

AN ARCHAEOBUREAU CRAT WRITES...

July 29, 2011 Brian Kerr Day of Archaeology, Day of Archaeology 2011 archaeologist, Archaeology, Brian Dix, Brian Kerr, Christopher Catling, clerk, Corfe Castle, Counties of England, Dorset, English Heritage, food, for us all, Fort Cumberland Festival, Freemasonry, good electronic systems, Haslemere, Haslemere station, Head of Archaeological Projects, http, Inspector, Jane Sidell, Joe Prentice, Kenilworth Castle, Lila Rakoczy, Man-Made Disaster, Music, Music groups, online press summary, Peter Brears, Radio 4, Roman London, Round Tower, Steven Brindle, Stonehenge, Surrey, Susan Greaney, The masonry, The Organ, Waterhouse Square, Windsor, Windsor Castle

A day or so in my life as an archaeologist working for English Heritage.

Started off by working at home at Haslemere in Surrey, eating toast with tea while dealing with e-mails with Radio 4 providing the background noise. As usual, was mildly distracted by Frankly the cat who views my attempts to sit down and work at a laptop as his cue to demand food with menaces and then attention, generally in that order.



A demanding cat. Frankly.

E-mails give me a few things to deal with before I do anything else. There are corrections to check on a chapter I helped to write for the forthcoming book on the Elizabethan Garden reconstruction at Kenilworth Castle. I was involved in organising the programme of archaeological and architectural research that contributed to the project, and I've co-written the archaeological chapter with Joe Prentice of Northamptonshire Archaeology, who directed the excavations, and Brian Dix, garden archaeologist extraordinaire, who advised throughout. Not much left to do – just checking that the photographs are in the right order, have the right numbers and captions, and are available in the right format for reproduction.

That done, I moved on to deal with some work on our forthcoming organisational restructuring. It's no secret that English Heritage took a huge hit in last year's government Comprehensive Spending Review. The organisation is having to deal with the impact of a net 35% cut in our grant from government. I can't say a great deal about what is currently going on, but it will come as no surprise to learn that many jobs are being lost, and that I and many of my colleagues will be put formally 'at risk' in the autumn, and will have to apply for a smaller number of jobs in the

restructured National Heritage Protection group. We've been through such reorganisations before, and I know the stress that this puts my colleagues through, but the scale and scope of these changes is greater than anything we've seen so far. A lot of colleagues are having to consider other career options and paths; an unsettling time for us all.

After a couple of hours, time to trek to the station to catch the 11am to Waterloo. I've been taking a few pictures to illustrate this blog, and drew pitying looks from fellow travellers as I took a photograph of the train as it came into Haslemere station. I'm a blogger, not a trainspotter....



My train arriving at Haslemere station

The train was fairly full, but got a seat and used the time to write up the blog of the day so far. Also did a little more on the draft publication strategy and synopsis for the Windsor Castle updated project design. I worked at Windsor from 1989 to 1995. We started off in the Round

Tower, the shell keep that stands on top of the 11th-century motte, excavating and recording the structures as part of a major engineering project.



Round Tower team, 1989, with the blogger looking much younger.

We'd just finished that project and evacuated our site office in November 1992 when fire broke out in the Upper Ward. That was the start of a huge programme of salvage and architectural analysis, with some excavation involved too.



Archaeological salvage of fire debris starting in the Grand Reception Room, Windsor Castle, 1993

The assessment of these large project archives was largely complete by the end of 1998, but work has been on hold then for a number of reasons. I've been in deep discussion with my colleague and good friend Dr Steven Brindle over the last few months, and the next stage is to get in touch with all the project specialists to let them know that the analysis may finally be about to happen. Hence the publication strategy, so they can see what we're asking them to do. By Guildford my seat was surrounded by loud and excitable children, and I was bitterly regretting having left my i-pod in my bag, which was overhead and thus inaccessible.



English Heritage offices at Waterhouse Square, Holborn

By bus to our Waterhouse Square offices in Holborn, where I find a seat among friends in London Region. Here I dealt with a variety of business by e-mail, including mundane admin tasks such as approving invoices and expenses. Fortunately we have quite good electronic systems for dealing with such things, so they were finished very quickly. The online press summary included a link to a Telegraph opinion piece on the listing of London tube stations. I tweeted the link with my own comments, and was later gratified to learn that my comment “Entertainingly daft Torygraph rant” appeared on the relevant page of the Telegraph website. A small but pleasing result. At this point I lost the use of the camera; my chum Dr Jane Sidell was off to give a walking tour of Roman London, and borrowed the camera to record the event.



