25 Years of Development-led Archaeology in England: Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats

Steve Trow

Abstract

After more than 25 years of development-led archaeology formalised in government policy, England may be better placed than most to reflect on the resultant legacy. The paper examines the advantages and disadvantages of the UK's particular approach to commercial archaeology from the perspective of Historic England, as a statutory advisor on the historic environment. It highlights the major increase in resources that commercial archaeology has delivered for the discipline and the way that a new generation of synthetic projects is delivering radical new historical narratives. Progress is also noted in terms of the profession's self-regulation of standards. The paper notes that the UK's approach is one which has evolved to operate within one of the most liberalised economies in Europe and one which must now respond to a strong governmental focus on deregulation and reduction in public expenditure. Particular concerns are identified where the commercial market still requires support from the public sector. The paper suggests that reflections on 'ideal' approaches for the conduct of archaeology may be less useful than planning for systems that will be resilient to future change.

Keywords: *archaeological heritage management; commercial archaeology; development-led archaeology; preventative archaeology; archaeological research.*

In November 2015 a large group of archaeologists met in Parliament to celebrate the 25th anniversary of the publication in England of *Planning Policy Guidance Note 16: Archaeology and Planning* (or PPG 16). Normally the release of a piece of ostensibly low-key spatial planning guidance would be a routine event and its anniversary would never be thought worthy of commemoration. However, PPG 16 was to have profound effects on the way archaeologists worked in England and, later, in the UK as a whole. It has also subsequently influenced thinking in many other countries.

Prior to 1990, some enlightened developers were willing to bear the costs of mitigating the archaeological impacts of their projects voluntarily: the majority were not. A handful of local authorities were attempting to apply archaeological requirements to planning conditions: most were not. As a result, only a fraction of the hundreds of archaeological sites threatened by development each year were the subject of rescue excavation. The single biggest funder of this work was the state, initially in the form of our environment ministry and, later, through its agency, English Heritage. Funding was always inadequate to address the scale of the threat and archaeologists were acutely aware of the large numbers of unrecorded losses taking place (see, e.g., Wainwright 2000 for an authoritative account of the situation).

From 1990, PPG 16 required developers to assess the archaeological impacts of their projects as part of the process of obtaining planning consent and, on the basis of advice from local authority archaeologists, either protect the most important threatened remains or bear the reasonable costs of recording them. As the quid pro quo for providing the funding for archaeological fieldwork, developers were allowed to exercise choice in the selection of an archaeological contactor to undertake the work on their behalf. These changes were an important step in the genesis of what has variously been called commercial, developer-funded, development-led, or preventive archaeology[1]. They rapidly transformed the way archaeologists in the UK[2] carried out their work and, in doing so, introduced many changes that were beneficial, some that were problematic and others whose impacts were not fully appreciated at the time.

After 25 years of operating this approach, professional archaeologists in England are well placed to reflect on both its strengths and its weaknesses and to consider both threats and opportunities.

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1 The term 'preventive archaeology' is not used widely in the UK but our 'development-led' or 'planning-led' archaeology is the equivalent, allowing a range of responses from the in situ preservation of archaeological remains to their archaeological recording, with options informed by the significance of the remains.

2 The development-led approach was formally adopted in England in 1990, in Wales in 1991, in Scotland in 1994 and in Northern Ireland in 1999.

Resources

The most obvious benefit of England's development-led approach has been in terms of the increased availability of resources. If the level of state funding immediately prior to the publication of PPG 16 is recalculated at today's values, it would now be worth around 17 million Euros annually. In contrast, our latest estimates (for 2013-14) suggest that in-year developer funding for archaeology in the UK (the great majority of which is spent in England) is now running at over 180 million Euros (Historic England 2016, page 7). At the very least, therefore, developer funding has resulted in something approaching a ten-fold real-terms increase in the resources available to England's archaeologists.

Of course, money isn't the principal concern *per se* – but it does stand as a broad proxy for the large number of archaeological sites that archaeologists have been enabled to investigate. Based on a recent survey and overview undertaken by Bournemouth University and funded by Historic England (Darvill *et al* forthcoming), it can be calculated that, since 1990, more than 75,000 archaeological interventions have been instigated as a result of the requirements of our planning system. These

Fig. 1. Without the availability of developer funding, many thousands of important archaeological sites in England would have been destroyed without record over the last twenty-five years. Mass grave of decapitated Viking men found on the Weymouth Relief Road. © Oxford Archaeology.

interventions range from large-scale area excavations down to small-scale trial excavations and watching briefs. Taken together, this represents an enormous body of new archaeological evidence, most of which would have been destroyed without record had it not been for the availability of developer funding.

