

# SOME THOUGHTS ON INTERPRETATION AND COMMUNICATION

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*Old field gate with locks. Photo taken by author.*

As an amateur I cannot talk about excavating something amazing or peering down a microscope in a perplexing manner! Rather, used the position as an amateur to consider the problems involved with

interpretation and the resultant dissemination of any outcome(s).

Metaphor time: Imagine the past, say prehistory, is behind a large gate. Now at one time that gate would've been easy to open and access would have been relatively straightforward, as the 'contemporary' past is today. Then as time passes it creates a lock on the gate thus denying access. The keys to this lock were broken up and became what is now excavated and analysed – artefacts, ecofacts, features, structures, and so on. Thus the role of interpretation is to recreate the keys from the many items discovered and make them fit the lock. However, this isn't as easy as it sounds as there are many locks and so innumerable parts of many keys. Theories are employed to construct a general outline of a possible key which is then refined using the data from the finds. If the key doesn't fit, the data is reassessed and the theory modified and tried again. And so it goes on until the key fits and the tumblers in the lock fall, or a new design of key (theory) is tried and the cycle continues.

The lock to the gate is now unlocked but still the gate will not open. The lock has become rusted and seized up over time – in order to release it communication is required. Thus various technical and final reports are produced, assorted papers, and possibly even a book (or two) are written. Inevitably these are aimed at their peers so involve a technical language, in which the wider public are not conversant, so creates a barrier to wider appreciation and understanding – which becomes even worse when the mass media 'pick up' on an item and misinterpret the findings. This isn't to say that technical literature isn't required, it's vital. But what is required is an effective, unambiguous, communication platform which describes the findings in a plain, accessible, language for a wider audience. This isn't to 'dumb down' nothing should be simplified, just released using a vocabulary which most people will understand without having to consult 'Google' every other line. Another problem with interpretation is that contemporary society is often used as a metric for structuring the past – this creates a reference point but also introduces biases into the interpretation. These social biases are quite evident from the writings of Victorian antiquaries – there is never any mention of either women or children. It is all a very anthropocentric view of the past where over half the population is being ignored. Admittedly children are quite often conspicuous by their absence within the archaeological record, but women aren't and were still ignored! One of the reasons for this is that their interpretation was a reflection of their society, where women were often subjugated and children were to be 'seen and not heard'. Sadly, this has become a self-perpetuating problem, where one teaches how they were taught – often using materials containing the same biases so reinforcing the problem. Even when using 'gender neutral' terms, it is often assumed that the main progenitor is male, even when no such thing has been stated. This creates the problem of both a vitally important section of society being sidelined and a potential misinterpretation of the data, who's to say what gender did what? The solution is to only use gender specific terms where there is evidence to support their use and nowhere else.

Well that's my 'Day of Archaeology' rant over for another year thank you for reading – time for a beer!