

REVIEWS

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Archaeology in the PPG16 Era: investigations in England 1990–2010. By TIMOTHY DARVILL, KERRY BARRASS, VANESSA CONSTANT, EHREN MILNER and BRONWEN RUSSELL. 280mm. Pp xxiv + 327, 170 figures (some colour). Oxbow Books, Oxford and Philadelphia, 2018. ISBN 9781789251081. £25 (pbk).

The Archaeological Investigations Project (AIP) was commissioned from Bournemouth University by English Heritage to collect fundamental information on the archaeological profession year on year between 1990 and 2010, basically to answer the questions of who was doing what, where, and with what outcome. Robust data were crucial to gauge the effectiveness of significant changes in the way archaeological investigations were instigated. The report reviewed here is a thorough presentation of the data, set in context and expertly analysed: it clearly traces the impact and legacy of a new system of procurement.

The final quarter of the twentieth century witnessed a phenomenal expansion in the archaeological profession. Largely due to government sponsorship, a network of localised teams, established variously in local authorities, universities and as independent trusts, was set up to help document and investigate England's wealth of sites and monuments. The broad range of tasks they were set varied according to perceived needs, but surveys were essential to provide management information, excavations were crucial to record unintended losses, and publication was all important to disseminate new knowledge and understanding of the territory which each team covered, whether town, county or region.

Expenditure of public funds rose considerably, but significant changes of political philosophy heralded a revolution in the way archaeological work was paid for. Progressively from 1979, central government would no longer underwrite the costs of the teams but only worthwhile projects and, more radically, those who brought about land-use change would be held responsible for their actions: rather than the public purse paying for the consequences, the promoters would have to pay.

Theory was one thing – making it happen would be another and would require a major re-direction of professional practice. In short, the main means by which investigation was brought about would be through the planning system, as spelled out through a government guidance note – Planning Policy Guidance 16 (PPG16). It was not fresh legislation, but advice on how existing laws should be applied to archaeological remains. A former president of the Society of Antiquaries of London, Geoffrey Wainwright, was its 'principal architect', and he is widely credited with its success.

Because Britain had virtually no experience of operating archaeological investigations on a commercial basis, fears arose over the potential for poor practice. Competition for limited funds was nothing new to archaeology, whereas 'competitive tendering' – a norm in many industries – was an alien concept. Perceived shortcomings of 'contract archaeology' in the USA were noted, but it was decided that the British profession could regulate its own behaviour. Terminology, professional ethics, roles to be adopted, standards expected, obligations required and accountability all needed to be defined, and so a professional institute (now the CIfA) was created. Those who earned their living from investigating threatened sites had to adapt rapidly to their changing circumstances.

What happened between 1990 and 2010 might be thought of as the ancient history of a rapidly maturing discipline, but it is instructive to understand the benefits and shortcomings of change. The substantial report reviewed here is a retrospective view of the results of the AIP, which analyses how the profession developed into its current state and investigates both planning-led and more traditional approaches. As we have come to expect with reports prepared by teams led by Timothy Darvill FSA, it is detailed, thorough, logically structured and well written: a commendable textbook on an important period in the development of archaeology. It analyses how archaeological 'events' were enabled, yet does not claim to assess the scope and quality of the outputs from those investigations: it is about the process, not the product.

In many ways PPG16 was a brilliant success; rather than relying on limited government funding,

it provided the means by which the resources necessary for essential archaeological work could be made commensurate with the scale of the threat. A series of case studies (Ch 9) highlights sixteen successful projects that were completed at a range of scales from a single house to a complete new town, and demonstrates the often-complex course of events. The general tenor of the report is upbeat and demonstrates the effectiveness of PPG16 and, in turn, the growth of the profession, especially amongst ‘contractors’.

More troubling for the present reviewer is the section on reporting and publication (Ch 8). It suggests that between 1990 and 2010, at least 80,000 reports were produced. Although it presents the alarming figure of 97.3 per cent for reports remaining ‘unpublished’ (fig 8.10), this should not be taken at face value. As the report makes clear, the function of many ‘grey literature’ reports is for management and planning purposes: they are for limited circulation, and may be of little interest to the average archaeological researcher.

Nonetheless, one of the fundamental principles of the archaeological discipline, enshrined, for example, in Cifa’s Code of Conduct, is ‘to make available through publication with reasonable dispatch’ the results of investigations (p 182). A large proportion of investigations provide new archaeological information, even if this is negative, but unless that information is shared it cannot contribute to the advancement of knowledge which is the basic rationale for the work in the first place. Although the AIP is not censorious and, for example, approximates the number of monograph-length reports published by the ‘top-20 archaeological contractors’, these numbers are tiny in comparison with the number of field investigations conducted throughout England.

A major concern for decades has been the availability of archaeological reports which bring together details of the observations made during investigations, interpret them and analyse their significance, but we might have expected a surge of professionalism that brought greater efficiency in the completion of projects. Although the AIP report does not calculate how many reports on significant discoveries, whether large or small, remain outstanding, others who have conducted overviews (Bradley, Fulford, Holbrook, etc) have found this to be more than half. In a personal retrospect on his experience in Norfolk, Peter Wade-Martins FSA found ‘369 grey literature reports, going back to 1994 which had not been submitted by 30 different contractors, with one contractor having 184 and another 68 such reports overdue’ (Wade-Martins 2017, 340). Doubtless,

his concerns are echoed elsewhere and the backlog mounts.

Such conclusions suggest there is a very serious malaise within the profession which local authorities, professional bodies and personal consciences are frequently impotent to control. There may be many reasons why publication is protracted, including a lack of expertise, but why is a professional standard for an accessible report not consistently achieved? Even if timely dissemination becomes the norm, how will the backlog be dealt with?

If we put to one side the destruction of archaeological deposits during the process of the investigation, the obfuscation of legitimate archaeological research by colleagues, the waste of effort and potentially large sums of the clients’ money, there still seems to be a wide disparity between expectation and reality which raises serious questions. Is the professional code overambitious? Should compliance be redefined to reflect different circumstances? Are those organisations that have been paid to produce a published synthesis, but have failed to do so, unethical? In the Norfolk case, how can the contractor with 184 outstanding reports claim to be professionally competent, and how can a client who employs them expect to satisfy the requirements of a statutory local authority? The tasks of deposition, curation and access to site archives were beyond the remit of the AIP, but these requirements might fare no better if scrutinised. In too many instances, policies and practices designed to bring public benefit through the advancement of knowledge of a shared heritage have been frustrated and it seems that early fears over ‘contract archaeology’ (above) were warranted: too often practitioners have failed to deliver. OASIS and HERALD through the Archaeology Data Service are an excellent initiative, but such solutions could be refined, accelerated and made mandatory.

The AIP succeeded in its task, and through its report provides an excellent perspective on professional behaviour. It confirms the effectiveness of a planning-led response to pressures on archaeological sites and, hopefully, it will lead to a greater resolve to bring about the timely dissemination of results, a greater advancement of knowledge and public benefit through easy access to the products of fieldwork.

WADE-MARTINS, P 2017. *A Life in Norfolk’s Archaeology 1950-2016: archaeology in an arable landscape*, Archaeopress, Oxford

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