

Enhancing a sense of place and time

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Figure 1: Cholsey phase 1 excavations (Photo: David Dewey)

This year's themes of research, impact and legacy have, for some time now, been widely identified as key components of the commercial archaeological process. As an outcome of fieldwork, they are commonly seen as indicators of the 'value' of archaeology. In practice, it has often been difficult for contractors to marry these potentially nebulous themes with the reality of excavating and reporting fieldwork; what is the impact and legacy of any particular strip, map and sample? How has it facilitated research? To a large degree, the answers to these questions are heavily dependent upon what is actually found; a 'blank' site is unlikely to score highly by any of these measures. Presuming a site is of significant archaeological interest, how does a commercial project achieve a meaningful and lasting impact?

Foundations Archaeology has been conducting archaeological fieldwork throughout Britain for over 20 years, evolving from a small to a mid-sized archaeological contractor during that time. We have recently undertaken two projects which are particularly relevant to the issues raised above.

CHOLSEY, OXFORDSHIRE

In 2015 we were asked by Linden Homes to carry out an evaluation in a field on the edge of the village of Cholsey, Oxfordshire, in advance of a proposed housing development. Previous desk-based assessment had indicated that the site did not have any particular known archaeological interest, other than the presence of a Roman road nearby. Evaluation trenching and geophysical survey, however, told a very different story. A large Roman building was located in the south-west corner of the site, while the remainder of the area contained Roman, as well as earlier, ditches, pits and postholes. By the end of the evaluation, it was clear that the site contained a Roman villa and part of its immediate hinterland.

In terms of facilitating the development, the occurrence of the villa was a major concern and would require a very precise and clear mitigation strategy. After consultation between ourselves, Linden Homes and the Oxfordshire County Council Planning Archaeologist, it was agreed that the development could proceed, provided that

- the villa building could be preserved in situ
- the remainder of the site was subject to appropriate archaeological investigation
- the archaeological works produced a clear benefit to the local community.

In light of these parameters, the area around the villa was designated 'an area of play' within the development plan and was not subject to below-ground disturbance. Moreover, the area was 'mounded-up' with topsoil in order to create sufficient overburden to hinder metal detectorists. Subsequent to the completion of the housing development, a permanent



Figure 2: Members of The Wallingford Historical and Archaeological Society (TWHAS) excavating at Cholsey (Photo: Foundations Archaeology)

noticeboard detailing the villa and its finds will be erected, as part of the play area.

During 2016 and 2017 we undertook a programme of strip, map and sample across the remainder of the site (Figure 1). As expected, the excavations recovered a significant number of features related to the villa, as well as earlier activity. These included multiple ditched enclosures and droveways, five substantial corn dryers, wells with associated clay-lined water tanks, animal burials, human burials and cremations, as well as numerous pits and postholes. Finds included substantial ceramic and animal bone assemblages, a significant number of small finds and metal finds, and environmental samples. The post-excavation assessment is ongoing, but it is clear that the excavations have yielded high-quality data with a high research potential, especially in relation to the previously unknown Roman villa, its hinterland and related economy.

In order to provide a benefit to the local community, a programme of outreach was undertaken during the fieldwork. It included

- a noticeboard that was updated daily
- excavation open days (Figure 2), where members of The Wallingford Historical and Archaeological Society (TWHAS) were invited to help with our site excavations
- multiple public/school open days (Figure 3), which included site tours, discussions and competitions for the children
- newspaper and radio interviews.

The outreach programme was successful in communicating the value of the archaeology undertaken. Local people were captivated, not only by the villa but also by the archaeological process; when asked to draw pictures relating to the site, the school children demonstrated that they had clearly understood what we were finding and how we went about it (Figure 4). The 'live' notice board proved particularly popular and the Oxfordshire Planning Archaeologist has now asked for this to be implemented on other sites. Outreach has extended beyond the fieldwork; we are continuing to give lectures relating to the site to the local archaeological societies in an attempt to provide more access to this audience along the journey to publication.

