

Archaeology: from a Disabled Enabled Perspective

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Background

Before introducing my research, I need to define disability and explain my disabled experience. There are two types of disability: visible and invisible. Visible disabilities are those that any person can see, whether it be a wheelchair or loss of limbs. The beholder knows the person is disabled; therefore, the disabled person has no choice but to display their disability. Whereas invisible disabilities may not be seen; the disabled person is given the choice as to whether they reveal their disability by using, for instance, a white stick but developmental conditions such as dyspraxia and autism can be invisible.

In my younger years I was able-bodied, running upstairs and climbing mountains. Recently I find climbing up steps equivalent to climbing a mountain because of severe pain. This makes me light-headed and dizzy, affecting my concentration. My quality of life and independence have been affected by disability. However, I refuse to accept

that my limitations will stop me participating in archaeology. If enabled through acceptance, my mountain would be easier to climb. Unfortunately, experience of exclusion barriers makes my mountain almost insuperable. Full acceptance, meeting needs with a 'can do' attitude, can enable a disabled person to achieve their full potential.

Disabled archaeologists form just two per cent of the UK archaeological workforce,¹ reflecting badly on some archaeological communities. These issues need to be addressed in archaeology; otherwise we may miss valuable archaeological contributions. In the UK over half of the public (67%) are ill-at-ease talking to a disabled person,² indicating a negative attitude towards disability. Can this be applied to archaeology? The aim of my dissertation was to ascertain what negative attitudes towards disabled inclusion exist within archaeology and once identified, what remedies might be suggested.³

In archaeology, disabled people work and participate in many contexts, albeit the numbers are low,⁴ but there is hardly any UK published literature on attitudes towards disability. Some positive examples do exist: unbiased attitudes held by the Thames Discovery Programme (TDP) enable disabled archaeologists to be integrated into fieldwork rather than preventing disabled involvement.⁵ Although they have no disabled policy as such (Nat Cohen pers. comm.), they welcome participation (Fig. 1) with the only criteria being over 18 years of age and the ability to climb up the stairs from the foreshore.

The Bamburgh Research Project's (BRP) training excavations also ensure disabled involvement using common-sense attitudes, with learning tailored to disabled participant's needs (see Fig. 2).⁶ Operation Nightingale is a prime example, too, of utilising field archaeology to aid the recovery of injured service personnel in collaboration with Wessex Archaeology (see Figs. 3 and 4).⁷ Since 2011 the unit has provided professional support on several excavations with their volunteer team running the post-excavation work for the Operation Nightingale sites. These examples illustrate a meeting of archaeology and disability inclusion, not exclusion.

Fieldwork

The data for attitudinal analysis towards disability was derived from the following interview strategies: focus group, one-to-one interviews, and with market research interviews as a control to the collated information. These strategies were selected to gather the most current and reliable information in order to ascertain attitudes towards disability in archaeology. The research methods had been employed successfully elsewhere by archaeologists and charities to understand contemporary thinking.⁸



Fig. 1: an example of an holistic approach: Nat Cohen of the TDP explains the Houses of Parliament foreshore to a group including the author, 2014



Fig. 2: archaeological disabled inclusion by the Bamburgh Research Project, 2014

The information gathered was intended to answer the questions:

1. Do negative attitudinal barriers towards disabled participation exist in archaeology?
2. If so, what are these barriers and how could they be changed?

There are limitations; views of people alter, so data only represents people's views at any one time. Small numbers interviewed may not be representative and long-term larger studies are needed to corroborate or negate my findings. The research was conducted over a short time and was limited mainly to physical disabilities. Therefore, there is also a need for a future study of invisible disabilities.

Focus groups and six one-to-one interviewees were shown a photograph (Fig. 5) which illustrated Digability's past work when archaeological opportunities were created for under-represented groups in local communities.⁹ They were asked what their immediate thoughts were as to what was happening in the photograph and what they saw first – an archaeologist or a disabled person, the premise being that people who see a disabled person and not an archaeologist are presenting an unwitting bias towards the disabled.

Focus Groups

Over one weekend, information sheets about focus groups were distributed to excavation participants, those involved

in archaeology as students, professional archaeologists, lecturers, project directors and commercial archaeologists. They were asked to share their opinions about disability in archaeology with the only criterion being that they had to be over eighteen years of age.

Two hour-long focus groups were conducted. The first group had 11 participants: two full-time archaeologists and nine undergraduates who were from the UK (6), Europe (1), Canada (1) and America (1). The second group had seven UK participants: four undergraduates and three archaeologists. During each meeting, each participant was taken to one side, shown the same Digability photograph, and then asked the same questions.

One-to-one interviews

Six individuals were interviewed and asked open-ended questions, with further questions used for clarification if needed.

