

On Landguard Point

By Carenza Lewis¹

On Landguard Point was an unusual project which linked archaeological excavation with performance art in an innovative mass-participation collaboration which culminated in a full-length feature film. It formed part of 'Artists taking the Lead', a series of twelve public art commissions across the UK to celebrate the London 2012 Cultural Olympiad and was funded by Arts Council England. *On Landguard Point* was conceived and directed by Robert Pacitti, specialist maker of live performance art, as a project about home, aiming to explore what this means to people living in the east of England. It comprised a series of large-scale public events, including specially-commissioned archaeological excavations, which involved thousands of people across the region as participants and audience. The music for the film of *On Landguard Point* was written and recorded by Michael Nyman (probably most famous for his score for the film *The Piano*), and it was shown in cinemas across the eastern region in summer 2012 to coincide with the Olympic Games and the Paralympics.

On Landguard Point involved a large number of different projects and activities including the archaeological excavations, sub-titled 'Dig and Sow'. Discussions between Robert Pacitti and Carenza Lewis during the development of the concept of *On Landguard Point* effectively established the relevance of archaeology to a project about home, especially when central to that concept are notions of shared and shifting heritage connected through time via people and landscape. The idea that digging into the ground, carried out by those living in the eastern region in their own gardens, creates an umbilical link between the homes and the residents of the present and those of the past was enthusiastically embraced by Robert Pacitti, who started the project with little prior exposure to archaeology.

Gradually, a concept was developed which wove the process of archaeological excavation into the narrative of the anticipated film while not compromising the integrity of either. The excavations (following standard 'test pit' methodology used extensively by Access Cambridge Archaeology in working with members of the public) would be carried out in six communities across the eastern region, with each bringing together residents, friends and neighbours in the challenge of completing their own excavation in just one day. The finds they made would link them to those who had, in the past, spent time in the places occupied by today's homes. At the end of the day, before each excavation was backfilled, the excavators would deposit a miniature silver charm representing an aspect of the culture of the East Anglian region into the bottom of the pit. The images represented by these charms were themselves chosen by residents of the eastern region during another

On Landguard Point project and modeled into silver clay by a local artist. This ritualized deposition was the 'sow' element of 'Dig and Sow'. The physical effort and commitment required to carry out the excavations in a single day was appropriately analogous to that involved in sporting endeavour at the top, Olympic, level.

The successful execution of 'Dig and Sow', which involved recruiting and coordinating perhaps a thousand people across diverse communities on a tight budget to a tight timescale, with different aspects of the management provided by two very different organisations both simultaneously engaged on other projects, was always going to present numerous challenges. The original hope was that 205 pits would be excavated in total – one for each of the nations competing in the 2012 Olympics – but budgetary constraints made this impossible. In the end, 148 excavations were completed, just a little over fifty short of the target. These took place in Ashwell (Hertfordshire), Maidenhall (Ipswich), Peakirk (Cambridgeshire), Clavering (Essex) (Fig. 1), Paston (Norfolk) and Potton (Bedfordshire).

All 148 excavations were completed appropriately, under the supervision of Access Cambridge Archaeology and other volunteers. The archaeological information they produced clearly opened the eyes of those digging to the fascination of finding the past buried under their feet, and has contributed to ongoing research at the McDonald Institute into currently occupied rural settlements in the eastern region. Ashwell (Hertfordshire) unexpectedly produced no pottery of immediate pre-Norman Conquest date, a startling discovery given that Domesday Book records 14 burgesses under Ashwell, suggesting a settlement of some size and probable urban status. This will prompt further investigation. Paston (Norfolk), famous for its collection of 15th century family letters from the period of the Wars of the Roses, has been shown to have been severely affected by post-14th century contraction with much of the settlement apparently abandoned. By way of contrast, the small Cambridgeshire Fen-edge village of Peakirk was shown to have been settled continuously for more than 1,000 years, and previously in the Roman period, with little sign of late medieval decline.