Another important benefit of the growth of developer funding was that it gradually permitted the redeployment of state monies to address threats to the archaeological resource other than those caused by the construction industry, such as intensive agriculture, coastal erosion and the desiccation of wetlands. Taken together (or even individually) the destructive potential of processes should always have been a major concern for archaeologists but they were not seen as particular priorities for funding (see, for example, Trow 2010, page 130-131, on agriculture).

Understanding

Had this paper been written five years ago, the lack of large-scale synthesis of the outputs from commercial archaeology would have been a major concern, notwithstanding the early lead provided by the work of Richard Bradley (Bradley 2006; 2007). Now, however, as a result of a new generation of major synthetic projects, undertaken by university-based academics and funded by the UK's or European research councils, we are seeing a real step-change in the understanding emerging from this body of archaeological recording. Examples of these projects include; *The Rural Settlement of Roman Britain* (University of Reading)[3]; *Fields of Britannia* (University of Exeter)[4]; *British and Irish Prehistory in their European Context* (Universities of Leicester and Reading[5]); *People and Places in the Anglo-Saxon Landscape* (University of Oxford)[6]; and (based on those records already incorporated in local inventories) *English Landscapes and Identities* (University of Oxford)[7].

These projects are confirming the cumulative value of large numbers of interventions at a variety of scales and demonstrating how commercial work is exploring previously neglected landscapes and site types. They are also illustrating how the commercially-generated record is far more comprehensive and representative of the archaeological resource when compared with the results of research-led fieldwork, notwithstanding its own biases (see Bradley, *et al.* 2016, 26-27, 329-330). Important

3 See http://www.reading.ac.uk/archaeology/research/roman-rural-settlement/.

4 See http://humanities.exeter.ac.uk/archaeology/research/projects/title_84580_en.html.

5 See Bradley, *et al.* 2016.

6 See Blair (forthcoming).

7 See https://englaid.com/.

new historical narratives are emerging from this enhanced knowledge base. As a result of the *Rural Settlement of Roman Britain* (which synthesized the results of more than 2,500 Romano-British excavations) and the *Fields of Britannia* projects, for example, Britain now has a good claim to be the best studied province in the Roman Empire.

This is only the beginning. Most of the potential of developer-funded work still remains to be tapped and its analysis is already providing a constructive critique of our fieldwork methodologies, which has the potential to change the way we undertake future archaeological investigation

Professionalism and critical mass

A major benefit accruing to our discipline as a result of development-led archaeology has been the significant growth in the scale of our field archaeological workforce and the perception of archaeology as a profession.

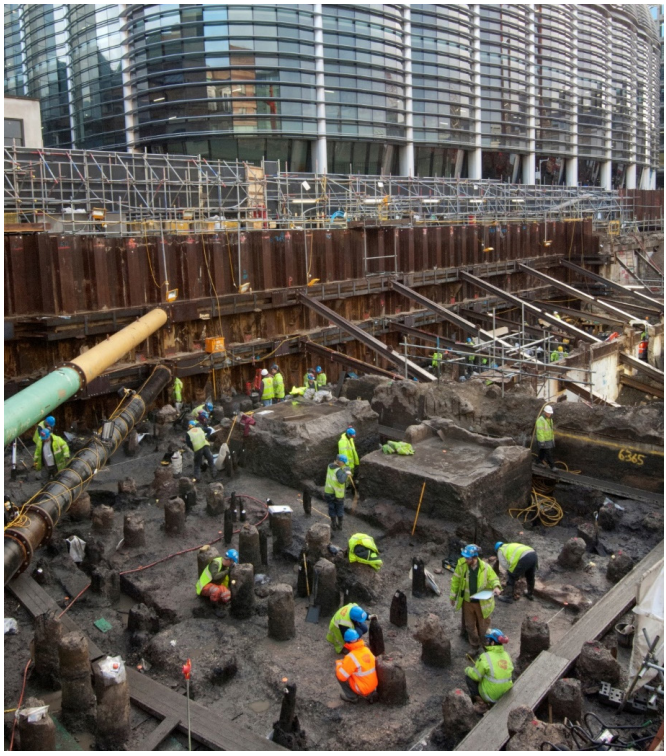

Fig. 2. Excavations at Bloomberg Place in 2013 illustrate the scale and complexity of some development-led archaeology projects. This three acre site in the heart of the Roman city of London required the excavation of seven metres of stratigraphy and complex waterlogged deposits. © MOLA.

