to be repeatedly enforced; some individuals were on occasion discovered to still be using ballpoint pens and similar non-permanent inks for labelling. The retention of some examples of the discarded packaging as a demonstration aid, replete with faded and illegible labels, proved particularly beneficial in changing such behaviours.

Overcoming challenges

Two other areas of success with regard to appropriate packaging can also be highlighted. A significant number of iron finds in an advanced state of corrosion were presented during the initial project deposition phase. This situation was aggravated by such objects having been stored in a mixed collection with finds of other materials. An early training activity ensured that volunteers understood the relevant use of absorbent agents, such as silica gel, in the packaging of metals in order to create an airtight ‘dry-box’ environment. Conversely, a small number of organic finds had been allowed to dry out and so to decay. In neither case were the finds presented
of great individual significance; for example, the iron objects were mainly fragments of nails or similar. In this case, however – in contrast to the somewhat reluctant attitude expressed by some to the use of indelible markers – the volunteers readily engaged with the concept of appropriate packaging. It appears that they were genuinely unaware that such object decay might be retarded relatively easily, and could therefore identify immediate and positive benefits of changing their behaviour in this area.

A further revelation with regard to packaging for the volunteers, and especially the chairs of the groups, was the knowledge that the County’s Archaeological Archive had approved conservation standards and dimensions for storage boxes. Both direct instruction in the archival deposition process by the staff of the archive and a project visit to the archive itself provided significant benefits. The volunteers were able to appreciate at first hand the importance of the space efficiency requirements of archival storage, as well as the associated need for standardised labelling of bags and boxes. While most volunteers had expressed enthusiasm for the pleasing aesthetic of using standardised sizes of packaging, they had not appreciated the critical utility that such an approach bestows on the efficient management of a long-term archive. The visit to the Archaeological Archive thus proved to be one of the highlights of the project. The timing of the visit to fall during the second year of the project was also beneficial. By that stage the volunteers involved were well-versed in – and engaging with – the basic principles of finds processing, packaging and labelling.

Once repackaged and stabilised, the activity of the project participants shifted to the systematic cataloguing and recording of finds for ‘assessment’ purposes. This element of the project was directed by the project staff, actively supported by a range of specialists. In particular, the ceramic specialists were able to guide the process to collate materials and generate information and records in a form that the specialists could more easily work with. This both empowered the volunteers by taking them further than simply washing the pot and helped them also to form a more practical and detailed understanding of the subsequent steps of ceramic identification and quantification. Wherever possible, the specialists made appointments to go through the assemblages during a scheduled ‘Open Lab’ session. At such meetings they would demonstrate to the volunteers the stages of laying out, sorting and approaches for initial identification.

A further important – and planned – outcome of this process was to open the volunteers’ eyes to the advanced skill set possessed by the specialists, emphasising its professional complexity and, conversely,
the limitations of the volunteers’ own abilities in these areas. The necessary cost of professional, specialist, post-excavation analysis was outlined, demonstrated and justified. As a result subsequent funding bids by at least two of the groups were far better informed in the area of budgeting for specialist support than might otherwise have been the case.

Some additional areas of cataloguing and recording were also undertaken enthusiastically by the participants. Particularly favoured activities included the recording and identification of coins and animal bones. The work with coins required an advance in the participants’ skills with regard to studio photographic techniques. The positive outcome of this training was readily seen, with a move from out-of-focus photographs of various digital resolutions to higher quality images in standard formats acceptable for archiving. Initial coin identification was undertaken and some volunteers developed particular knowledge in this area. Identifications were verified during a scheduled visit by a numismatist; further analysis was left for professional consultation at a later date. A similar approach was taken to the cataloguing of animal bone, with particular volunteers gaining specific skills in identification sufficient to support initial sorting. A visit by an osteoarchaeologist again helped to confirm identifications and guide further quantification. However, the final stages of the animal bone analysis and report writing remained firmly within the purview of the professional.

Sustainability of future archaeological projects

In terms of the future sustainability of community archaeology projects, the overriding aim was to equip the volunteers with the knowledge, skills and resources to undertake post-excavation work in an increasingly independent manner. A further objective was to enhance the groups’ understanding of professional standards, and the obligation upon them to plan and budget accordingly were they to undertake future archaeological interventions. This approach emphasised the significance of project design, academic/administrative consultation, appropriate budgeting and the contribution of professional archaeologists to facilitate the various stages of their projects. While the groups did possess a clear understanding of their general responsibilities to the shared heritage, and with regard to community engagement, their knowledge of professional best practice once again proved limited. The project raised both the groups’ leadership ability and understanding, achieving demonstrable levels of success.
As noted earlier, a series of 14 more formal skills development workshops were organised for the project. These were attended by significant numbers of the participants. However, a pattern also developed by which some groups sent representatives who would then relay their experience back to the wider group membership. This approach helped to extend the reach of the workshops, at least with regard to key information. The value of the workshops was measured through both practical outcomes and formal evaluation. Positive practical outcomes were perceived through a more efficient and systematic approach taken by participants of ‘Open Lab’ sessions in areas of activity covered by the workshops. When asked formally whether the workshops would help to inform future archaeological practice among the groups, 86.7 per cent responded positively. The evaluative data also indicated that in terms of attendance the most popular subject matter was medieval and Roman ceramics (attracting 78.6 and 64.3 per cent respectively), followed by numismatics (50 per cent) and then by a more practical artefact drawing workshop (42.9 per cent) (see Fig. 6.2). The last event was so well received that participants independently arranged further drawing workshops; these they self-funded outside of the structure of the project.

