

COMMUNITY ARCHAEOLOGY: MORE QUESTIONS THAN ANSWERS

Author(s): Christine Baker

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## COMMUNITY ARCHAEOLOGY: MORE QUESTIONS THAN ANSWERS

Christine Baker examines its potential and its challenges.

Earlier this year I attended the open forum for Archaeology 2025 in the Royal Irish Academy. Community archaeology was much discussed and there appeared to be two particular strands of opinion in the room. For many, community archaeology is the answer. It will engage the public, who will in turn canvass local political support, which will translate into national policy, which will access funding, which will lead to more projects, and on we will go. For others, however, it meant dark muttering about ‘bandwagons’, and concerns about falling standards and threats to professionalism. For me, as someone with academic training and a commercial archaeology background and who has been involved in community-based and public archaeology in a local authority context for almost a decade, the potential for community archaeology is not without its challenges.

### What do we mean by community archaeology?

The definition is at best loose, as the term ‘community archaeology’ is often interchanged with ‘public archaeology’ and

can encompass building, geophysical, landscape and topographic surveys, oral history and school-based projects, graveyard restoration, archive research, heritage trails and signage, citizen scientist projects, field schools and summer camps. For some it is a construct of post-processualism, while for other it has its roots in nineteenth-century antiquarianism. In post-colonial countries community archaeology serves as a means to express a national identity or as a vehicle for indigenous rights. In an Irish context it is often cited as something in its infancy, something to which we are new. But again there are those who would argue that we have a strong tradition of community involvement in archaeology through our historical and archaeological societies and schemes such as the Employment Schemes of the 1930s, when excavations were carried out under the joint direction of the OPW and the National Museum of Ireland. The results of these were deemed ‘very satisfactory, both as regards relief of unemployment and from the scientific standpoint’, and have ‘yielded facts of value in the building up of the picture of the life and customs of Ireland in prehistoric and

less remote times’ (OPW Annual Reports, 1934–8). Prior to the emergence of fully fledged ‘rescue’ archaeology in Ireland in the 1980s, most major archaeological excavations were undertaken for research or conservation purposes, and whilst these, too, were led by professionals from the universities, the NMI or the OPW, the work crews very often included members of the local community working on FÁS schemes or as direct labour on RIA-funded excavations.

### Who does community archaeology?

There are numerous theoretical constructs and frameworks for community archaeology and as many arguments about definition, especially whether a project is truly ‘bottom up’ (community-led and designed) or is in fact ‘top down’ (professionally designed with community participation). The latter approach is often also termed ‘archaeological outreach’. Just as there is no one definition of what constitutes community archaeology,

Above: Enjoying the ‘Swords Castle: Digging History’ Fingal community archaeology project.



Left: Fin O'Carroll and Bairbre Mullee in the community garden at the Black Friary community excavation project, Trim.

Below: Sieving with the Resurrecting Monuments group, St Doulagh's Church, Co. Dublin.

archaeology experience routinely does not match expectations. This stems in part from the public perception of what archaeology is, but also from the profession's idea of what the community *should* want. In 2015 I undertook a public consultation over a six-week period to inform the writing of the Draft Fingal Community Archaeology Strategy 2015–2017. All but one of the 257 respondents wanted to see more community archaeology projects, the exception preferring a dog park. Awareness and interpretation, specifically in the form of heritage trails and signage, were the wish of almost a third of respondents, with over a quarter interested in archaeological-based options, including excavation, geophysical survey and field-walking. The remainder of the respondents plumped for tourism-based initiatives, family-based heritage activities and education days. Thus there is a demand for a diversity of projects, from digging to interpretation, across the community. Perhaps less to the profession's liking are the suggestions for metal-detector days and children digging 'real' sites!

A repeated request during the 'Swords Castle: Digging History' community excavation, and ever since, was to see the finds from the area exhibited locally. The sense of ownership generated by the

the motivations for doing it and who is doing it vary widely. For many small groups the focus is a single local monument and the impetus is to use it to draw tourists to their area; for others it is the sense of place, connecting their community to the past through an examination of their graveyards. For some it is about ownership of the archaeological process, a means of learning and training, while for others it is just something they've always wanted to try.

