Getting Archaeology into Class

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Introduction

In February 2004 two members of staff from Kingsbury High School, London Borough of Brent, contacted UCL’s Institute of Archaeology (IoA) in order to propose a joint archaeology project. Michael Long and Stephen Ramsay, respectively assistant head teacher and history teacher at Kingsbury High School (KHS) had already identified their site in the back garden of a school-owned caretaker’s house. They had a seemingly unique question, “Would it be at all possible for students from your department to lead this project and to teach our 6th formers some of the basics of archaeology?”

To cut a long story short, that’s exactly what we did. The joint venture was named the Kingsbury High School Archaeology Project (KHSAP) and for three weeks last summer six second-year undergraduates directed and supervised an excavation in the school grounds with pupils and teachers taking full part. However, the aim of this article is not to tell the story of the excavation. Instead, the intention is to explore some of the issues and initiatives surrounding the project and draw conclusions concerning the relevance of such projects to archaeology. These issues relate to the teaching of archaeology in high schools, widening participation in higher education (particularly within the discipline of archaeology) and the current issue of Black and minority ethnic (BME) communities’ participation in archaeology.

KHS is a large comprehensive school with an ethnically diverse population of almost 2000 pupils. As in many schools, archaeology is not taught and the subject is invisible within the curriculum. Pupils and teachers are informed about the subject via the usual suspects of Time...
Meet the Ancestors and the Discovery Channel, although only about a third of the pupils participating in the excavation watched these regularly. Research carried out amongst year 12 (6th form) pupils suggested that very few of them visit archaeological sites or read about archaeology, whilst almost none of them knew the name of an archaeologist. There was a general confusion concerning the relevance of archaeology to local or national history and a broad feeling that archaeology was not particularly relevant to them as individuals. Additionally, almost half of those questioned thought that archaeology was something to do with dinosaurs. There was, however, a great deal of enthusiasm and excitement in the school concerning the prospect of learning more about archaeology.

Education and the Kingsbury Project

The school’s request to undertake an excavation presented the means by which we were able to introduce archaeology into the school. The archaeology became the departure point for the planned educational activities and remained at the heart of the project. On site, we were able to teach many of the skills that would be normal fare for a training excavation, as shown in Figs 1–3. However, working in conjunction with the school, the LAARC and English Heritage, it was possible to bring a broader range of teaching methods and resources to the project. The pupils constructed a web site for the excavation featuring daily photographs and diary entries, which served to inform the rest of the school about progress. Resources provided by the LAARC included a visit by three members of staff who gave talks about the finds from the site, the development of house interiors and about the LAARC’s function. Kim Stabler from English Heritage gave a talk on the interpretation of artefacts, which was one of four lunchtime lectures on topics such as dating methods, environmental archaeology and sampling.

One of the issues arising from the planning of this project was the apparent non-existence of a blueprint for developing such a project within a high-school setting. Examples of archaeological projects within primary school contexts suggest it is possible to incorporate archaeology into many
aspects of the National Curriculum on a subject-by-subject basis. However, the high-school environment presents different challenges for integrating archaeology into the curriculum, with perhaps the major difference being the number of teachers who are involved. The demands of the national curriculum make integrating archaeology into individual subjects difficult and it is telling that much of the literature concerning archaeology in schools relates to primary education. Whilst the aims of the project pointed towards the pupils, it is the teachers who provide the key to the success of any school-based project. They control access to the pupils and provide the conduit for getting archaeology into the classroom. One of the most successful examples of this at KHS was an inter-class web site design competition. Two classes of year 9 pupils (aged 13–14) visited the site in order to take photographs and interview those taking part. Back in the classroom each group constructed a web site based upon the excavation. The staff at KHS also made it clear that linking archaeology with individual curriculum subjects was not an essential goal. Instead the multi-disciplinary and cross-curricular nature of archaeology was emphasised and the project acted as an applied example of how different subjects dovetail into one another. The project also allowed those taking part to develop transferable skills, for example thinking skills such as categorising, evaluating and analysing evidence. Finally, since pupils were in the trench at the point of discovery, they were encouraged to interpret what they had found without fear of making mistakes in their interpretations. The project emphasised active participation at all stages.

**Widening participation in archaeology**

In some respects the KHSAP could be viewed as a straightforward archaeological ‘outreach’ project. However, from its inception the project was allied to a current HE initiative known as ‘widening participation’. This initiative is directly linked to the government’s policy of achieving a participation rate of 50% of 18–30 year olds in HE by 2010.4 One of the strategies put forward for achieving this is that of expanding participation levels amongst ‘non-traditional’ or ‘under-represented groups’. Whilst it should be noted that constructing such groups and measuring levels of participation remains problematic,5 the recently formed Office of Fair Access6 has identified the following as groups traditionally not participating in HE:

- people from low income backgrounds
- people from lower socio-economic groups
- minority ethnic groups or sub-groups that are under-represented in HE
- disabled people.

Government justifies the policy on the grounds of the social benefits to individuals of participating in HE, such as ‘better health, lower crime and a more tolerant and inclusive society’.7 Within high schools the initiative is called ‘Aim Higher’ and is concerned with raising the aspirations of young people in order for them to gain the qualifications necessary to go on to HE. Research into the achievement of young people at university shows that amongst those with similar ‘A’ level grades students from state school backgrounds tend to out-perform those from independent schools.8 ‘Widening participation’ and ‘Aim Higher’ offer archaeology the opportunity to construct a presence within comprehensive schools and in consequence to address some of the current issues regarding participation within the discipline.

