

Commentary

by Gromaticus

Cui bono?

In the Autumn 2020 issue, I reported on MOLA's new four-year project Bringing the Past to the Present, measuring, maximising and transforming public benefits from UK government infrastructure investment in archaeology, led by Dr Sadie Watson.¹ I said then that I would follow the project, and now I think it's time to give an update.

I found that Sadie Watson and her colleagues (Dr Harald Fredheim and Dr Kate Faccia) have been busy, and have recently published the proceedings of the *Europae Archaeologiae Consilium* symposium on Archaeology and Public Benefit,² held in Prague in March 2020, as well as a series of MOLA blogs.

There are clear ramifications to the project, both in the broader heritage sector in the UK and in development-led archaeology across Europe. For example, the DCMS has plans for a major ten-year study intended to create a system through which the benefits of culture and heritage can be valued.³ I suspect that the ramifications go even wider, and I shall return to that point.

Fundamentally, just what is public benefit? There are many definitions. Sadie Watson succinctly defines it as 'socially inclusive legacy', which needs unpacking. Here I take 'socially inclusive' to mean that the benefit must be available to all members of society, and not restricted to any particular group, and 'legacy' to imply that the

benefit outlasts the actual event or project that gave rise to it.

She also quotes HS2 Ltd's definitions that it includes 'knowledge creation, engagement with people, the creation of a lasting archival and skills legacy' and proposes to 'refocus archaeology to increase public value and relevance to society'.⁴ Amen to all that, but how is it to be achieved?

In the same symposium, Barney Sloane (the project's Co-Investigator and Director of Specialist Services, Historic England) suggests several public benefits:⁵

- Contribution to shared history
- Artistic and cultural treasures
- Local value
- Place-making and social cohesion
- Education benefit
- Contribution to science and innovation
- Health and wellbeing (eg Operation Nightingale)
- Added economic value to developers.

Much more can be said, but the key points seem to be: how can the benefits of any archaeological project be measured? How can it be tailored to maximise them? Can one sort of benefit be traded off against another? And how do we get beyond straightforward knowledge creation? These questions, with which Sadie Watson and her team are grappling, have consequences far beyond their remit – they surely apply to all development-led archaeology,

and more widely to all archaeological work, even that in the amateur sphere.

If a local society is a registered charity, then its purposes must be for public benefit. As defined by the Charity Commission, this is legalistic and (to my mind) not particularly useful – what the MOLA team is seeking to achieve seems to be much more in the spirit of the term, and could give all of us valuable guidance. But could it perhaps also be used as a Trojan Horse to fight opposition to an otherwise unpopular development by offering potential archaeological goodies? A gain of an archaeological benefit could be offset, or even negated, by the loss of a benefit of a different type, for example environmental.

I look forward to following the progress of this project in the coming years, and hope to come back to it here from time to time.

1. *London Archaeol* **16** (2) (2020), 30.

2. Watson, S 'Foreword: Archaeology and Public Benefit' *Internet Archaeology* **57** (2021). Accessible online at <https://doi.org/10.11141/ia.57.19> [accessed 13 May 2021].

3. Watson, S 'Archaeology and Public Benefit Project Update 4: Can you put a value on heritage?' MOLA blog (2020) Accessible at <https://tinyurl.com/9bh99w8m> [accessed 13 May 2021].

4. Watson, S 'Public Benefit: the challenge for development-led archaeology in the UK' *Internet Archaeology* **57** (2021). Accessible at <https://doi.org/10.11141/ia.57.1> [accessed 13 May 2021].

5. Sloane, B 'Making the Case for the Public Benefits of Development-led Archaeology.' *Internet Archaeology* **57** (2021). Accessible at <https://doi.org/10.11141/ia.57.17> [accessed 13 May 2021].

General Meeting and Annual Lecture

Due to the COVID-19 restraints, the 2021 AGM was held as a online meeting via Zoom. In accordance with the requirements of the London Archaeologist Association Constitution, the Minutes of the 2020 AGM and the Annual Report for 2021 can be found on the website. Elections of the Officers and members of the Committee were held by series of Zoom ballots.

The Officers remain as follows: Joint Editors, Diana Briscoe and Jenny Hall; Managing Editor, Peter Rowsome; Secretary, Rosalind Morris;

Membership Secretary, Jo Udall and Communications Officer, Helen Johnston. Jacqui Mellows was elected Treasurer, following her co-option in July 2020. Les Capon, Natasha Billson and Alistair Douglas were re-elected as Ordinary Members. Alison Telfer and Brigid Geist were elected as Ordinary Members in addition.

The Annual Lecture was held online as advertised. After the AGM, Stephanie Ostrich, leader of the Walworth Heritage Action Zone for Southwark presented: *Heritage Action Zones:*

heritage-led regeneration in London's historic high streets. Since 2019, Stephanie has managed the Walworth Heritage Action Zone, a heritage-led regeneration and community initiative with Southwark Council, Historic England and their community partners. This was a particularly fitting subject where Covid has taken its toll on all the country's high streets.

The presentation can now be watched via the *London Archaeologist* website: www.londonarchaeologist.org.uk/news.html.