

The Future For Our Past: Publication and Archaeology

by

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THE PRESENT JOURNAL

Before I outline the potential future for the journal of the Northamptonshire Archaeological Society, I would like to make a small apology for the present journal. In my role as Senior Archaeologist for Northamptonshire Archaeology, the archaeological contractor attached to the County Council, I had hoped to be able to bring a number of more substantial sites to publication this year, but other demands on my time have prevented this. As a result, in order to ensure that there was a journal for members this year, to continue the pattern of annual publication re-established by Martin Tingle, it has been necessary to use several smaller projects for which reports could be brought to completion within shorter time scales. That is not to say that these smaller sites are not worthy of publication, but it would have been preferable if we had produced a journal that also contained a few more sites of greater substance. Hopefully these will appear next year, as outlined below.

However, the contents of this journal do provide a good cross-section of the projects that currently form a substantial part of the work of a professional archaeological contractor working within the constraints of developer funding and contract tendering. This involves dealing with the archaeology threatened by development projects – housing and industrial developments, road building and mineral extraction being major impacts.

The principal constraint is that only that part of any site under threat of destruction can be dealt with. Major developers will now typically employ archaeological consultants to advise them, and development schemes may well be modified so that the main areas of archaeological interest are preserved undisturbed, or at least substantially undisturbed, within the development scheme, so that only the

marginal areas become available for excavation. Other forms of development, such as road schemes and pipelines inevitably provide only transects across sites, with little or no scope for works beyond those limits, and these schemes too may be modified to avoid the densest areas of archaeology.

As will be evident from a number of the contributions to this volume, the result is often a frustratingly partial view of a settlement, and certainly not the parts that we would have chosen to excavate. Some years ago, it was pointed out to us in Northamptonshire Archaeology that at a site within Northampton we were “looking on the wrong side of the road” to find a particular medieval religious house. We were not of course “looking on the wrong side of the road”, we were looking at the only area available to us, the area potentially under threat by a new development, which happened to lie across the road from that particular medieval religious house.

While I have apologised on behalf of both the society and Northamptonshire Archaeology for the thinness of this journal, I must also point out that another reason for its thinness is the lack of contributions from other organisations and individuals. Copies of the journal published in the 1970s and 1980s show a wide diversity of contributors, which also meant that the costs of publication were being met by several organisations, which included the then Department of the Environment (now English Heritage), the Northampton Development Corporation Archaeological Unit, The Northamptonshire Archaeology Unit of the County Council, The Nene Valley Research Committee, and others. In recent issues Northamptonshire Archaeology has become the dominant contributor of both articles and therefore finance. This is not a healthy position for the society, and a return to a broader base of contributors would do much to ensure the survival of the journal and to help create a greater diversity of content.

It is regrettable that despite many other archaeological contractors carrying out work in the county, so few have chosen to publish the results within the county journal. This had been true even while the County Council maintained a Planning Archaeologist who, on behalf of the relevant planning authorities, would recommend conditions to be attached to planning permissions and would also monitor the resulting fieldwork and its analysis and reporting. From April 2006 the regular monitoring of all planning applications by a single Planning Archaeologist based within the County Council was brought to an end as part of a cost-cutting exercise, as the statutory responsibility for such archaeological provision lies with the relevant planning authorities and not the County Council. As a result, there is now no one to encourage any archaeological contractor to make the results of their investigations more widely available. Of course, this aspect will actually become academic as, if no one is setting archaeological conditions on new developments, there will be little to report anyway.

I must also mention that only a few of the local independent archaeologists now provide material for the journal.

While the future for professional archaeology in the county is uncertain, below we will take a positive

stance and look to a brighter, more colourful, future for the journal.

PAST JOURNALS

Before we consider the future for the journal, we can summarise what we are doing to respect the past. From 1966 to 1973 the Northamptonshire Federation of the Archaeological Societies published eight annual Bulletins, providing summaries of work carried out across the county each year (Plate 1). In 1974 the Federation became the Northamptonshire Archaeological Society and the paper-bound Bulletin was replaced by a card-bound journal containing more substantial reports in addition to an annual round-up. This was number 9 in the series, and established the format that has been retained largely unchanged to the present day.

Digital copies of those first eight Bulletins are contained on a CD attached to this volume, becoming our first adventure in digital publishing. While some of our older members will still have their original copies, these early Bulletins must survive in relatively small numbers and this digital publication will make them available to the younger and future generations of society members.

