

DAY OF ARCHAEOLOGY BLOG – A VIEW FROM RURAL YORKSHIRE

July 24, 2015 Kat Curation, Explore Posts farming, Heritage Management, historic environment, parkland, rural archaeology, Yorkshire

The Day of Archaeology is a chance for me to talk about real life archaeology as an historic environment adviser in England. I've read the various Day of Archaeology blogs with interest over the past few years and I've seen exciting blogs of jungle excavation, lab work, and contract archaeology on building sites (my life for 10 years before I started my current role) but I haven't seen much about the life of a rural historic environment adviser in the green hills of Yorkshire so here goes...

I work for Natural England, which is the government's adviser for the natural environment in England. We look after nature conservation (particularly SSSIs) and landscape – and cultural landscapes include archaeology and historic buildings. I'm based in Yorkshire and I advise on 5 counties worth of rural archaeological sites in farmland but have colleagues across the country. I bet you thought Historic England did all that!

Morning: I have some sites that I want to discuss with colleagues so instead of working from home on my laptop, I am going into our Natural England offices in Leeds. I work in a large mixed office where most of the staff has an ecology background; however they have made me very welcome – although they do tend to assume that I know everything about the entire history of human civilization and can answer at the drop of a hat. The reality is that I have a BSc in Archaeology (focusing on European prehistory and environmental archaeology) and an MA in Archaeology & Heritage Management including project management, buildings archaeology, landscape archaeology and cultural resource management. However in my work I have to be a generalist and do a little bit of everything, mainly advising farmers on how to manage the archaeology that they have on their land, as well as arranging projects to help them improve the condition of degraded monuments. Originally I was a city girl but I've learnt more about farming in the last 5 years working in rural areas.

I really enjoy this work. It feels very constructive to improve the condition of neglected sites rather than just dig them up and record them so that they can be built on. Some of my past sites are quite spectacular like the stabilization and conservation of Frith Hall.

My favourites are the little sites though. Places such as Oxygrain's packhorse bridge – few people will ever see this tiny scheduled monument in a moorland landscape other than from the nearby road bridge. It was collapsing and on the At Risk Register but since we grant aided its sensitive repair I know that it will stand for another few hundred years. Along with writing guidance and giving general advice I design several projects each year (some of which run for 2 or 3 years), mostly managed by architects or archaeologists on site. Once set up each requires periodic input to keep them running smoothly. It's like spinning plates, giving each one the right attention at the right time.

I also enjoy getting out and about talking to farmers and landowners – I have to be able to inspire and enthuse them about archaeology and the historic environment if I want them to undertake projects as all our schemes are voluntary. Sometimes a tiny change in land management such as planting a grass strip around a barrow can make a massive difference to whether archaeology deteriorates from ongoing ploughing or is preserved for future generations to enjoy. Some farmers 'get' archaeology right from the start, others need persuading, but they usually come around in the end.

In my job I get a LOT of e-mail which is considerably less enjoyable than getting out and about. It takes me 2 hours or so to work through this. I also update my diary with today's site visit so my boss knows where I will be (for safety). We work a lot on trust but he could call and check up on me at any point and he will also be checking my diary to see what location I am working in. After the e-mail, there's time for a quick lunch before I head out.

Afternoon:

Today I am going on a visit to a farm which is considering entering an agri-environment scheme. These are schemes where farmers agree to farm their land in ways that are sympathetic to wildlife and habitats, don't cause water pollution, are friendly to school visits – and most relevant to me – good for the historic environment and landscape too! This farm is a former parkland, one of the more complex sites I work on, so this will be a joint visit with ecologist colleague, Fiona.. If I was going out alone I would phone a 'buddy' with a finish time when they need to check up on me as working alone in remote locations with no mobile phone signal can be dangerous, but today we're fine as a pair. I borrow the work camera and handheld GPS to take out with me in case we need to map new features but mainly we want to talk to the farmer about their plans for the land, the historic and natural features that they already know about and how to manage them, and whether they are interested in joining an agri-environment scheme.

After a quick chat (with cup of tea) and a look at some plans in the farmer's kitchen we head out in his Land Rover. We'll hike once we are closer to the fields. Fiona is very excited about the wood pasture in the parkland (an area of mixed grassland and trees which is grazed) which could be habitat for rare insects and bats – she checks the trees for signs of droppings that could be a roost. I am looking at boundaries such as iron railings and estate walls, structures, and views and vistas to see what the potential is for restoring some of the original design. I know from old photos and talking to the farmer that this parkland used to have an avenue which has lost a lot of trees through age and disease – replanting this in the old location would be a great way of enhancing the historic feel of the parkland as well as creating good habitat (although we might have to wait 100 years or so for the trees to get big enough for that!). The farmer is concerned that his cattle might damage the trees when planted so we discuss different types of tree guards to protect them or possibly moving the cattle to another field and grazing this one with sheep instead. It's not as glamorous as the building work but it's all important.

Evening: I've dropped off Fiona, returned the hire car and got a lift back to my house from the hire company so now I log on quickly to my laptop. I need to download the camera shots and write up some notes from today's visit. It's been a long day (it's about half 5 now but I need to work past 6 to make my full hours) but I check my diary too in case I have anything to prep for Monday. Luckily there are no visits

just an office based meeting where I have already made notes on the agenda so there's no more work to do on that. Eventually it's time to log off and pack everything away securely.

Night: I draw a really strong line between my work life and my home life – I find it the best way not to burn out. If archaeology was not my job it would be my hobby – but it is my job and so tonight I'm going out with friends. I have a much better social life than when I was a field archaeologist (less away work, more time for hobbies, family and friends) but I wouldn't swap those times either. I think I needed to learn and experience field archaeology before I could be effective in a role like this.