Evaluation

Evaluation exercises were undertaken at both the halfway point of the project and at its conclusion. Over the two years of the project some 150 ‘Open Lab’ sessions took place, equating to roughly 750 hours of community engagement. With regard to individual participant involvement, a rough estimate of volunteer activity indicated that at least 9,000 volunteer hours were committed to the project. As noted above, five different groups took part. However, some presented more than one assemblage of material for processing. In all, 10 different projects were brought to the ‘Open Lab’ sessions, the majority of which reached a stage ready for archival deposition by the end of the project. A further group of projects remain as ongoing activities still being pursued by the groups – but now with a clear system of working and defined objectives that will result in archival deposition.

Thus one of the project’s primary aims was achieved: that of archival deposition of finds which would otherwise probably not have found their way into the public sphere. While the staff of the archive welcomed this practical outcome, they also recognised the project’s wider and ongoing benefits. As the archive’s collections access officer observed:
I genuinely can’t remember a project as successful as this in a long time, certainly not in terms of bridging the amateur/professional divide and forging new relationships. I think the new archaeological landscape it has created going forward is, if anything, even more important than the archives that will be deposited. (Tomlinson 2014)

One area that did not perhaps entirely meet the ambition of the original aim was that related to public outreach and educational activities. While a number of such activities and events were successfully delivered, the intensive nature of delivering training and supervising lab-based finds sessions tended to monopolise the available time of the staff. In addition the educational activities, when delivered through schools, depended upon the support and organisational accommodation of the host schools. Regrettably in many cases the demands of curriculum and formal teaching, together with other workload pressures among teachers, inhibited access to schools for the ‘Road Show’ activities.

On reflection, the team decided that a schools-based workshop approach was probably best located within a separate dedicated project. Further development of this activity was beyond the staffing resources of the ‘Open Lab’ project as currently funded. Nonetheless imaginative use of public contact opportunities when they arose allowed the team to deliver just over 300 person days of outreach activities to some 1,660 individuals – including nearly 800 children – across the two years of the project (Tomlinson 2014). It is important to note that most of these interactions were facilitated jointly between project staff and volunteer participants.

Unforeseen outcomes

While the project had clearly stated aims with expected outcomes, there were a number of other outcomes that the project team had not entirely foreseen or which proved more significant than expected. As stated earlier, by locating the ‘Open Lab’ sessions physically within the BGU-UK’s campus, it was hoped to avoid any inter-group rivalries. In practice, however, the behaviour of the various groups in attendance was far more collaborative than might have been expected. Though focusing mainly on their own assemblages of material, the participants were constantly supportive of each other and curious about each group’s finds and progress.
Indeed, an outcome aligned with this, which was to some extent particularly unexpected, was the role played by a number of the more highly skilled volunteers.

A small number of volunteers came to the project with pre-existing skills and knowledge in a variety of areas. For example, one individual turned a particular interest in photography into a shared skill resource for all the groups. After taking initial advice from project staff on the requirements of archival small finds photography, she effectively became the key point of contact and advisor for volunteers engaged in such photography. Another participant, a retired research chemist, applied his skills and knowledge to the application of the university’s Raman spectrometer to the identification of various materials from the assemblages – in particular the pigments of Roman painted wall plaster. His dedication to this task was sufficient to generate two consultation visits by project staff and volunteers to experts at University College London and the British Museum. A final example is that of a volunteer whose particular knowledge of archaeological mollusc recording and identification resulted in him leading a skills workshop on the subject. He was subsequently ‘contracted’ by a group different to his own to produce an identification and assessment report on their mollusc samples.

The relationships between groups were greatly strengthened as volunteers explored sharing skills and knowledge collaboratively between themselves, independent of the project. This proved a significant outcome for the ‘Open Lab and Road Show Project’ with regard to the future sustainability of community archaeology in the county. At the same time it demonstrates the part that skilled ‘citizen researchers’ can play in supporting wider archaeological practice, including potential benefits for local academic and professional/commercial archaeologists.

While it had always been an aim of the project to help participants develop a coherent understanding of the role played by specialists in archaeological post-extraction processes, the project’s success in this area was actually greater than expected. The participants quickly came to appreciate the role of such specialists. Yet also, even more importantly, the groups came to a clear recognition of their limitations in this regard. This was important as, when providing advice to support subsequent funding bids, there was little need to remind the groups of the importance of correct and timely engagement with the various and relevant specialists. Instead it was possible to focus such guidance more effectively on the specific requirements of each particular project.

