

Other professions - Planners, public & profits

Ronan Toolis and Steve Carter make a plea for interpretation to be built into the conditions that drive commercial archaeology.

Sometimes, when caught at the bottom of a waterlogged trench in torrential rain, commercial archaeologists might ponder what the point of archaeology is. Will society at large be any better for what we do? Well it should be, because the fundamental justification for most commercially funded archaeological work in Scotland is public benefit. Society benefits from a greater understanding of its past, offering a sense of place and a perspective on the present and future. So, archaeological discoveries are wasted if we don't report them to the wider public as well as our peers. This is particularly true of archaeological excavations because excavation is a form of destruction; the only way of 'preserving' an excavated site is through disseminating the findings as widely as possible.

Archaeology has a long tradition of interpreting its findings to a wider audience, be it through specialist academic publications and lectures or more popular forms of public outreach, often devised by voluntary or not-for-profit organisations. This tradition still exists, but most archaeological work in Scotland today is undertaken by commercially-funded companies. Commercial archaeology is largely driven by planning conditions, not research or educational objectives. These planning conditions are imposed during the development control process because local authority planning policy recognises that the archaeological resource is a finite, non-renewable public asset. The underlying justification for commercial archaeology is the mitigation of development impacts for the public good.

A practical example of this policy is provided by the Braehead Iron Age Dig in Glasgow, undertaken by AOC Archaeology Group. The full excavation of the site was subject to planning permission, which required an element of public participation. An interpretation package was designed around the idea of changing interpretations of the site as the dig progressed. Visitors were guided by professional archaeologists from an introductory exhibition to vantage points around what was admittedly not the most visually appealing of sites. As new finds and information affecting the interpretation of the site were revealed, the exhibition and the dig website were updated, enabling visitors to trace the progress of the excavation from initial assumptions to new interpretations. Volunteers were also encouraged to participate in the excavation so members of the public could actually contribute towards the changing interpretation of the site.

However, Braehead is a rare example of interpreting archaeology to the public as a condition of planning consent. Planning conditions routinely require the production of academic publications, but these serve a tiny elite readership, and there is rarely a requirement for more public forms of dissemination. In general, local authorities have proved to be remarkably reluctant to follow through the logic of 'public benefits' and

ensure they materialise. An honourable exception to this picture in recent years has been the requirement from Highland Council for public presentation of the results of all significant archaeological projects.

Commercial archaeological organisations are, of necessity, focused on chargeable work. If interpretation for the wider public is not required of their clients, it is highly unlikely that such work will be funded. Examples of un-funded public interpretation work are widespread in the commercial sector, as CSA's Scottish Archaeology Month testifies, but these often rely on individual members of staff giving up their own time. The simple truth is that most archaeologists are still genuinely interested in their work; and like to tell other people about what they discover.

This ad hoc approach to providing interpretation of commercial archaeology, based on the circumstances of a particular development or the good will of individuals, is simply not an adequate approach to a significant public asset. The present planning system offers, in theory, a mechanism for funding significant levels of interpretation in archaeology but it is largely failing to deliver. Can we hope that the Scottish Executive's proposed modernisation of the planning system will change things for the better?

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Some writers thrive on the contact with the commerce of success; others are corrupted by it. Perhaps, like losing one's virginity, it is not as bad (or as good) as one feared it was going to be.

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