With such a large number of people involved in digging, or in helping with activities as diverse as directing traffic to serving refreshments, the personal outcomes of 'Dig and Sow' were as varied as the individuals. Comments such as 'It was a wonderful community project which tied in well with the Cultural Olympiad' (AW, Clavering) showed that the wider context was being appreciated, although other participants had little interest in the Cultural Olympiad aspect of the 'Dig and Sow' project and a small number were actively hostile to the art/cultural element. Most, however, wholeheartedly embraced the opportunity it provided to try something new and different – archaeological excavation – within their own community. The commitment shown was

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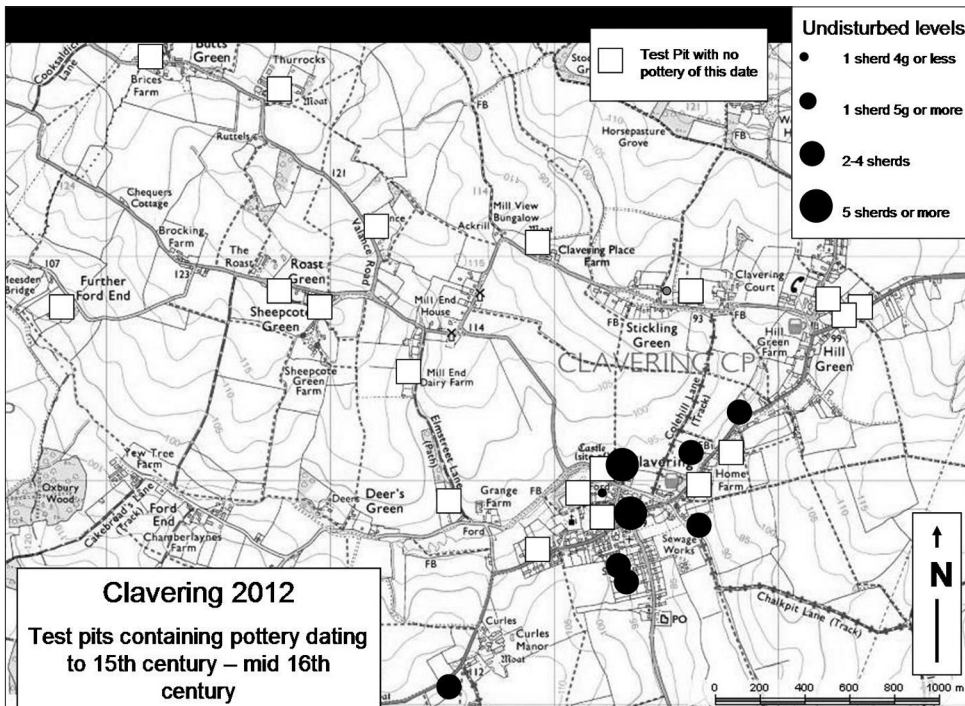
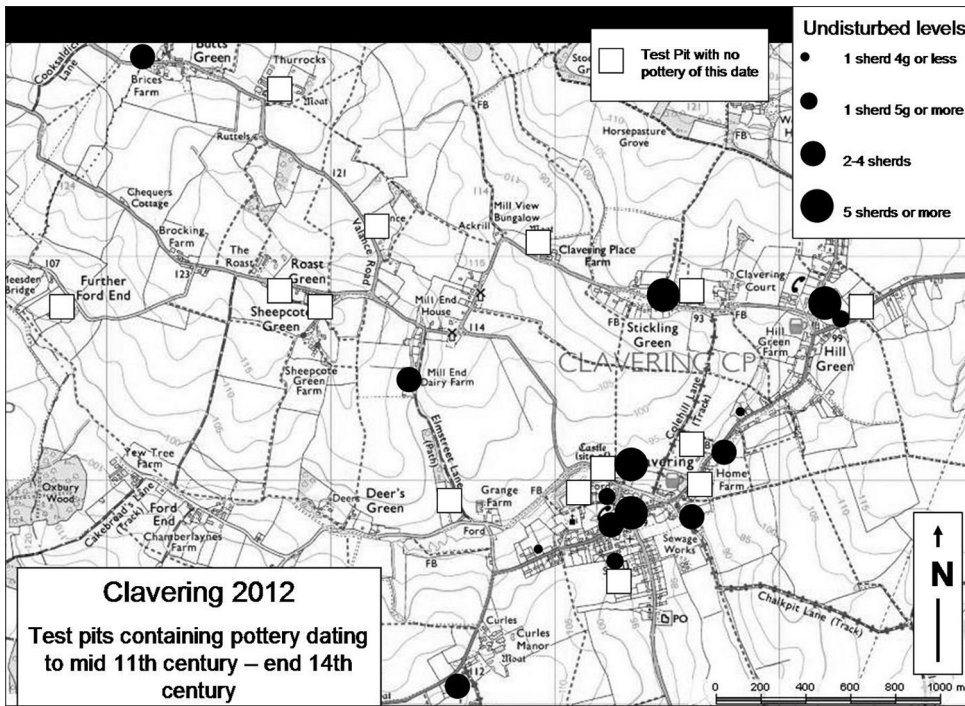