That subsequent costing and project planning was well-structured was confirmed when two of the groups were awarded funding for further
archaeological fieldwork projects. One such project involved limited open-area excavation at a known archaeological site, while the other was an extensive programme of urban test-pitting and community engagement. Both projects incorporated appropriate levels of professional support retained through funded contracts.

**Improved wellbeing and related benefits**

Less tangible but equally important outcomes were a range of wellbeing and health-related benefits. By the end of the project there was evidence for an increased sense of self-worth and improved physical and mental wellbeing among a number of the volunteer participants. While much of this evidence was subjective, formal project evaluation feedback and qualitative interview responses have helped to confirm this positive effect (see Simpson and Williams 2008 for a discussion of approaches to evaluation). The creation of a networking culture between the groups not only positively supported further archaeological activity through the sharing of experience and specific skills, but also strengthened social interactions and initiated new-found friendships (Tomlinson 2014; English Heritage 2014). Overall a clear sense of communal and intellectual value was established among the participants which appears in most cases to represent the foundations for longer-term commitments and actions.

It is more difficult to assess any direct economic value associated with the project, other than a crude correlation between general archaeological costs and the number of hours of ‘labour’ delivered by the volunteers. There is also little, if anything, in the wider literature to provide base-data against which such a measure might be evaluated. Indeed, while some attempts have been made recently to assess the economic value of heritage participation, these have defined such actions as passive – framing those who visit heritage as an ‘audience’ rather than as individuals actively engaged through participatory activity (see English Heritage 2014; Fujiwara et al. 2014). Clearly the type of heritage engagement described here might be more correctly aligned with the participatory activity of, say, ‘playing sport’ rather than more passive forms of consumption. As Melville (2014, 5) notes, with reference to Bickerton and Wheatley (2013):

> Another recent study found that visiting historic sites did have a statistically significant impact on well-being, one that was similar to attending arts events, greater than that for visiting museums, and less than that for playing sports.
In addition, if purely economic benefits are to be assessed, then the contributory nature of archaeological research conducted upon public archives – which thereby generates positive outcomes as a wider public good – should be seen as a multiplying factor (Lipe 2002; Burtenshaw 2017).

Thus although the wellbeing benefits of the ‘Open Lab’ project – and participation in archaeological activities more generally – can only be assessed through subjective reflection, it is clear that positive benefits certainly exist. Such benefits include greater personal confidence, enhanced intellectual motivation and improved community engagement and friendships. It is evident that participants of the current project received all these benefits; in the case of some individuals, attendance at practical sessions had more specific and positive outcomes for their personal health, both physical and mental. As a result, the project’s legacy is not only an ongoing engagement with archaeology by a group of community volunteers with enhanced skills, but also a group of people whose wellbeing and quality of communal interaction has been demonstrably enhanced.

Conclusion

The ‘Open Lab’ project set out to tackle a problem identified by professional and academic archaeologists, although equally recognised by the volunteer participants. It concerned the failure to complete post-extraction processes and thus to deposit finds assemblages into the appropriate public archaeological archive. The project focused upon skills development as the means by which such assemblages could be translated from a precarious ‘orphaned’ status to publicly secure archival deposition. The raising of the participants’ levels of knowledge and understanding of archaeological process were significant additional outcomes. A range of personal and social benefits also accrued to the participants. This will help to provide a strong foundation for the future sustainability of community-based archaeology projects.

The project, as noted, was initiated as a ‘top-down’ concept. However, through the responsive approach taken by the project staff toward the participant groups, a strong element of ‘bottom-up’ direction in fact ensued. While some aspects of this direction required careful management to ensure that professional standards of conservation care, analytical rigour and archival norms were maintained, the process became essentially collaborative.
The project delivered significant outcomes for the funds invested, yet the time-limited nature of project funding presents a key weakness going forward. Access to professional support and advice is essential if community-initiated projects are to be successful. The unpredictable nature of archaeological intervention, the complexities of certain forms of research and the sometimes fluctuating nature of group membership all present challenges to even the most highly skilled volunteer archaeologists. While funders are happy to provide resources on a project-by-project basis, most shy away from commitments to the provision of long-term professional staffing. Despite archaeological archives in the UK being managed by local public authorities, the current economic conditions make it highly unlikely that suitable levels of professional support can be provided from the public purse. The current project was based in a university, however, and so was able to make excellent and efficient use of the institution’s resources for community benefit.

As universities, at least in the UK, move toward a more financially autonomous model and engage in rhetoric of increased ‘civic’ worth and contribution, the focus for such community support should perhaps be further developed within that setting. Community archaeology provides a very real way in which universities can reach out to their ‘local’ communities in a process of interactively popular, yet firmly scholarly, practice, and a number have successfully engaged in such activities. As noted during this project, it is also a way in which universities, through creative engagement with skilled ‘citizen researchers’, can advance their own archaeological research enquiries, with demonstrable levels of ‘public impact’ providing a clear institutional benefit. Such a model constructs university-supported community archaeology as a well-defined public good, based on a dynamic process of shared learning and knowledge exchange.

References


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