

◆ Nothing new under the sun

E.C. CURWEN'S EXCAVATIONS AT WHITEHAWK CAMP, BRIGHTON

By Roger M. Thomas

E.C. Curwen's excavations ahead of development on Whitehawk Camp in the 1930s were funded by the developers. Curwen also specifically saw the damage to the camp as being counter-balanced by the knowledge gained. In both respects, the excavations were far ahead of their time. This note describes how these arrangements came about, and also discusses why these principles were not adopted when 'rescue archaeology' developed in the late 1960s. 'Developer-funding' did not become the norm until 1990, and an approach which emphasises gains in knowledge (rather than 'preservation by record') was not embraced by policy until 2010.

E. C. Curwen's excavations in the 1930s at Whitehawk Camp, Brighton, are well known as an early investigation of a neolithic causewayed enclosure. It has recently been recognised that they were also, in their funding arrangements and their philosophical basis, far in advance of their time (Alexander 2011, 25–6; Sygrave 2016). In both respects, the excavations followed principles which were not generally adopted in England until many decades later, a point of sufficient interest to warrant this short article.

In 1932, improvements to the horse-racing course which occupied part of the monument were felt to be needed. The work would level part of the two outer ditches of the enclosure. In his report in *Antiquaries Journal*, Curwen explains that, as the camp was a scheduled monument, 'permission for the levelling was made conditional upon the threatened portions being first excavated under proper archaeological supervision. The lessees [of the racecourse] agreed to this and contributed a sum of £125 for the work, which [Curwen] was asked to carry out.' Because the improvements needed to be in place for the 1933 racing season, the archaeological work was carried out in December 1932 and January 1933; as Curwen observed, the excavations were in the nature of an emergency (Curwen 1934, 100).

This episode seems to have established some kind of precedent for what happened in 1935, when further excavations in advance of damaging development on a larger scale were undertaken. Curwen's report on the 1935 work says:

the excavations...were carried out for the Sussex Archaeological Society at the request of H.M. Inspector of Ancient Monuments, the

occasion being the proposed construction of a new road.... This road was to cut right through the centre of the camp, and as the latter is scheduled under the Ancient Monuments Act, permission for its construction had to be obtained from H. M. Inspector of Ancient Monuments. The road being an urgent necessity, permission was granted on condition that its site should first be excavated archaeologically by the Sussex Archaeological Society—at the cost of the Brighton Corporation. This arrangement worked very satisfactorily, for while the corporation got their road at relatively little additional cost, the damage done to the camp was more than counter-balanced by the knowledge and the specimens acquired during the excavation (Curwen 1936, 60).

These were pieces of what we would now call 'development-led' archaeological work: work carried out because of an impending development threat, rather than for reasons of pure research.

The first point of note is that the developers (the Brighton Race Stand Lessees and Brighton County Borough Council) were required to undertake the excavations, as a condition of being able to improve the racetrack or construct a road across a scheduled monument. These are, as far as I know, the earliest recorded instances of developers being required by the authorities to carry out necessary archaeological work (which, in practice, means paying someone to do it on their behalf: here, the requirement was that Sussex Archaeological Society must supervise the work), as a condition of obtaining permission to do the development at all. In fact, it was not until 1990 that the publication of 'PPG 16' (Planning Policy

Guidance Note 16 on *Archaeology and Planning*: DoE 1990) placed a general requirement on developers to 'make for provision for' (in effect, to pay for) archaeological work on their sites. (PPG 16 related specifically to the planning system, but its principles were also applied to 'scheduled monument consent' developments on scheduled monuments.)

Surviving administrative correspondence sheds some light on how the arrangement at Whitehawk came about. It comprises papers of Frank Bentham Stevens, honorary treasurer and financial secretary of the Sussex Archaeological Society (East Sussex Record Office, ACC 9048/5/7). Under the law at the time (the Ancient Monuments Act 1931) the only requirement was to give H. M. Office of Works three months' notice of an intention to do works affecting a scheduled monument. Thereafter, unless the Office of Works issued a preservation order, the works could proceed without more ado. The Council nonetheless seems to have interpreted this as meaning that 'consent' was needed from the Office of Works to build the road across the monument. On 23 November 1934, the Council wrote to the Office of Works about this. The Office of Works replied on 4 December, saying:

the Commissioners [of Works] raise no objection to the formation of the proposed road, provided that an excavation of the site of the road is first carried out under the supervision of the Sussex Archaeological Society. A report on the excavation should be published.

