

REFLECTIONS

Digging Community Archaeology

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Blood, sweat, but no tears were shed as volunteers of the Holt Local History Society's Garden Dig one July weekend in 2013 eagerly hacked, trowelled, and scraped away at the hard packed soil of their assigned square meter land. Various garden owners had generously provided a piece of their land for excavation, and many of them even joined in the painstaking work.

The day was sweltering hot, and the land only grudgingly yielded its secrets to dedicated hands and minds. Gallons of water were gulped down dusty-dry throats, and in the community hall busy hands skillfully dealt with incoming finds, volunteers, curious locals, and visitors.

Intruders

Of whom I was one. As a Norwegian I descend from the settling, trading, and raiding Vikings who, for a couple of hundred years, left their mark on the area. Fortunately, the members of Holt History Society and other participants in the project bore no grudges. They received me graciously and took me around the grounds, explaining what was going on.

My main archaeological tool is my computer, and my digging has mainly been done on archaeological and other relevant websites. I got hooked on the fascinating world of rock art and burial mounds through copy- and stylistic editing of an archaeological magazine. I never looked back after that; my work along with university and other studies within the field led from one site to the other...

The Irish Sea and the River Dee

On this occasion it had taken me to the quaint little town of Holt, situated on the 70 mile long river Dee. Here, and for several miles along its course, from the beautiful Snowdonia mountains to its outlet into the Irish Sea between Wales and the English peninsula of Wirral, the river actually constitutes a natural border between England and Wales.

The area is rich in archaeology, partly due to its strategically important location. Structures and objects from different periods, not least the Roman, abound, and the Garden Dig event is part of an extensive project aiming to map, reveal, and understand more of the area's rich history.



FIGURE 1 Wirral Archaeology's John Emmet and Peter France.

Photo: Astrid Kähler

Boot licking

Even though I am not new to the field of archaeology, the concept of community archaeology as demonstrated here, in southeastern Wales, was unfamiliar to me. During my visit I saw professionals working alongside semi-professionals, the one indistinguishable from the other by appearance or behaviour, as they shared bucket loads of trowelled soil as well as information and experience.

In modern community archaeology there seems to be delightfully little room for perceived (by others as well as by themselves) superior experts sweeping in, expecting reverent licking of their dirty, but oh so noble, site boots.

In the same way doctors can easily miss out on crucial information if they don't draw on their patients' expertise on their own systems, a non-local archaeologist who does not give heed to local knowledge, experience, and social dynamics may fail to obtain essential information.

Spreading of the gospel

Only in an atmosphere of mutual respect and understanding can learning, results, and spreading of 'the gospel' be effective. The Holt Local History Society, in the spirit of community archaeology all over Britain and the USA, has been actively investigating and researching the area for more than 20 years.

A vast array of experts in different fields applicable to history and archaeology regularly join together to unravel more about the multi-faceted and exciting Holt history.

The garden test pits, therefore, were by no means randomly picked. Preceding the event were years of mapping and analyses using geophysics and Lidar (light detection and ranging) scanning, aerial photography, archaeological excavation, and written and oral sources.

Coming to the rescue

In times when government funding of British archaeology seems to be at an all-time low, dedicated and often highly proficient members of local archaeology and history societies are coming to the rescue. Members are not only contributing to projects run by public institutions, but often initiate and carry out projects from start to finish.

Community archaeology is therefore not only complementing publicly funded, or even privately funded, work within the field; it is a driving force in its own right, and is instrumental to keeping archaeology and history alive in universities, museums, the media, and in the minds and hearts of the public.

Castle rampart

Down by the river, set on a base hewn out in the middle of the quarry which provided its sandstone building material, Holt Castle, built sometime between 1282 and 1311 by John de Warren, who was granted the area after the final defeat of the Welsh by Edward I, is being subjected to a loving makeover, to render it both more attractive and accessible to visitors. Financed by lottery and private funding and run by Wrexham Heritage Services (WCHC), this project is formally separate from the garden digs.

