

## World Archaeological Congress 4

University of Cape Town

10th - 14th January 1999



### Symposium: A curse or a blessing in disguise: is CRM archaeology's future?

*Historical Archaeology and Cultural Resource Management in England: A Crisis*

Paul Courtney (Leicester, UK)

In the United States, the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966, notably section 106, and the Archaeological and Historical Preservation Act of 1974 brought an exemplary degree of legislative protection to archaeological remains on federal land in the United States, about 30% of the total land mass. It also ushered in the new era of commercial archaeology characterized by private firms of archaeological contractors and competitive tendering for contracts. Subsequent Federal requirements distinguished between prehistoric, historic and building recording and specified that those working on federally funded projects should have relevant academic qualifications and practical experience in the specific field. This stimulated the rapid growth in the number of both state and commercial posts available for historic archaeologists. In turn this demand encouraged universities to increasingly provide teaching in historical archaeology, hitherto a marginal subject. Commercial archaeology, whatever its failings, has thus had a marked influence on the growth of US historic archaeology.

In 1990 Britain went down a similar road towards commercial archaeology with the Department of the environment's Planning Policy Guidance Document 16, normally referred to as PPG16. This brought heralded a switch from public to developer funded archaeology. Unlike the US legislation PPG16 is only a guidance document can be rescinded by the government without reference to parliament. In theory PPG16 makes no distinction between private and publicly-owned land, applying equally to both. Local government bodies can, however, choose not to implement PPG16. Worryingly the recent decision by Leicestershire County Council to charge, without advance warning, its districts for archaeological planning advice has led to several of the districts refusing to implement PPG16 on the grounds of it not being a statutory regulation.

There are obviously many differences in practice with the US which result both from different planning laws, contrasting landscapes and different cultural histories. One difference is that in practice monitoring of planning applications is closely tied to the

records in county-based sites and monuments records. Prospective work for unknown sites does take place on large projects but is much less common and generally on a smaller-scale than in the US. This has particular implications for pastoral landscapes and aceramic periods where the majority of sites are as yet unknown. Monitoring of projects is undertaken by so-called curatorial archaeologists normally located in a local authority planning department, often at county council level. Variations in funding -provision have resulted in very widespread differences in provision. Counties like Essex and Northamptonshire with well-staffed archaeology offices are able to provide a wide range of services including research and education as well as elaborate site-specific briefs for PPG16 work and monitoring by experienced excavators. Other counties are less fortunate and are clearly stretched as is evident by the variable quality of their briefs (i.e. project specifications) and monitoring.

Contracting is undertaken by a wide range of outfits varying from large independent commercial units, units loosely attached to universities or museums as separate financial or business units and individuals competing for smaller contracts or sub-contracting. All of these bodies have to compete for contracts by undercutting their rivals. In the SE of England such competition is especially fierce. The curatorial or planning dept. archeologists have some control on minimum standards. However, these are difficult to enforce when reports may follow much later. The 'unsaid' reality is that fear of legal action prevents the actual banning of sub-standard contractors. Most commercial archeologists agree that the inevitable tendency to always accept the lowest bid has been to drive down standards of English archaeology since the 1980s. The new system also means that excavating units rarely have resources for research or public archaeology they were able to previously undertake with public funding. The bottom line for contractors is now to break even or go bankrupt and an increasing number of talented archaeologists are leaving, or trying to leave, unit management jobs due to the stress and lack of job satisfaction. The fact that they are contracted to developers has also introduced new pressures. Developers can potentially sue archaeologists for poor advice, over-running dead-lines or exceeding curatorial briefs.

On the plus side PPG16 brings in about 35 million pounds a year of developer money into archaeology. It has undoubtedly improved the consideration of archaeology in the planning process and resulted in better protection of archaeological sites. PPG16 has led to a marked decline in large-scale excavations especially in provincial towns. It has, however, led to more excavation in hither-to neglected areas like suburbs. The number and range of sites excavated has risen but there are fewer excavations of enough substance liable to push academic archaeology forward. The author recently examined the pottery excavated on about a dozen sites over a year by a small contracting unit. The work took a week and produced only one contaminated feature which pre-dated the 18<sup>th</sup> century and virtually all 18<sup>th</sup>-20<sup>th</sup> century contexts were highly residual. Certainly information from small-scale excavations is useable, the above-mentioned PPG16 ceramic work helped solve a problem over a 17<sup>th</sup> century trade route into mid-Wales. However, in general the resources for synthesizing the gray literature are not widely available and the problems of using such material require the most skilled and talented of professionals.