Market research interviews

In 2014, 100 members of the public were approached with 77 agreeing to participate to provide a control to the more detailed research. Again they were asked what they thought was happening in the Digability photograph and what they saw first – an archaeologist or a disabled person. They were also shown the image

(Fig. 2) which indicated that disabled participation is possible. Both photographs were used to create an immediate impression, and the participants' initial responses were recorded in order to establish whether the public saw archaeology or disability first and to establish innate attitudes towards archaeology and disabled involvement. I used my walking cane, which may have created some bias in responses but I made no mention of archaeology or disability, as this could have affected the responses.

The results

The results of my research are presented here, firstly those from the market research interviews, then from the focus groups and individual interviews.

'Which did you see first?'

Approximately 70% of the market research participants saw the archaeologist first (see Fig. 4), indicating a general acceptance to disabled involvement. However, numbers seeing a disabled person first (30%) were perhaps high enough to indicate that attitudes towards disability within society still need addressing.¹⁰ Attitudes may be softening towards disabled archaeology as is demonstrated by the younger age group (18–30 years).

'What is happening in the photograph?'

About 80% of the market research participants recognised archaeological activity (see Fig. 2), reflecting public interest in our discipline. The main response, to 'disabled doing archaeology' (49%), suggested that participants saw disability and archaeological activity as one event. This is encouraging, suggesting that the assumption that the public would hold negative attitudes towards disabled involvement in archaeology is wrong.

Interviews and focus groups

Respondents were predominantly in the younger age group with just under a quarter in the older age group (30–50 years) and none in the oldest group. The predominance of the younger age group could, therefore, produce a biased view. Market research interviews among the youngest group suggested positive attitudinal acceptance of disabled archaeology and it was to be

expected that the predominance of this age group in interviews and focus groups would show similarly high levels of acceptance of disability in archaeology. However, a larger number (52%) saw the disabled person first, while the others (44%) saw the archaeologist first. This suggests that there may be greater barriers within archaeology towards disabled participation than amongst the general public. This is supported by Phillips *et al*, who propose that within archaeology negative attitudinal barriers do exist towards disabilities' holistic inclusion.¹¹

Half the respondents saw archaeological excavations first, the other half saw a mixture of archaeology and disability activity within the photograph. The majority who saw the archaeologist first were from one-to-one interviews. 40% saw disability before any explanation about the photograph and 32% saw archaeological activity. This supports the responses that a negative attitude may exist, but a more detailed survey in the future would bear this out. As just under half of the respondents saw the disabled person first before the archaeological activity, this suggests that a lack of disability training has made people unsure of how to adapt to disabilities present in archaeology.

Results suggest generic attitudinal acceptance of disabled participation, with the mixture of archaeological and disabled activity suggesting mixed attitudes towards disabled involvement. Whilst recording the immediate responses within this group, some participants chose their words carefully, suggesting a lack of awareness and knowledge about interacting or preparing for disabled involvement.

Comparison

Comparison of responses shows that one-third of the archaeological group members and over two-thirds of the public hold positive attitudes towards disabled people's participation in archaeology. This shows a possible unwitting bias within archaeology against disabled people's involvement, with older-age groups less accepting of disabled involvement. Other responses confirmed that higher proportions of public respondents accepted disabled



Fig. 3: Operation Nightingale members with Phil Harding from Wessex Archaeology
(© Crown/Wessex Archaeology)

involvement in archaeology when compared to archaeological respondents.

Additional questions were posed during the individual and focus group interviews and the results are presented here:

Experience and Training

Interview participants had had limited experience of disability on excavations, exemplifying a lack of familiarity with disabilities and showing archaeologists have not gained the social knowledge needed for disability involvement. Only one had had disability training.

The Disabled Barrier

Disabled people who do not ask for help when participating in digs were seen by most interviewees as causing major barriers to their own inclusion. The interviewee with disability training commented saying '...disabled students can be too proud concerning their independence, making more work for us ...', meaning disabled people need to accept their limitations and ask for help.

Disabled Inclusion

All interviewees felt that disabled people should be included within archaeology, another suggested that '...archaeologists are poor at considering groups outside of established audiences...', while a third

felt that '...physical competence needs to be questioned...', meaning what can and can't physically be done by disabled people on excavation. Physical competency could be established through a private questionnaire detailing what the disabled person can do. All agreed that archaeologists overlooked disabled people as a group and some thought there should be a 'physical test' to allow physical disabled involvement in archaeology. This suggests a limited view of acceptance, lacking consideration of a disabled individual's *ability* and a greater focus on *disability*.¹²

The Glass Door Effect

Just under one third of participants felt that the 'Glass Door Effect' was a barrier to inclusion. This refers to disabled people being able to view the 'shop window' of archaeological opportunities, yet unable to 'buy' or take part in activities offered to 'all'. Three interviewees felt those with disabilities were stigmatised within archaeological circles with feelings of wariness and suspicion present in archaeological settings.

UK Universities

Over half of the focus-group participants said UK universities were underfunding disabled archaeology students, with no equality with able-bodied students, for example, in

fieldwork and excavations.