Trying to persuade Dr Jane Sidell, Inspector of Ancient Monuments for London, to point the camera somewhere else.

I also had to draft a response to a member of the public who had written to say that she was disappointed to learn that we aren't running the Fort Cumberland Festival of British Archaeology event this year. I explained that this was as disappointing to us as it was to her; our free FOBA weekend event has been very popular, usually attracting c. 2000 people over a weekend to enjoy a range of archaeological and related activities. We enjoy it as much as the visitors do. We had to take the difficult decision not to hold the event this year in late 2010; by then it was already clear that we would be in the middle of a major reorganisation, and in that context it seemed unfair to ask colleagues to commit their time and energies to planning the event at a time when they were likely to be severely distracted by other events. We hope to be able to reinstate the event next year, resources permitting...

At 2pm, I took part in a Portico project team meeting. Portico is a project that aims to provide up-to-date research content on the English Heritage website for our historic properties. Enhanced content is already online for all of the free sites, and the first sets of pages for 12 of the pay sites are now available. An introduction to the project with links to the available content is available at [\(insert link\)](#). We were updated on progress, which remains good; the first batch of site information is now online, and all of it has been or is being updated with links to online

resources. Another batch of sites is nearly ready to go online, including Susan Greaney's excellent Stonehenge pages. The next stage of the project is currently being planned; I may have volunteered to write up one or two sites myself. A day conference is being planned for London next April to promote the project. The introductory page on the EH site shows the content that's available so far – <http://www.english-heritage.org.uk/professional/archives-and-collections/portico/about/>

Following the meeting I had a very useful discussion with Christopher Catling about the National Planning Policy Framework, which is currently out for consultation. I think we agreed that it's a huge improvement on the earlier practitioners' draft, preserving more of PPS5, but there are still some concerns, including the assumption in favour of development that permeates the document.

After that, there was time to check e-mails and deal with a few more bits of business before catching the train home. This included correspondence relating to one of last year's fieldwork projects, on the Romano-British settlement around Silbury Hill, and the forthcoming excavation at Wrest Park in Bedfordshire, where we'll be digging up parts of the French Parterre to assist in its restoration.

That was Thursday 28th July – I decided to write it up for Day of Archaeology as I was taking today off. In the event, I took a trip to Corfe Castle, which I haven't been to for far too long. Despite the long queues of holiday traffic, it was a useful and hugely enjoyable visit. I always particularly enjoy the path up to the keep, which passes through the tumbled remains of the demolished sections of the keep. It's very evocative of the sheer scale of destruction on this site.



The degree of destruction caused by slighting varies from site to site; this would appear to be off the vindictive end of the scale. The site is looking very good, but I was very disappointed by the new interpretation panels, full of rubbishy unhistorical cliches. The panel about 'oubliettes' was the worst example. It went on about the agonies of the poor prisoners abandoned in deep pit prisons. The work of Peter Brears has, of course, demonstrated beyond reasonable doubt that such structures are strong-rooms, for the safe storage of documents, money and other valuables. The reason that they often have well-lit chambers with fireplaces above them is not to provide accommodation for the better-off prisoners, but to provide a room for the clerk or steward to work in. Worst of all, having conjured up imaginary sufferings in imaginary oubliettes, the panel finished by admitting that no such chamber survived at Corfe. So the point of this rubbish was.....? Rant over.



The effects of undermining - the tower has slid down the slope, and the curtain wall has fallen over.

I took some time looking at the evidence for the destruction of the site, which is a particular interest of mine. This was the subject of the thesis of a friend of mine, Dr Lila Rakoczy, and since reading her work I've become more interested in looking at the evidence for how buildings were demolished. The walls at Corfe have certainly been undermined, but there's no clear evidence for the use of gunpowder, despite the claims on a number of panels that the site was 'blown up'. The surviving unused sap at the base of the keep's latrine tower is a simple horizontal rectangular slot, which I think argues for the use of the 'burnt timber prop' method of undermining – i.e. using timbers to prop up the wall as the sap is excavated, and then burning them out to bring down the mass of masonry above. Drawings of near-contemporary saps used for explosive undermining, e.g. in Vauban's work, show that these saps tend to be hollowed out behind a small opening in the outer face of the wall, to contain the blast and thus maximise the effect of the explosion on the masonry. A bit anorakish, but it keeps me happy.



Possible sap at the base of the Keep's latrine tower, The masonry at the right hand corner is, I think, relatively-modern underpinning.

After that, I enjoyed a much faster and prettier drive home by avoiding the main roads. So there you have it – two days for the price of one, and I got to see some archaeology on one of them.

Brian Kerr, Head of Archaeological Projects, English Heritage