The current debate concerning ‘who participates?’ in archaeology is couched in a similar language and identifies both under-representation and the benefits of participation. Within the discipline the CBA9 has identified a ‘them and us’ perception amongst the public, who regard archaeologists as being ‘too remote’. Archaeology is viewed as a ‘white middle-class preserve’ and failing to engage BME communities at almost any level. The IFA have reported on the lack of participation within the profession of a number of groups, particularly BME groups, recommending that further research be initiated to establish the reasons behind low participation.10 Other research has indicated that the current cohort of undergraduates is unlikely to change this situation with Black and Asian students representing only 3.5% of those taking heritage related degree courses.11 Meanwhile, the APPAG reported that archaeology has a social and economic value, benefiting communities by providing a ‘sense of place’,12 a view echoed by
Tessa Jowell in a recent speech to the IFA annual conference.13

The Archaeology

The archaeology formed the central element of the KHSAP. As the excavation continues, the following constitutes an interim report. The site is located at TQ 2023 8908 in the rear garden of 75 Roe Green, Kingsbury, Middlesex. The archive will be deposited with the LAARC and the site code is REK04.

Before the construction of the present house, the site had been occupied by a timber-framed building (Fig. 4), which was demolished in 1950. The house is recorded in the RCHME volume for Middlesex and assigned a probable early 16th century construction date.14 Another key reference for the area is a map of 1597, known as the Hovenden Map,15 which accurately shows local roads and field boundaries, many of which are extant.

A 5m by 5m trench was excavated by hand, and it quickly became clear that there would be plenty for the pupils to find. The range of artefacts recovered includes assemblages of pottery, glass, bone, clay pipe, flint, metalwork and ceramic building material. The topsoil contained building material spreads probably connected to the construction of the present house, whilst spreads of burnt material, found below, may relate to the demolition of the Tudor cottage. On this interpretation it would appear that the level of the garden was raised by about 0.4 m when the present house was built, having been raised by a similar amount in the 19th century. Below the modern levelling layer there was evidence of earlier activity in the garden, including a cut feature containing a cat burial. The London Clay at the bottom of the excavation was approximately a metre below the present ground surface and was cut by a number of features: a brick drain, a small pit, a more modern circular pipe drain and by two post holes. None of these features is earlier than the 19th century. A Tudor deposit was found in the northeast corner of the excavation containing redware, Surrey Border Ware, and a few late medieval sherds.16 In addition, an amount of coarser and more abraded pottery was discovered both below the Tudor deposit and across excavation at its lowest level. This pottery is of a number of different fabrics, is
unglazed and of poor quality. Spot dating by Gus Milne suggests the pottery is Saxo-Norman: evidence of pre-Tudor activity on or near the site. In association with this pottery a number of struck flints were found. They have been examined by Jon Cotton who suggests they may be débitage associated with preparing flints for use as a building material. The 2005 season will extend the excavation and continue the broader landscape investigations that began last year.

Discussion and Conclusion
A key element of the KHSAP was the active participation of pupils in the archaeological process. This ‘Time Team generation’ shows a great deal of interest in archaeology but also appears to have little depth of understanding about the subject. The reason for this lies in a perceived irrelevance of the subject. The evident perception at KHS was that archaeology is undertaken ‘elsewhere’ and by ‘other people’. Richard Benjamin17 has argued that amongst BME communities in particular, this lack of relevance stems from both a paucity of direct cultural relevance and a lack of information that would enable such communities to feel affiliated to British Heritage. Benjamin has put forward a possible solution to this arguing that ‘lesser known and more culturally diverse aspects of British heritage’ may be employed as a ‘hook’ to catch an interest in archaeology. Of course the economic barriers to participation in archaeology need to be acknowledged. High levels of student debt and the low level of archaeologists’ salaries cannot help to make the discipline attractive.18 Nevertheless, and developing a point recently made by Don Henson of the CBA, it is suggested here that archaeology has the potential to break down ethnic identities and to provide evidence of ‘our common humanity’.19 Archaeology can, and should, be used within communities to emphasise similarity rather than reinforce differences. The motive for engaging in participatory projects such as the KHSAP is clear: continued ambivalence to the subject by whole communities does not bode well for the future. What happens when the ‘Time Team’ bubble bursts?

Fig. 4: the Tudor cottage at Roe Green, Kingsbury c. 1910. Reproduced by permission of the Brent Archive
The KHSAP is a relatively small scale and experimental project. Deliberately ‘organic’ in nature the project successfully brought together a number of archaeological agencies and educational institutions. We have been invited back to continue the project. This joint project with a comprehensive school is highly relevant to archaeology, offering the opportunity to establish a presence in education, currently denied by the National Curriculum. Such projects allow us to broaden the social groups who participate in archaeology and the policy of ‘widening participation’ offers the means by which such projects may be initiated. The motive is the future relevance of the subject. As commercial archaeology draws the practice of archaeology further away from the public, the discipline relies more and more upon the apparent huge popularity of archaeology, which we often take for granted. The way ahead lies in getting archaeology into class.

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2. The London Archaeological Archive and Research Centre, Mortimer Wheeler House, 46 Eagle Wharf Road, London, N1 7EE.
12. Op cit fn 1, section 3.2 paragraph 45.
15. All Souls College, Hovenden maps, portfolio II, nos. 9–15.