It is not entirely clear that the Office of Works had the legal power to require excavation in this way, but the Council needed to build the road urgently, as it was part of a wider slum clearance scheme in which it was engaged, and the Council seems to have accepted the stipulation fairly readily. There was also a further request from the

Council to the Office of Works for 'permission' to lay a water-main across the monument.

On 26 December 1934, Curwen wrote to Bentham Stevens saying:

If the additional estimates for the Excavation are passed by the Town Council (which I suppose they will be, seeing that the Excavation is made a necessary condition), then the preliminary excavation ought to be one of the most important digs of the year.

It is evident from what happened subsequently (and from Curwen's report, quoted above) that the Council did agree the funds, enabling the



Fig. 1 The 1935 excavation in progress on the line of what is now Manor Hill (the new road which the Council was building), looking towards the junction with Freshfield Road (Sussex Archaeological Society, Visual Resources, Curwen Collection Image 231).

excavation to take place as required. It is also clear from the correspondence that the Council was in close touch with Society throughout. In all this, events at Whitehawk in the 1930s mirrored the kind of arrangements which PPG 16 was to put in place in 1990. The authorities imposed a condition on a developer, requiring excavation; the developer engaged a suitable archaeological organisation to carry out the work, and met the costs of it doing so. It is also notable that the Office of Works specifically stated that a report on the Whitehawk excavation should be published. Non-publication of 'PPG 16' archaeological work was to become a significant problem in due course (see e.g. Fulford and Holbrook 2011, 33–5). The arrangements for Whitehawk did, though, differ in one important respect from those introduced by PPG 16. The Office of Works stipulated that the excavation had to be supervised by the Sussex Archaeological Society. Under PPG 16, the developer was able to commission any competent archaeological organisation to discharge the archaeological requirements on the developer's behalf. This led to the growth of a competitive market in commercial archaeological services after 1990, an approach which aroused much controversy at first and which some still view with reserve.

The second interesting point lies in Curwen's comment that 'the damage done to the camp [by the Council's road] was more than counter-balanced by the knowledge and the specimens acquired during the excavation.'

The philosophical basis of PPG 16 was a notion of 'preservation by record': where archaeological remains will be affected by development, and they cannot be preserved *in situ* (or do not merit this) then they should be 'preserved by record'. That is to say, a record should be made of the remains, so that this record can be studied in the future, after the remains themselves have been destroyed.

This concept of 'preservation by record' seems to have originated in the 'rescue archaeology' era of the late 1960s onwards, when central government (rather than developers) met much of the costs of excavating, or 'rescuing', threatened sites. The idea of 'preservation by record' was then given considerable prominence by its inclusion in PPG 16, and by the way the new guidance was implemented by the archaeological profession. Under PPG 16, development-led archaeological work came to be commonly described in professional circles

as 'mitigation' (a term borrowed from the environmental language of the time): in other words, reduction of the harm to archaeological remains by making records of them before they are destroyed (Thomas 2009).

'Preservation by record' is open to a range of criticisms, both philosophical and pragmatic. Philosophically, it is not possible to 'preserve' a site by making records of it. The record is always a result of selections and choices, observing and recording some things and ignoring others, in line with the excavator's skills and research orientation. The records of an excavation are a record of the excavator's engagement with the site, not a facsimile of the site itself.

The pragmatic objection to the notion of 'preservation by record' is that it can encourage or permit an unthinking approach to archaeological excavation, in which things are excavated simply 'because they are there', standardised field methods are applied uncritically, and the primary aim is seen as being the creation of site records, with wider interpretation being left to others and to a later date.

In due course, concerns did indeed arise that the very substantial expenditure on development-led archaeology under PPG 16 was overly focussed on producing site archives and technical reports, and was not producing new knowledge or public benefit in proportion to the cost of the activity (Southport Group 2011, 6–7).

As a result of these concerns, when PPG 16 was replaced by 'PPS 5' (*Planning Policy Statement 5: Planning for the Historic Environment*), a new approach was adopted. This stated that, if a 'heritage asset' was to be destroyed or damaged, the developer should be required to 'record and advance understanding of the significance of the heritage asset before it is lost' (DCLG 2010, 11; emphasis added). This wording was carried into the successor to PPS 5, the National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF), published in 2012 (DCLG 2012, 32).