We have also been digitising past copies of the

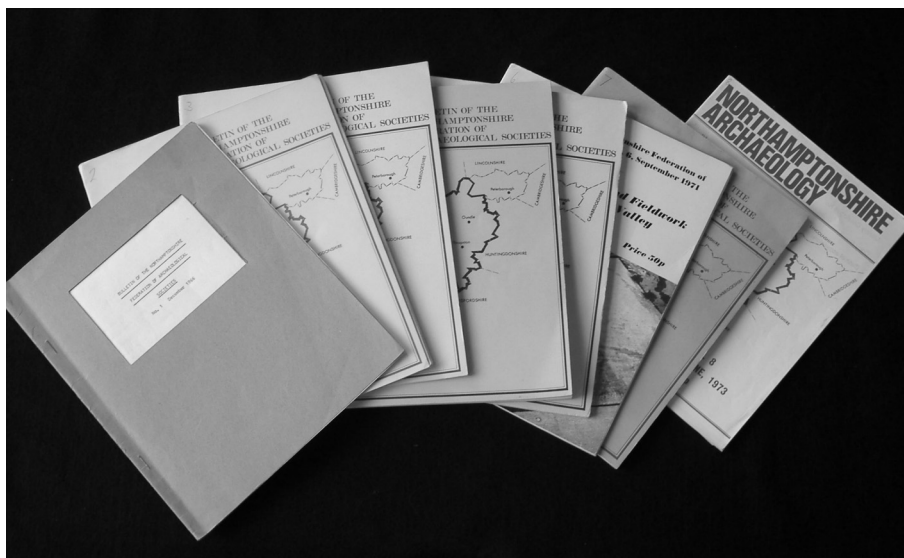


Plate 1 The Bulletins of the Northamptonshire Federation

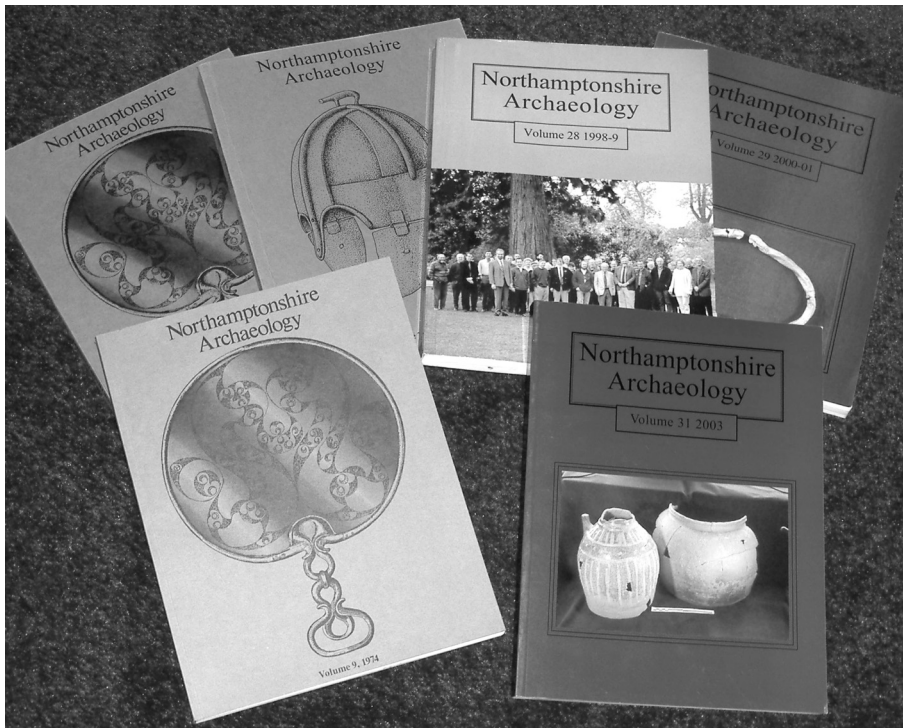


Plate 2 A few past copies of the journal

journal itself, and the intention is that in the next journal, volume 35, we will provide a second CD containing the past journals, at least up to volume 30 (Plate 2).

The initial impetus for digitising the past journals was provided by a scheme proposed by the Council for British Archaeology to set up an online library of county journals and other publications. This library will be fully indexed so that the entire contents can be searched on a wide range of criteria – author, period, site type, finds type etc, making it a valuable research resource. As this note is being written the site is still in its trial phase, but by the time you receive this journal it should be fully running. The intention is to make all of the past journals available on this scheme, where researchers will be able to search for and download copies of individual articles. They will be charged a minimal fee for articles from older journals, as the intention is to encourage use of the resource, and a slightly higher fee for articles from recent journals, so that we do not discourage new members from joining the society.