This paper seeks to principally address the impact of PPG16 on one area of English archaeology, the document-rich period since the Norman conquest (1066) to the present: i.e. the high and late medieval, post-medieval periods. The study of these

periods took off primarily with the growth of urban archaeology after World War II especially with the bombed sites of London. W.F. Grimes, Adrian Oswald and Ivor Noel Hume dug medieval and later layers which in former decades and in other towns would have been systematically cleared without recording. Another boost came in the 1950s with a nation-wide burst of interdisciplinary research on deserted villages headed by economic historian Maurice Beresford and government archeologist John Hurst. The study of these period really took off in the 1960s with the growth of permanent archaeological teams, initially urban-orientated, funded by a mixture of local and central government money. From the mid 1970s rural areas were also similarly covered by archaeological units and large-scale excavations in the 1970s and 1980s were often funded by money intended to train the unemployed. The practice of medieval and post-medieval archaeology, however, has always tended to be stronger in towns than in the countryside, where prehistoric remains are significant. Urban excavations produced large quantities of medieval and later finds and from the 1960s many of the specialist jobs produced were to work on these assemblages.

A major problem with the development of high medieval and post-medieval archaeology in Britain has been the reluctance of universities dominated by prehistorians and classicists to take onboard these periods. There has also perhaps been a tendency to denigrate indigenous 'folk culture', a tendency dating to the 19<sup>th</sup> century linkage between imperial Britain and the Classical world. England is one of the few countries in western Europe not to have a national folk museum. This has hampered research, theoretical development and meant that most medieval and post-medieval sites in Britain have been dug by archaeologists with no relevant academic period-training. This has tended to mean that these sites were often characterized by the production of technically competent monographs which were poorly integrated and weak on wider interpretation. The subject has been highly dependent on enthusiastic individuals learning the subject by working on large-scale projects and research in their own time.

One of the worrying features of post-PPG16 archaeology has been the loss of specialist posts such as documentary historians, finds specialists and eventually even finds co-ordinators. Such work is now increasingly done on a contract basis or by unskilled workers. The pressure of commercial work puts a premium on non-academic skills and allows little time for training. The lack of large-scale projects which is increasing as the 1970s and 1980s back-log sites are written up is also affecting on-the-job learning. This trend will affect many areas of archaeology but its impact on medieval and post-medieval archaeology given the lack of a strong university presence is particularly alarming. Meanwhile museums, long a source of specialists in this field, are increasingly becoming commercialized themselves and the "R" word (i.e. research) increasingly a 'dirty word'. Already some units are facing problems over acquiring workers with specialist academic skills. Recently one of our largest units approached English Heritage to seek help with training but was also forced to ask their medieval pot specialist to go free-lance. The situation could be devastating when the current generation of free-lance specialists who learnt their skills in previous decades retires. Meanwhile there are already signs of a growing split between commercial and academic archaeology with the latter looking increasingly abroad for projects or concentrating on purely 'theoretical' and 'social history' research.

There is probably no realistic alternative to developer funded archaeology in Britain. However, for it to succeed we need to move away from the situation where vested parties tell us how wonderful it is to addressing some of its problems. Commercial archaeology despite its success as a planning tool will not push archaeology forward academically. The best option is for the state sector to radically adapt its agenda, administrative and funding structure to take account of the commercial era. Training schemes and state-funded research projects, perhaps like the Discovering Ireland project could be considered.

However, such schemes need to complement and integrate the commercial sector rather than ignore it. English Heritage's current programme to fund assessments of urban archaeology in selected towns is an important step in the right direction. The recent suggested merger of the Royal Commission of Ancient and Historic Monuments and English Heritage, our two most important state bodies, calls for a more general radical rethink. British universities also need to be encouraged to teach more later medieval and post-medieval archaeology. The introduction of American period-based qualification system is perhaps less appropriate for Britain with our more complex periodisation and tendency to have multi-period sites. There is also a deep seated anti-intellectualism and distrust of academic qualifications in Britain alien to the USA. Nevertheless inadequate training has hampered the development of several areas of English archaeology and often given the public a poor return for its money in terms of informative, published reports which place the archeology adequately into local, never- mind regional, national or international, context. Too often millions has been spent showing that medieval towns, for example, have a lot of pottery and walls and not much else. To take no action will create a situation in 20 years time where serious medieval and post-medieval archaeology in England may become the exclusive domain of a few wealthy foreign universities.

#### Appendix

For more on the structure of commercial archaeology in Britain got to the selection of papers from the European Association of Archaeology proceedings from Santiago de Compostella 1995: <http://www.molas.org.uk/santiago.html>