There are now very many more professional archaeologists operating in the UK than there were prior to the publication of PPG 16, providing our profession with vital critical mass. The UK's most recent employment survey (Landward Research forthcoming 2016) estimates a total archaeology-related workforce in March 2015 of 5,736 of which an estimated 3,844 were engaged in commercial archaeological practices. Recent calculations based on the UK Government's published proposals for new infrastructure suggest that we may now face a shortfall of 880 to 1,900 archaeologists annually over the next four to five years (Historic England 2016).

While such fluctuations in the workforce may be regrettable at a personal level and can cause short-term skills shortages, it should also be noted that even at its nadir in 2012, the UK's commercial sector maintained a core of more than 2,800 active commercial archaeologists, ensuring a significant degree of resilience and continuity within the sector[8].

Fig. 3. Commercial archaeological practices operating in England have been the source of considerable methodological, technical and conceptual innovation in archaeological fieldwork. Graves of Black Death victims found deep in a shaft dug for London's Crossrail project. © Crossrail.

8 It should be noted that, as 7% of archaeologists working in the UK at the height of the market (during 2007-8) were from overseas (Landward Research 2013), suggesting that a significant future challenge to our commercial workforce could be impediments to the free movement of archaeological professionals resulting from the UK's stated intention to leave the European Union.

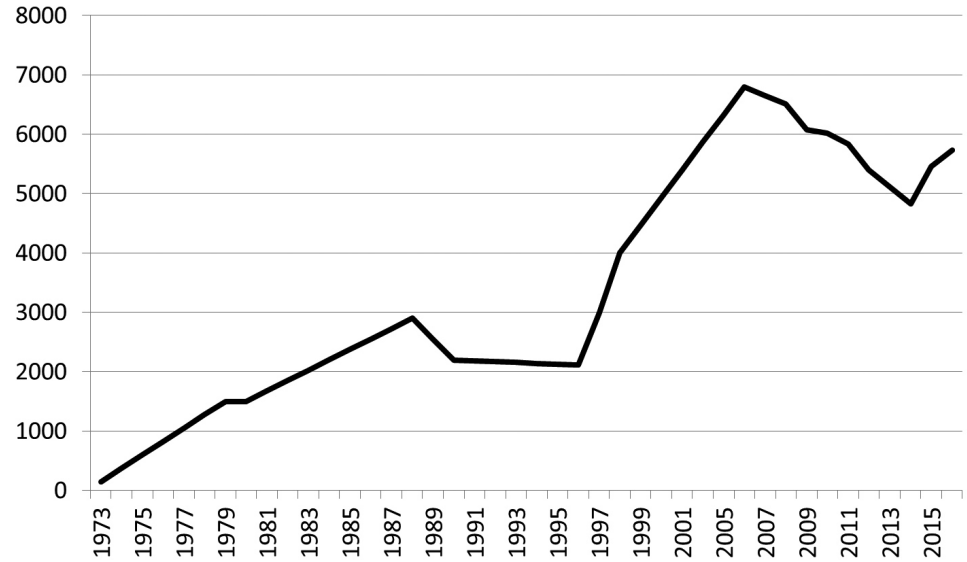

Fig. 4. Estimated numbers of professional archaeologists working in the UK (After Landward Research 2013, figure 1, page 21, Landward Research 2015, page 15 and Landward Research forthcoming 2016, page 15 interpreted by the author).

Weaknesses and threats

It is no exaggeration to describe the cumulative effects of commercial archaeology in England as a revolution. Nor is it unrealistic to conclude that, to date, their implications have been largely beneficial to the conduct of our discipline. When Historic England marked the 25th anniversary of PPG 16, therefore, we did so by releasing a digital publication (Historic England 2015) that rehearsed and celebrated the gains PPG 16 and its successors had delivered, squarely aimed at developers, planners, and the interested public.