Within the archaeological profession there is an emergent hierarchy of what truly constitutes community archaeology and who can access it. Do the public open days on third-level-led digs constitute community archaeology in its truest sense, or might they be better characterised as exercises in direct dissemination to fulfil their corporate requirements? Are self-defining local groups who don't advertise their activities widely as much community archaeology as those that do? Can commercial companies ever successfully undertake community-based archaeology? Does it matter?

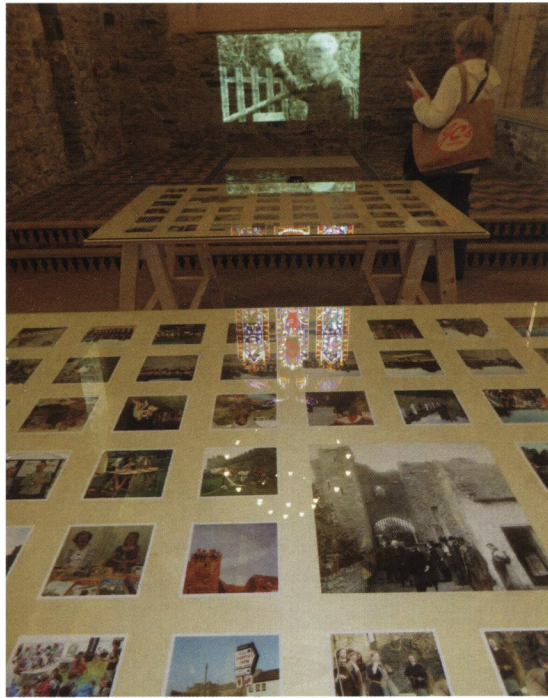
Within a legislative context which endeavours to protect and manage our archaeological resource by ensuring that archaeological excavations and related prospecting are undertaken in a scientific manner by qualified, authorised and experienced people, I would contend that our only viable and acceptable model is a partnership one. Unlike the amateur archaeology tradition of our nearest

neighbours, the conditions of our licensing system apply to the community dig as much as to any other. The legal responsibility belongs to the licence-holder. This does not, however, preclude non-professionals from having some input into the design and decision-making, which can result in interesting and rewarding partnerships between professionals and the community.

### What the people want?

That said, evaluations of community excavation projects in the US and UK have shown that the reality of the community





Left: The 'Swords Castle: My Castle' exhibition was a means of recording people's memories of the monument.

Below: 'The community' at Swords Castle.

undertaken in anything other than a community context. The project represents not only an investment in heritage by Fingal County Council but also an opportunity for public participation, community-building and inclusiveness, feeding into heritage-based tourism. Rather than taking from the profession, community archaeology can provide opportunities for archaeologists by creating demand for expertise through the need for geophysical survey, excavation, specialist reports, and interpretative, educational and heritage-based tourism products.

As for the volunteers themselves, their willingness to fund-raise for their sites and to promote awareness of their local heritage, and their readiness to share their time, take holidays from work, give up their weekends, work in the rain etc. in order to take part, demonstrate the enthusiasm that these community archaeology projects can generate. Neither can the diverse expertise brought to community projects by individuals be overlooked. A background in construction or survey is often invaluable; an enthusiasm for crafting can prove useful for finds-labelling; photography skills, organisational talents and the ability to get on with people are contributions to the

experience. Participants can engage at whatever level they feel suits them, be it research, surveying, digging, finds-processing etc., and receive practical training in archaeological techniques and information-sharing.

### Can we handle it?

The undertaking of community archaeology projects is not without its challenges. Getting a good fit between the community participants and the archaeologists is important: not every archaeologist is suited to the intensity of simultaneously training and guiding new diggers while maintaining professional standards and doing public outreach. Likewise, many communities may not be willing to acknowledge the constraints—legal, logistical or evidence-based—on their vision for 'their' monument.