Figure 1 Maps showing pottery of high medieval date (a) and later medieval date (b) from the On Landguard Point ‘Dig and Sow’ excavations in Clavering (Essex), indicating a marked decline in pottery yields in the late medieval from dispersed settlement sites.

remarkable, especially in occasionally very adverse weather conditions, and the sense of celebration in shared achievement, as people gathered in community halls for tea and cakes at the end of each day, was palpable and inspiring. 94% of participants who completed feedback forms rated their experience as ‘excellent’ or ‘good’, 87% strongly agreed or agreed that they felt ‘more engaged with the archaeology and heritage of the area than before’ and 95% recommended the activity to others.

The final film of *On Landguard Point* was well-received by those who reviewed it. Most of these, perhaps appropriately, were based in the eastern region. It was welcomed as ‘a visually stunning film, exploring

some of what makes the landscape here, both human and geological, so unique.... important in the small canon of films dedicated to our lives in the east’.² Watching it in Cambridge, I found it beautiful, moving and thought-provoking, magnificently complimented by Nyman’s musical score. As the combined result of so many projects, it was inevitable that little of the film was given over to the archaeology – this was never going to be an ‘art house’

² Andrew Cann, East Anglian Daily Times http://www.eadt.co.uk/entertainment/review_world_premier_of_on_landguard_point_pacitti_company_ipswich_film_theatre_thursday_june_21_1_1420862 (accessed October 11th 2012).

take on *Time Team*. But where the archaeology did feature, it had considerable impact, and it provided the last, lingering images of the entire film: after a charm in the shape of a dog (representing Black Shuck, one of the best-known East Anglian legends), was deposited in the bottom of a completed test pit, the camera lingered on in close-up as shovelful after shovelful of soil was thrown in on top, in a visually beautiful, deeply-textured, compelling, contemplative sequence which lasted several minutes. It was as unlike *Time Team* as anything could possibly be.

Our involvement as archaeologists with *On Landguard Point* was important and instructive in a number of ways. ‘Dig and Sow’ introduced many people to archaeology, of course, and gave them an unforgettable experience they would not have had otherwise, while providing valuable new information about the past which advances wider research into historic settlements. It added an extra dimension to the *On Landguard Point* film which significantly enriched it. But more broadly, by involving archaeology in a cultural project focussed on performance art, our involvement with *On Landguard Point* also underlined the diversity and inter-connectedness of ‘culture’ in all its different manifestations. It showed how archaeology can contribute to a broader range of community cultural and arts programmes than it usually does, and reinforced the links between archaeology, heritage, museums, culture and the arts. The demonstration that the inclusion of archaeology enhanced and broadened the appeal of the primarily arts-based *On Landguard Point* project should be a useful lesson for the future – many people took part who would not have been interested were it not for the hands-on archaeology, and it reached parts of the community that *On Landguard Point* would not have done otherwise.



Figure 2 Test pit ASH/11/05 under excavation by community volunteers on the *On Landguard Point* ‘Dig and Sow’ project

And we can hope that has brought the possibility of an arts film one day dedicated to conveying the beauty of archaeology, its ability to inspire, its capacity to convey wider allegorical messages, perhaps a step closer.

On Landguard Point is a project from which everyone involved will doubtless gain something different. We are all individuals, and this was a project that made everyone think. Perhaps the final words about its capacity to speak to those involved should be given to one of the East Anglian residents who took part in the digging:

‘I was given the silver rifle charm yesterday to bury in a test pit my team dug in my back garden. As I lay the rifle in the bottom of my pit I had a sudden rush of emotion: my son is in Afghanistan at the moment serving in our armed forces. I snatched the rifle from the pit and put it back in the envelope I had freed it from two minutes earlier. My promise to you is, in October when my son returns safely home I will place this charm in the ground at a depth of 500mm. My son, and my family, make my Home.....’ (PP, excavated on ‘Dig and Sow’ in Potton, June 2012)



Figure 3 Robert Pacitti, Director of Pacitti Company, thanks volunteers at the end of a day spent excavating in Clavering, Essex before Carenza Lewis summed up what was found. The finds are displayed on benches and table in the background.



Figure 4 Still from the ‘*On Landguard Point*’ feature film focussing on a charm being handed over for deposition in a test pit in Maidenhall, Ipswich (Suffolk) before the pit was backfilled.