

UNIVERSITY FIELD SCHOOLS – THE BEST WAY TO GAIN FIELD EXPERIENCE OR MAYBE NOT?

July 24, 2015 Kevin Wooldridge Education,Excavation, Explore Posts, Neolithic Field School,Marden

This year's 'Day of Archaeology' sees me working for Historic England at the Reading University Archaeology field school. The project is based around the villages of Marden and Wilsford in Wiltshire, UK located approximately half way between Stonehenge and the village of Avebury. The project is mainly concentrated on investigating the two Neolithic henge monuments located in Marden and just outside Wilsford.

We have been here now for 6 weeks and over 130 folk have passed through the project.....mainly university undergraduates, but also a number of recent graduates; many A level students (who might be considering studying archaeology at uni) and of course archaeology enthusiasts of all ages. Historic England are providing specialist services to the project, conservation, finds and environmental analysis and in my case, and that of my two HE colleagues, Cat and Dave, supervising the excavation of the 'Roman' element of the project. In essence imparting our combined knowledge and experience to the students.

I wanted to take this opportunity to digress about university field schools in general. There has been a recent discussion on the BAJR archaeology website about the value of university field schools and whether they prepare students for the 'real world' of archaeology, in the case of the UK that being the vocation we describe as 'commercial' archaeology.

I will declare my own view immediately. I am a great fan of field schools. I have worked on quite a few both in the UK and abroad. I think they are of immense value to students in acquiring a degree of competence in field skills that may help them if they decide to follow a career in archaeology. If the BAJR discussion is to be believed though, my enthusiasm isn't shared by all archaeologists. A number commented on the lack of professional training included in many undergraduate courses and asked whether field schools covered the basic requirements of commercial archaeology.

Of course there is a balance to be achieved. As I mentioned before there is only so much that can be learnt in 6 weeks and of course many students only attend for part of the project. Experience is probably the most vital component of a career in archaeology and whilst field schools are akin to dipping a toe in the waves, they are no replacement for the real time, real life immersion in the archaeological ocean.....

There are of course other factors to consider. Although the number of students studying archaeology has remained fairly stable over the past few years, the number choosing to enter archaeology as a profession is relatively small, probably less than 10%. Studying archaeology as an academic discipline does not necessarily mean that the student wishes archaeology as a career. Likewise the A-level students (17 and 18 year olds) are considering their options. Archaeology might be one of several subjects they are looking to pursue at university; but with exam results and firm offers still some way in the future...the general

interest participants in the project are also attending for a variety of reasons and not always interested (or concerned) in pursuing a career in the discipline....

I do believe however that field schools provide a fair (albeit light) approximation of the physical and mental stress that is involved in vocational archaeology. Our 'successes' therefore might also be counted as those folk who realise that archaeology may not be the career they wish to follow. In general we try to be honest, not diminishing the pressures of the job, the low pay, the lack of security etc etc, but we do try to get across the message that archaeology can a fascinating and stimulating profession and of course that archaeologists are the nicest group of people you are ever likely to work with.

The Reading project is scheduled to run for a further two seasons.....so I may be back next yearbut if previous 'Day of Archaeology' postings are to go by, I have never yet managed to be doing the same thing 2 years running....

Anyway here are some nice images from this years project....



The excavations across Wilsford Henge (top) and the Roman enclosure (below)



Project site tour – terminal ditch Wilsford Henge



Selfie



Alex and James and a leaf shaped arrow head



More leaf shaped arrow head



Jim Leary and David Roberts consider a worked flint