Aside from the personality clashes that can arise in any group dynamic, some specific skills are required for volunteer management, especially in a public service context. An issue that I am aware of from personal experience, and also from liaising with other archaeologists involved in community archaeology projects, is how best to facilitate the full participation of people with learning difficulties or poor social skills, as well as those who may have mental health difficulties. Some participate as individuals, others as members of groups interested in experiencing archaeological excavations as a new means of outreach for their members.

community dig naturally extends to the artefacts unearthed by the participants, who wanted to be able to see 'their pottery' or 'their pin'. It is the clay pipe or the nineteenth-century lice comb or the glass bottle they unearthed that tangibly connects them to the past. Although the Collections Resources Centre is located minutes from the excavation site, and despite the National Museum's efforts in organising a 'Behind the Scenes Day' there for the community, and explanations of the legislation and conservation requirements, the demand to be able to see what has been found where it was found is undiminished and undoubtedly shared by communities throughout the country.

### Show me the money!

There are few sources of direct funding for community archaeology, although the Heritage Council supports community proposals that include geophysical survey and supports the piloting of a Community Archaeologist position in Fingal and the Adopt-a-Monument scheme nationally. Some members of the profession have voiced concerns about the rise of volunteerism within archaeology, but the idea that the volunteering element and community archaeological projects in general are displacing paid jobs that would otherwise be done by professionals is a fallacy. For instance, the community excavation at Swords Castle was funded directly by the local authority and would never have been





Above: **Employment Scheme excavations, Castleknock, 1938** (courtesy of the National Museum of Ireland).

While in the main successful (my own experience with this issue was positive), this can present complexities for the archaeological team who may feel ill-equipped to handle the additional responsibility. Archaeological excavations and other community archaeology events—even guided walks—are also public events which have health and safety requirements, not least the daily safety induction and the cost of public liability insurance. Working with under-eighteens and vulnerable adults can present insurance difficulties and requires Garda vetting and specific training. Again, with legal responsibility for the site resting with the archaeological licence-holder, training and support in these areas are necessary.

### Outputs

Besides the feel-good factor, what are we getting from community archaeology? Through the licensing process, like all other excavations, community archaeology has to be underpinned by a research agenda; results must be interpreted, specialists engaged and reports submitted. In Historic England's 2016 report *Assessing the value of community-generated historic environmental research*, an examination of 12,000 voluntary or community projects covering a vast range of topics and investigative techniques concluded that 'the research generated has significant value and largely untapped potential to enhance research resources', an indication of the potential value to our

heritage resource. It would be interesting to conduct a similar assessment in this country.

Unlike development-led surveys and excavations, for which commercial sensitivities are often cited as reasons why information is inaccessible, the nature of community excavation is completely open. Social media entries, such as daily blogs, tweets and pictures, school tours and outreach, which are often conditions placed on grants of funding, mean that we have much more access to the fact of their existence. The opportunities for dissemination—whether through leaflets, signage or other publications—are more likely to be built into the funding of community archaeology projects, and requests to speak locally or to feature in local media are much more frequent.

### The future

One of the benefits of community archaeology is the building of a constituency with an interest in heritage, but will it give heritage, and specifically archaeology, a voice, however many times we end up on *Nationwide* or the *6-1 News*? Can public interest translate into funding? As the economic cycle again shifts to development, will archaeologists turn their backs on the community for the lure of greater returns in the commercial sector? We have a diversity of

community archaeology models in this country, and studies such as *Evaluating the value of community archaeology* in Britain have concluded that community archaeology 'undeniably has value' despite being 'directly affected and even controlled by current political trends'. I don't think that we can, or should, roll back from encouraging citizens to engage directly with their archaeological past, but it is apparent that an evaluation of both research outputs and participation experience of community archaeology in Ireland is needed. A framework of support and training such as County or Community Archaeologists would increase access; specific training for archaeologists working in the community sphere is required. For all the expectations and concerns around community archaeology, its core value is that, while archaeology connects us with our past, community archaeology also connects us with each other. ■

### Acknowledgements

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### Further reading

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- Simpson, F. 2009 *Evaluating the value of community archaeology: the XArch Project*. *Treballs d'Arqueologia* 15, 51–62.