Issues of funding brought about a heated debate when it was revealed that the Disabled Student's Allowance (DSA), founded to ensure disabled equality with other students,¹³ was to be cut from April 2016. Respondents believed this was a travesty with one participant commenting '...the government has geared society against disabled people...'. All said that the government should change this policy permanently or be perceived to be prejudiced. Under-funding ensures some disabled people will never engage with archaeology at university level.

All participants agreed that physical access and cost were the biggest barriers to disabled participation in archaeology. I would suggest that it is the unwitting biases explained above that are the real issues. We need to change our practice of artefact- and context-based archaeology to participant-based archaeology.¹⁴ All participants agreed, during discussion, that there is a lack of knowledge, awareness, understanding and familiarity in archaeology about disabled people and their needs, which can create an atmosphere of mistrust, fear and ignorance towards disabled participatory inclusion.

New Approaches

Negative barriers can be removed completely, gradually broken up or left 'as they have always been'. Legislation makes it illegal to discriminate against disabled people in any form.¹⁵ Provision ensuring equality for all students is enshrined in law, but no UK Parliamentary Act contains any details about disabled inclusion within archaeology.

The core of all such barriers is a lack of awareness, knowledge and understanding, resulting in the reaction encountered by some disabled people wishing to participate. All interviewees and focus groups overwhelmingly agreed. Possible new approaches could entail education, a media campaign and UK universities following Inclusive Accessible Archaeological Guidelines.¹⁶

Education

A systematic educational approach within workshops and lectures, using

disabled archaeologists for every UK educational facility and community group, could raise awareness. The archaeological groups suggested it should only be a disabled archaeologist's job, as able-bodied archaeologists cannot answer disability questions. Disability training for all archaeological staff before starting work would enable and encourage disability participation.

These educational strategies could be directed by the Chartered Institute for Archaeologists (CIfA) or the Council for British Archaeology (CBA) with initial funds raised from the public, then, longer-term, through sponsorships and apprenticeships. Both CIfA and the CBA have policies and procedures which encourage positive attitudes towards disabled enabled inclusion.¹⁷

Media Campaign

A media campaign challenging views that disabled people are physically or mentally incapable of undertaking archaeology would help to create an atmosphere of inclusion. If archaeologists and the public were to become increasingly aware and knowledgeable about disability, then the battle will begin to be won. Every archaeological group agreed that it was an '...excellent idea...' and that '...archaeology would be an excellent

subject to do it with'.

Overwhelmingly, the top two negative barriers within archaeological groups were physical access and its associated costs. There are ways of mitigating the costs by planning ahead, using excavation methods with negligible costs.¹⁸ This would allow disabled people entry into archaeological activities.¹⁹ Physical access is a negative barrier, but a negative attitude is worse. If archaeologists were more accepting towards disabled participants, negative attitudinal barriers could change.²⁰ It is more imperative to change these attitudes than any other barrier.

UK Universities

Within our discipline we are taught to bring other subjects into archaeology, such as zoology leading to zooarchaeology.²¹ Yet UK universities will not liaise about successful disabled methodologies, which, if done, would enable disabled participation. Both focus groups saw this as a major barrier.

Liaison, communication and sharing strategies within Digability, enabled disabled people to participate in archaeology, within the Workers Educational Association (WEA) project.²² Local community archaeology should liaise and share, as indicated by the All-Party



Fig. 4: Operation Nightingale members carrying out surveying work at Barrow Clump, Figheldean, Wilts (© Crown/Wessex Archaeology)



Fig. 5: disabled archaeology in action, at Digability 2011 (© Workers' Educational Association)

Parliamentary Archaeology Group.²³ By taking a bottom-up approach, archaeological departments could do the same.

Disabled Barrier

I would like to thank the disabled undergraduates I interviewed as part of my full dissertation, and am grateful for their input. Yet the disabled need to come together and communicate, enabling their voices to be heard. We, as disabled people, need to accept our limitations and vocalise our needs. If

not, how can anyone help? Groups could connect, developing powerful voices towards dispelling attitudinal barriers and national awareness raised, bringing positive attitudinal change and acceptance within archaeology. Without a voice, '...I am invisible...' and we will remain a silent, empty space.

Conclusion

The aim of this research project was to establish the degree to which negative attitudinal barriers prevented disabled

participation in archaeology and to suggest approaches to rectify attitudinal problems encountered which prevent the full inclusion of disabled people in archaeology today. We should perhaps be following the lead of the TDP in London in order to make disabled inclusion a reality.

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Theresa O'Mahony was awarded the Professor Sir Malcolm Grant Scholarship to support her graduate study at the Institute of Archaeology, UCL, and she undertook the MA in Public Archaeology at the Institute in 2015–16. She runs the New Hope Project for the homeless in Hounslow, demonstrating her leadership potential with her work there. In addition, she qualified to join the Defence Archaeology Group, part of Operation Nightingale, which was founded in 2012 to utilise both the technical and social aspects of field archaeology in the recovery and skill development of soldiers injured in the conflict in Afghanistan.

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