Looking more closely, however, one finds that several Holt Local History Society members are volunteering in the project. In addition, it has made use of data obtained by Wirral Archaeology's geophysical surveyors, who also helped in deciding the location of the garden trenches to be excavated. One of which not quite coincidentally happens to be just beside the former Holt Castle rampart.

Gold digging

It therefore excited not only the finder (who has been digging both his heart and a friend's garden out for two blazing days), the landowner, and members of the history society, but also people running and involved in the castle dig, when a gold ring was found in a level that suggests an age close to the origin of *Castrum Leonis* (as Holt Castle is also known from the lion sculpture above its gateway).

The lucky gold digger volunteers for both projects, and his already proven enthusiasm was in no way curbed by the find. When I last saw him, after everyone else had finished, he was still digging. Rumour has it he is now happily trowelling himself into deeper layers of both the earth and an understanding of the Holt area's heritage.



FIGURE 2 Knee deep in archaeology.

Photo: Astrid Kähler

Feeding the masses

Feeding the drive of people already interested in local, national, or global heritage is important. But unless findings and knowledge are disseminated to inspire and kindle interest within a still wider circle, they are of little worth.

Both The Holt Local History Society and WCBC are well aware of this. The latter has an impressively wide-ranging educational programme, and the former regularly organizes events, publishes articles, and is currently in the process of producing a book on the Holt digs and studies to be had free of charge. Today's opportunities for spreading the word are endless, and the best way to acquire new, dedicated disciples is for dedicated voices to preach the gospel about an area both parties know and love.

Joined forces

Involving people in the early stages of a project, and giving them a chance to take part in setting goals, making decisions, and planning is always a wise thing to do if you are looking for people who are motivated, committed, and cooperative. This also goes for potential sponsors...

In order to bring our understanding of past and present societies to a higher level, people must come out from whatever mound, circle, hut, or fortress they reside in, and join together.



FIGURE 3 Coffee break.

Photo: Astrid Kähler

Community and all other forms of archaeology are writing a never ending and exciting story, with new chapters constantly being added and old ones rewritten. Ultimately, we are all searching for hints from the past as how to meet present and future challenges, both locally and globally.

Scandinavia

Community archaeology, as demonstrated to me in Wales, has no actual counterpart in Scandinavia. Denmark has several amateur archaeological societies and seems to be the Nordic country with a model most closely resembling the British one. However, the scope and the character of the work can not in any way be compared to what is taking place on the other side of the North Sea.

In Norway the impact and leeway of dedicated amateur archaeologists and historians are even more limited. Relevant societies (of which there is only one registered amateur association) are indeed to some extent involved in recording, registration, research, dissemination, and preservation of cultural heritage. However, only as an exception to the rule are people (mostly school classes) not affiliated with governmental institutions invited in to take part in, let alone plan and organize, the fun in the trenches.



FIGURE 4 Some things that glitter are gold.

Photo: Astrid Kähler

No size fits all

The reasons for this may be any or many of the following: political, legal, financial/economic, practical, cultural, or historical. At this point, however, I will refrain from venturing into that potential minefield.

After all, the overall aim of the countries mentioned here is of course to protect and preserve archaeological monuments, sites, and artefacts. This, it is widely agreed, can best be done by creating a general appreciation for our cultural heritage. Through enjoying and exploring the past, we acquire knowledge enabling us to better understand ourselves and the world in which we live.

Which route to take in order to reach this aim may be a subject of debate. There is probably no one-size-fits-all solution. However, we must be open to new ways of doing things, and never stop learning from each other. I certainly learned a lot from the Holt Community Dig and haven't stopped talking/writing about community archaeology since.

Notes on contributor

Astrid Kähler is a Norway-based writer, among other things being a regular contributor to *SPOR*, an archaeological magazine published by the Norwegian University of Science and Technology.

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