

Commentary

by Gromaticus

A dose of heritage, please

No sooner is one issue published, I know that I have a month in which to decide what Gromaticus will say in the next issue, and also that whatever is said runs the risk of already being out-of-date by the time that it appears in print. That is a risk I have always faced, but one that feels more acute as the speed of dissemination continues to increase – quarterly issues are interspersed by more frequent blogs and now even by daily tweets. It is impossible to compete, so perhaps a mature if rather dated reflection is the best that can be offered.

When I started to think about this issue, my intention was to provide an update on a project which I introduced in the Autumn 2020 (issue 16–02) and elaborated in the Summer 2021 (issue 16–05): *Bringing the Past to the Present*, led by Sadie Watson at MOLA. By following a series of blogs dated to early and mid-2021, I found that the project was progressing through a stage of asking pertinent questions about ‘extending the value of archaeology beyond its typical business sectors [ie developers] and its traditional audience [ie those already interested in archaeology]’ (my brackets).¹

Clearly, much work is in progress, and more needs to be done before workable conclusions are reached. So I shall allow myself to be distracted for now, and return to the project when there is something definite that I can get my teeth into.

Social Values

The distraction was a reference to a related topic: Elizabeth Robson’s *Wrestling with Social Values* project at the University of Stirling, and the launch of a new *Social Value Toolkit*.² As the title suggests, this has a broader scope than just archaeology, but it has much to interest us. She rightly points out that:

the diverse values that historic places hold for different communities have been the focus of increased public debate and official intervention.

This, although referring to the wider heritage context (Edward Colston and all that), will become more relevant to archaeology as our interpretations become more social and go beyond the ‘what, where, and when?’ with which we are so familiar.

She led me to wonder what we as archaeologists might mean by ‘social value’, which she defines as ‘the significance of the historic environment to contemporary communities, including people’s sense of identity, belonging, attachment and place’.

For archaeologists, and indeed also local historians, this seems to split into two parts:

- (1) the **internal** (the value to the participating individual or group, in terms of teamwork, discovery, personal achievement, etc), and
- (2) the **external** (the outcomes of disseminating discoveries and interpretations to a wider community).

It’s interesting to see how heritage has been adopted into the ‘health and wellbeing’ agenda in recent years, at both national and regional level. For example, Historic England tells us that: Heritage plays a significant role in society, enhancing our wellbeing and quality of life, improving the way places are perceived, and engaging the general public.³ Well, you may say, they would say that, wouldn’t they?

So how about the What Works Centre for Wellbeing (‘an independent collaborating centre that develops and shares robust and accessible wellbeing evidence to improve decision-making’)? They say:

The scoping review . . . finds that historic places, assets – and associated activities and interventions – can have a wide range of beneficial impacts on the physical, mental and social wellbeing of individuals and communities.⁴

No heritage axe to grind here. Locally, I can see a similar picture. My local borough’s heritage service has been subsumed under a wider ‘local health

and wellbeing’ umbrella, and has posted a *Local Heritage and Wellbeing* report, described as ‘an overview of how Sutton’s Cultural Services Heritage offer can support local health and wellbeing’. It is now our job to show how archaeology can continue to advance the appreciation of the heritage in our local areas.

Surprise!

I was delighted to read in the Autumn issue, and in many other places, about the discovery of part of a Roman statue of Minerva hidden as part of a 19th-century statue of King Alfred. Hidden in plain sight, one might say. It’s always a joy to see these surprises that archaeology is able to spring on us, and may there be many more.

Advance notice

We hope that it will be possible to hold the Annual Lecture and AGM of *London Archaeologist* at the UCL Institute of Archaeology, 31–34 Gordon Square, London WC1, at **7.00 pm** on Thursday **19 May 2022**. We are currently planning to have a real meeting, but may have to move online, depending on circumstances.

Antonietta Lertz, a Senior Archaeologist with MOLA, will be speaking about ‘From riches to rags: 2,000 years of settlement at Landmark Court, Southwark’. The current excavations were only completed at the end of 2021, and this lecture will look at both the recent excavation as well as previous excavations on the site – see the facing page for further information.

A formal announcement will be made in the next (Spring) issue, but please add the date to your diary now (and keep an eye on our website for updates).

1. Available online at: <https://tinyurl.com/ueuzjbu>.

2. Available online at: socialvalue.stir.ac.uk.

3. Available online at: <https://tinyurl.com/4hpw3tpr>.

4. Available online at: <https://tinyurl.com/3xcbd8w8> [all accessed 13 October 2021].