In relation to research, impact and legacy, the Cholsey project has been very successful as it facilitated

- a badly needed housing development within the village
- the discovery and preservation of a



Figure 3: Kids and corndryers (Photo: Foundations Archaeology)

- hitherto unknown Roman villa building
- positive engagement between the developer, archaeologists and local people, as well as local societies
- a lasting impact within the village, in terms of the built space, as well as a sense of place and enhanced historical significance
- an archaeological excavation, the results of which have a high potential to add to our understanding of the villa economy in this area.

LECHLADE MEMORIAL HALL, GLOUCESTERSHIRE

As part of the regeneration of Lechlade Memorial Hall following a fire, the town council commissioned us to undertake archaeological works before the construction of a new hall and skate park. The site, although relatively small, contained a very interesting sequence of remains, which included Late Neolithic 'Grooved Ware' pits; an Early Bronze Age high-status barrow, with associated burials spanning over 1,500 years (Figure 5); later prehistoric and Roman boundaries, and Anglo-Saxon buildings.

At an early stage in the project, it was clear that the site had a high potential to allow us to engage with the public and, therefore, working closely with the town council, we instigated a programme of information dissemination during and after the fieldwork, with a view to 'telling the story of the barrow'. This comprised a noticeboard that was updated daily and continued public engagement during the excavations, as well as multiple public lectures and a radio piece

Figure 4: Herb's (aged 9) picture of a plough-damaged cremation (Photo: Herb/Foundations Archaeology)

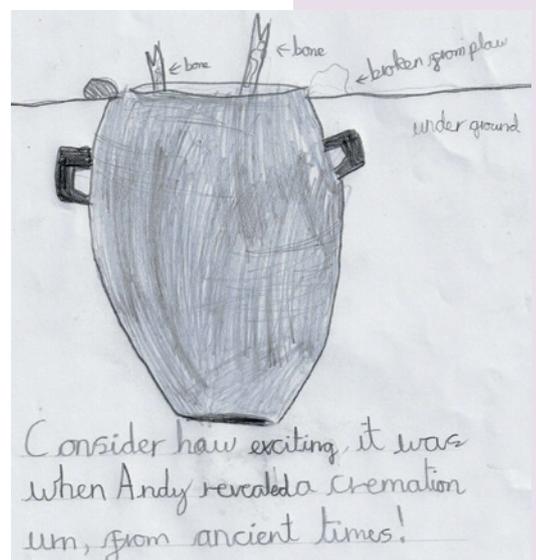




Figure 5: The primary burial at skate park barrow, Lechlade (Photo: Foundations Archaeology)



Figure 6: The Barrow skate park (Photo: Foundations Archaeology)

on BBC Radio Gloucestershire. As with the Cholsey site, it was clear that people were very interested, not only in the barrow, but also in the process of excavation. People of all ages, genders and backgrounds would frequently come to site for updates and discussions. The positive interaction between the archaeologists and the public was key to success here.

The engagement with the public is continuing beyond excavation; the town council is planning to include our site reports as permanent features on their new town website and they have named the new skate park ‘The Barrow’ (Figure 6).

We think that the Lechlade Memorial Hall project added material value to the local community as it

- formed a significant and positive part of the story of the regeneration of the Memorial Hall
- enriched the local environment, providing the new community hall and skate park with a deep-rooted sense of place and time
- allowed archaeologists and the town council to positively engage with the public
- has left a lasting impact, whereby the previously ‘buried and forgotten’ barrow is now a feature in the contemporary townscape
- facilitated the collection of high-quality data, which has the potential to significantly enhance our understanding of the prehistoric and Saxon archaeology.

These two sites have clearly demonstrated the potential for commercial archaeology to add value to development projects. This value exists not only in ‘hard’ research potential but also in materially enhancing people’s sense of place and the history of that place. In relation to research, impact and legacy, a key to the success of these projects was identifying the archaeological potential of the heritage asset at an early stage and projecting this potential, so that it could act as a springboard to maximising the outputs for all stakeholders. In the context of value to society, the archaeological remains present within these sites was seen as an enabler, as opposed to an inhibitor.