

# Commentary

by Gromaticus

## A manifesto for archaeology

I admit that I am not a 'big-picture' person, being happiest working on the details of a topic or project: a tactician rather than a strategist. One of my first conference papers was titled 'The tactical use of models in archaeology'. So I feel out of my depth when looking at the overall state of archaeology in England today, and assessing its strengths and weaknesses. Fortunately, a group more able to face this task, the Society of Antiquaries (SoA), has taken it on and has published *The Future of Archaeology in England: A Manifesto*.<sup>1</sup> Rather than try to summarise it, I shall here quote from its Executive Summary.

Over the thirty years since the publication of the UK Government's *Planning Policy Guidance 16: Archaeology and Planning* (PPG16) in 1990, the practice of archaeology in England has developed significantly, the major achievements being:

- a vast increase in the amount of archaeological work undertaken;
- a revolution in our knowledge of the past in many areas;
- the development of a greater understanding about the distribution and ubiquity of the archaeological resource;
- the general acceptance of measures for safeguarding the archaeological dimension of the historic environment within the planning system.

However, the introduction of PPG16 and its successor policies has also seen:

- a significant change in the funding model for undertaking archaeology,

from mixed developer and government funding, to almost all developer funded;

- a system dominated by discrete competitively-tendered projects, which place limitations on time, funding, and impetus to develop co-operative working practices, and which has been slow and inconsistent in responding to the potential for public engagement;
- a gradual and crippling decline in resources (35% since 2006) for local authority archaeological services, which specify archaeological responses to development proposals and monitor outcomes.

PPG16 was predicated on achieving 'preservation by record'. PPS5 (2010) shifted the emphasis, stating that the ultimate justification of archaeology funded through public policy is to increase understanding of the past for the benefit of the public. Despite this, archaeological practices have tended to fossilise around the process-driven approach adopted during the expansion of development-led archaeology between 1990 and 2010.

## Key findings:

- Currently, the system does not deliver adequate public benefits because it is process-focused and under-resourced.
- There is minimal and fragmented provision for the specification and oversight of work, inadequate provision for using data to generate and disseminate knowledge, and almost no provision for curating and making accessible the archive.

- The SoA believes that a profound cultural change is necessary to address these issues. In considering the future practice of archaeology in England, it is vital to look beyond the immediate consequences of declining public resources.

## Recommendations:

- Fundamental to change must be recognition by all of the need for greater collaboration in the planning role, fieldwork, research and dissemination.
- A new system of regional hubs, based on the SoA's key principles (Section 3), would deliver the necessary cultural change.
- These hubs would be umbrella bodies, supporting local authority services, encouraging cross-disciplinary work, fostering research and training, and promoting best practice.
- Archaeological work should provide key public benefits by advancing understanding, encouraging engagement and participation and promoting social cohesion and placemaking.

I encourage you to read the full Manifesto, to discuss its implications for you and any archaeological organisations to which you belong, and to reply with any ideas you may have.<sup>2</sup> How can archaeology best contribute to public benefit? Perhaps it's especially at a time like this that we most need a bold vision to carry us forward.

1. <https://tinyurl.com/y5w5b7w8>

2. Emails to: [manifesto@sal.org.uk](mailto:manifesto@sal.org.uk)

## Annual Lecture and General Meeting

This will be held online on 20 May this year (as it is unlikely that the Institute of Archaeology will be available). A short AGM at 7.00 pm will be followed by the prestigious Annual Lecture.

Stephanie Ostrich will present **Heritage Action Zones: heritage-led regeneration in London's historic high streets**. HAZs have been rolled out in four phases over the last few years: the first Greater London HAZ was Sutton in Round 1; the first inner London one was Walworth as part of Round 2.

This is a particularly fitting subject where Covid has taken its toll on all the country's high streets.

The AGM proceedings will include the election of Officers, plus six ordinary members to the Publication Committee. We have a complete slate of Officers, and four ordinary members, who are happy to stand for re-election. So there are two vacant places for ordinary members.

To discuss the positions or submit nominations, please email the

Secretary, Rosalind Morris, at [londonarchaeologistmagazine@gmail.com](mailto:londonarchaeologistmagazine@gmail.com) OR use the contact form on our website: <https://www.londonarchaeologist.org.uk/contact-us.html> OR write to Rosalind Morris, c/o MOLA, Mortimer Wheeler House, 46 Eagle Wharf Road, London N1 7ED.

All are welcome to join us on Thursday 20 May 2020 from **6.45 pm** via Zoom. Please book your free place on the *London Archaeologist* website (see above).