Notwithstanding this upbeat assessment, we cannot deny that archaeology in England faces some significant challenges at the moment and we are by no means complacent about the future. Our principal concerns are intended changes to our national spatial planning policies and the erosion of our system of local authority archaeological advisers. Also of concern, but of a lower order, are issues around professional standards; the accessibility of the records for commercial fieldwork; and our ability to curate the enormous body of archaeological archives that this work is creating.

Changes to England's planning system and advisory services

Currently, our most pressing concern arises from a near-continuous series of government initiatives to liberalise England's spatial planning system, with the intention of promoting economic growth. At the time of writing, it is difficult to predict the implications of the latest round of changes. While our archaeological system is not the intended target of these changes, we are concerned that it may become unintended 'collateral damage'. As the UK has not translated the Valetta convention into statute - only into national policy and practice - we have no statutory 'safety net' should that policy and practice be changed.

A second key concern is the impact that reductions in public expenditure are having on our local authority advisory services. Although our market in commercial archaeological services is thriving (and has demonstrated that it can weather even severe economic shocks), its success depends on a network of publicly funded curatorial (or advisory) archaeologists based in our local authorities. These colleagues manage our Historic Environment Records (local inventories); ensure the archaeological implications of development are recognised in both the strategic planning and development control processes; help to negotiate appropriate briefs for and written schemes of investigations for compensatory fieldwork; and monitor the academic and

Fig. 5. Most commercial archaeological practices operating in England are delivering their work to high professional and academic standards. Excavation of the internationally important waterlogged late Bronze Age settlement at Must Farm, Cambridgeshire. © Cambridge Archaeological Unit.

methodological quality of fieldwork, analysis and publication. In short, they are the lynchpin of the system.

Nationally there are just over 270 full-time archaeologists advising local planning authorities (Historic England *et al* 2016), but the number has dropped by a third, since its peak in 2006, reflecting cuts to local expenditure. Projected social service demands on local authority funding suggest this erosion is likely to continue.

Standards, publications and archives

Standards in fieldwork, analysis and publication could obviously be regarded as a potential challenge in a system where developers are allowed to choose their own archaeological contractors and where there is no centralised system of permits or licensing for fieldwork. Historic England is certainly not complacent about the standards of archaeological work, recognising that some fieldwork, analysis and publication carried out in England may be inadequate. Nevertheless, we consider that the great majority of work is delivered to high or acceptable standards and that some of the most innovative work (intellectually and methodologically) is undertaken by our commercial sector[9]. In addition, many developers now wish to routinely work with archaeological practices of proven quality, notwithstanding cost differentials, in the way that they work with other professions. So, while we might be superficially attracted by the centralised systems of excavation licensing operated by some countries, as a belt-and-braces way of enforcing standards, we are not convinced that such a system is always best placed to encourage innovation and creativity and could even run the danger of infantilising our archaeological operators.

The professionalism of most of our archaeological practices can be exemplified by reference to the track-record of one of the larger commercial archaeological practices operating in England. Not only does Oxford Archaeology operate high fieldwork standards, it also has an impressive rate of project completion and publication. Since 1999, for example, Oxford Archaeology has published over 200 excavation reports, ranging from monographs to journal papers, and has deposited over 1000 archaeological archives (Personal communication: Anne Dodd, Post-Excavation Manager Oxford Archaeology). While Oxford Archaeology's record is certainly exemplary in terms of English archaeology, it is not isolated.

9 Examples to illustrate this include the very recently concluded excavations of the waterlogged late Bronze Age settlement at Must Farm, Cambridgeshire: the technically demanding archaeological recording required by the current Crossrail project in London; and the innovative archaeological recording delivered by a joint venture between two commercial practices ahead of the construction of Heathrow Airport's terminal 5.

Reference to Oxford Archaeology's record in publication and archiving does flag up two other current challenges for archaeologists working in England. Firstly, the need to ensure that the mass of archaeological 'grey literature' publications generated by commercial fieldwork is retrievable and accessible to researchers; secondly, to ensure that archaeological archives can be deposited in appropriately accredited museums.