With our participation in this scheme we are making the contents of the journal easily and cheaply available on a world-wide basis to anyone with a computer and an internet link. If you wish to use and explore this resource, go to BritArch, the web site of the Council for British Archaeology, which will contain the necessary link, and we would also hope to provide a direct link from the NAS website.

As the CBA site is designed to be a searchable resource across multiple journals, and not an archive facility, another option may be to approach the Archaeology Data Service, where the entire collection of the journals could be lodged as a long-term, secure digital archive, alongside a growing catalogue of archaeological data, including other county journals.

THE FUTURE FOR THE JOURNAL

The format of the journal has remained largely unchanged since 1974. It is a quarto page size published by offset litho. In its early days black and

white plates could only be included on glossy pages inserted at the end of the volume, while today the black and white plates appear within the articles. The only other significant change has been the move from a plain card cover carrying a black and white line drawing to a laminated, glossy card cover carrying a colour plate (Plate 2).

Following discussion by the committee, it is proposed that after over thirty years it is now time that we moved the journal forward to a new style and format. Given our short print run, it will cost us no more, and perhaps a little less, to use digital publication rather than the traditional printing press. The other main benefit will be that we can then include colour throughout the journal at no additional cost, and this will include both colour figures and plates. At the same time we are also proposing that we should move to an A4 page size. This should make the contents far more attractive to the reader and, as many of the contributors currently have to convert A4 colour illustrations to black and white quarto especially for publication in the journal, the change will make life easier for them as well.

The society has traditionally had a liberal policy towards the contents of the journal, in that it publishes submitted articles without any external academic refereeing and with minimal editorial interference in the contents. It has recently been suggested by some members that there has been a decline in the value of the journal as often modern reports only summarise aspects of the finds and environmental evidence, and do not provide the full reports in which more of the material will have been discussed in detail and fully illustrated. This approach is not unique to this journal as the submitted articles reflect a general trend in archaeological reporting.

Developer funding has led to a huge increase in the number of sites being investigated and in the quantities of material being recovered. This, combined with the fact that much of the work being reported on is carried out by archaeological contractors who have to be profitable businesses to survive, undoubtedly has led to different attitudes towards analysis and publication. Another factor is that while the traditional view is that a report should describe, discuss and illustrate all diagnostic finds, the modern view is that many of these finds are diagnostic because they are well-known types, and we do not need to endlessly republish the same material. Another problem is the extreme length and

detail contained in some specialist reports, and the likelihood that most of our readers will have little interest in seeing, let alone reading, many pages of such specialist study. The big advantage we also have these days is that such reports can be omitted from or summarised within the journal while still being made available to those who need this level of detail in the original reports, which are always submitted to the county Sites and Monuments Record, and are now often being made available online, as will be discussed in the review of publications within the Notes section of this volume.

The intention is therefore that the liberal editorial policy will continue and it can be anticipated that a wide variety of reporting styles will be evident in future journals, from the most traditional style report through to the most modern abbreviated synthesis.

A counter argument to this approach is that in doing this we are reducing the future value of the journal as the primary reference source for the archaeology of the county, and there is substance in that argument. However, our principal purpose must be to produce a journal for the present-day reader, and not the potential reader of 20, 50 or even a 100 years time, and to recognise that in the present day with digital archiving, often through the internet, and also with the establishment of county Sites and Monuments Records (SMRs), now being re-branded as Historic Environment Records (HERs), the county journal is only one of a number of sources of archaeological information in the short term, and hopefully for the longer term as well.

The most effective way future archaeologists could be served would be to safeguard the site records, the finds and all other relevant material in a permanent archive where they could be accessible for future study, a direct archaeological equivalent of the excellent Northamptonshire Record Office. Unfortunately, this is something which we seem unlikely to be able to achieve in this county in the present political climate, when so little value is placed on the underlying substance of our archaeological heritage, as opposed to the saleable gloss, and it would cost several million pounds to set up a proper county museum and archive. I find it very sad that so much good archaeology from the past 30 years or so has no home, so that the public of the county are largely ignorant of the very existence of this rich heritage. Any National Lottery winners reading this please get in touch.