This approach can be seen as a form of 'offsetting', an accepted term in environmental protection circles. In short, a loss of one kind (here, the physical remains themselves) is 'offset', or compensated for, by a gain or benefit of a different kind (increased understanding of the remains). This is a very different concept from that of 'preservation by record' (Thomas 2009), and one which echoes remarkably closely Curwen's comment on his work at Whitehawk: 'the damage done to the camp was

more than counter-balanced by the knowledge and the specimens acquired.'

In embracing both the principle of 'developer-funding' and the idea that the knowledge gained from an excavation can offset the loss of the physical deposits themselves, Curwen's work at Whitehawk Camp was many decades ahead of its time. It was not until 1990 (under PPG 16) that developer-funding became the norm. A further two decades were to elapse before a philosophy of 'preservation by record' was replaced, in PPS 5 and then NPPF, by one which emphasises the need for development-led archaeology to provide increased understanding of the past, rather than simply to accumulate more data for its own sake.

Given that the approach taken at Whitehawk seems to have been successful (certainly by Curwen's account), it is interesting to ask why neither principle was taken up when 'rescue archaeology' came into being on a large scale in the late 1960s and early 1970s. It is possible to offer some suggestions; more detailed study of the administrative and other records from this period might shed further light on the matter.

Under the post-1945 political settlement ('the welfare state'), there was general consensus that spending by government was the solution to problems in society. The political pressure applied by the Rescue movement was aimed at getting an increase in state spending on rescue archaeology, and it succeeded in this: see papers in Rahtz 1974. There was no question of lobbying for developers to be made to pay. Of course, the majority of sites threatened by development were not scheduled monuments, and acceptance of the principle that archaeology was a matter for the planning system to consider was still some years off.

At this time, central government had statutory responsibilities for the protection of archaeological sites under the ancient monuments legislation, but it had no explicit statutory power to spend money on 'rescue archaeology'. Normally, government can only spend money on something if it has a statutory power to do so. Such a power was not introduced until the Ancient Monuments and Archaeological Areas Act was passed in 1979.

In practice, central government funds were spent on 'rescue archaeology' from the Second World War onwards, starting with excavations on defence sites (Ministry of Works 1949; Grimes 1960). It is possible that funds which had actually

been voted for the preservation of monuments were diverted to this purpose (Christopher Young, *pers. comm.*).

Central government funding for rescue archaeology increased five-fold (from £210,000 to over £1 million) between 1970 and 1980 (Jones 1984, 50). The lack of a statutory basis for this funding prior to 1979 would have made it expedient to represent 'rescue excavation' as a legitimate alternative to the physical preservation of threatened sites. Indeed, even after the passing of the 1979 Act, state-funded rescue archaeology was still portrayed in terms of preservation. In a paper published in 1983, Andrew Saunders, then Chief Inspector of Ancient Monuments and Historic Buildings, discussed the tension between 'research' and rescue, saying: 'The Department's brief is limited to preservation and it must direct rescue archaeology funds to the recording of threatened sites as just one of the options open...for preserving sites for future study' (Saunders 1983, 23). The ethos of 'preservation by record' is very clear.

This phrase became widely accepted: for example, a 1986 publication on the work of the Central Excavation Unit was titled *Preservation by Record* (English Heritage 1986). The phrase was subsequently enshrined in PPG 16. Again, there was a tactical element to this. The argument was that archaeologists would rather see remains preserved than excavated for a development; if the developer wanted to destroy the remains, the least they could do was pay for the excavation. 'Preservation by record' was explicitly presented as a second-best option to preservation *in situ*.

Notwithstanding that this was a tactic to make developer-funding politically acceptable, the incorporation of 'preservation by record' as an approach into PPG 16 led to it becoming a central professional precept, fundamentally shaping the view of what development-led archaeology was about (Southport Group 2011, 6).

It seems, then, that the phrase 'preservation by record' was initially adopted as a device to legitimise state spending on rescue archaeology, in the absence of a specific statutory basis for it. This may well be the reason why the approach taken at Whitehawk in the 1930s, which recognised the beneficial gains in knowledge from 'development-led' archaeology, was not pursued in the early days of the state-funded 'rescue' era. An approach which emphasised the value of gains in understanding only re-emerged in

2010, after nearly twenty years' experience of PPG 16 had shown some of the problems of a 'preservation by record' philosophy.

Seen in this light, the work in the 1930s at Whitehawk Camp, with its use of developer-funding and its philosophy of what we would now call offsetting (an increase in knowledge as a form of compensation for the physical loss of part of a monument), was far ahead of its time. Maybe there really is nothing new under the sun.

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