In the past, one weakness in the English development-led system has certainly been a lack of control over the resultant mass of grey-literature reports. Historic England, working with others, has sought to address this by funding periodic retrospective surveys of these reports through Bournemouth University's Archaeological Investigations Project[10]; by sponsoring an on-line index for archaeological investigations (OASIS)[11]; and by facilitating an on-line national grey literature library managed by the Archaeological Data Service of the University of York[12]. This is still a work in progress and Historic England no longer sees post-hoc pursuit of other organisation's grey literature as one of its responsibilities. Instead, as part of a current review of information flows within heritage-related disciplines, we aim to move to a system where appropriate professional standards require archaeological practices to make their grey-literature and other reference information available on-line in real-time[13].

Finally, we should acknowledge that a combination of the sheer scale of the archives being generated by the large number of development-led archaeological interventions over the last quarter century, coupled with reductions in local authority spending, are also posing significant challenges in terms of museum storage. This has resulted in a diminishing number of museums willing or able to accept the digital, documentary and artefactual records of archaeological interventions, and significant backlogs held by archaeological practitioners which they cannot deposit. While targeted strategic investment in purpose-built stores would help to address the challenge, this is unlikely to be considered favourably by the government unless archaeologists also reassess current approaches to selection and retention of their material. Our current practices have changed little in the last 25 years and are ill-suited to the explosion in commercial fieldwork that we have witnessed. They now seem ripe for technical, philosophical and ethical reconsideration.

10 See https://csweb.bournemouth.ac.uk/aip/aipintro.htm for information about these surveys, which also sought to characterise wider trends within the discipline.

11 See http://oasis.ac.uk/pages/wiki/Main.

12 See http://archaeologydataservice.ac.uk/archives/view/greylit/.

13 See https://historicengland.org.uk/research/support-and-collaboration/heritage- information-access--strategy/.

Conclusion

After 25 years of development-led archaeology formalised in our spatial planning policy, archaeologists in England may be better placed than most to reflect on the resultant legacy. Inevitably, there is much for the profession to celebrate and there is also a great deal for it still to attend to. It would be presumptuous to argue that our system is the best way to operate but most would agree that it has brought considerably more benefits than problems to the conduct of our discipline. After initial teething problems, our commercial archaeological sector is now mature, has shown itself able to withstand the major economic shock that followed the financial crash of 2007-8 and it is currently in another phase of expansion. Its achievements have been considerable. It has accomplished the investigation of many thousands of threatened sites which would otherwise have been lost without record and it is now generating radically new historical narratives at the national and regional level, overturning past assumptions based on research-led fieldwork. It has been innovative in its methods and has established itself as a business-like profession in the eyes of both government and the construction industry.

The liberal approach adopted in England, without the strong central system of licencing that characterises the approach in some other European countries, has certainly contributed to previous problems with information flows and some challenges in terms of professional standards. These are, however, being resolved and the majority of our archaeological practices achieve professional standards that equal, or possibly exceed, those operating in the countries with more centralised approaches. Historic England regards the setting and oversight of national standards for professionals working in historic environment related disciplines to be a matter for professional institutions, rather than government. So much will depend on the future effectiveness of those professional institutions, particularly the Chartered Institute for Archaeologists[14].

There are also areas of real concern, not least the future prospect for two key areas where the effectiveness of the market remains reliant on public funding - local authority planning advisory services and museum services - and the possibility that our approach of the last quarter-century will be seriously impacted by further waves of deregulation.

While the international exchange of information about approaches to the conduct of archaeology - such as that exemplified by this volume - is always helpful, we must remember that archaeologists work within differing social, economic and political frameworks that they can do little to influence, individually or even collectively. The approach to commercial archaeology adopted in the UK Archaeology is

14 See http://www.archaeologists.net/.

one which has evolved to operate within one of the most liberalised economies in Europe: and one which, because of the UK's high national debt-to-GDP ratio, must now respond to strong governmental focus on deregulation and reduction in public expenditure. The duty of the UK's archaeologists is to make the best arrangements they can, within that framework, for the care, understanding and public enjoyment of their nation's inherited archaeological resource.

While critics of the UK's system (for example Demoule 2010 and Schlanger 2016) should be listened to respectfully, their arguments often seem disconnected from realpolitik and they have failed to articulate why archaeologists, alone, should expect to be insulated from the economic vagaries that affect all other professions. There are few countries in Europe that are immune to the challenges faced by the UK. As European archaeologists, therefore, we may well be advised not to think not about whose national arrangements work 'best', but rather to concentrate on those approaches we can adopt that will be the most defensible, sustainable and resilient in what is a rapidly changing and uncertain world.

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