

Response to Society of Antiquaries of London's Manifesto 'The Future of Archaeology in England'

My response to the Manifesto¹ is framed within my ongoing research project which focusses on public benefit from development-led archaeology,² but my views also reflect my personal work experience as a field archaeologist. The views expressed here do not represent the views of either my project partners or my employer.

The Principles in the SAL's Manifesto are all laudable and I don't disagree with any of them from a theoretical, broad perspective. Taking a more specific focus on the public benefit aspects a reread of the review of the Southport Report is illuminating in terms of how little fundamental sectoral change has been achieved, defined as partly due to a reluctance to commit to professionalisation.³ This speaks to a problem with leadership – that it requires us all to agree on a shared definition and purpose for archaeological study, something that is frankly impossible in my view and which might not help with outward facing work. Few of the professions we might align ourselves with (such as architect or engineer) matured as rapidly within a similarly reactive environment to ours and therefore their public benefit provision is simpler to articulate. We should all adhere to professional standards of course but I believe the commercial nature of development-led work means that we will only see significant improvements where there is purposeful action by pioneering individuals, backed up by regulation and advice. We operate in a deregulated market with reduced support from central or local Government, as shown by decreasing funding for the curatorial sector, a situation I don't think will be solved by creating regional hubs given the likelihood of cost-cutting being a priority. Efficiency rarely means the same provision for less money; it will mean changing what service can be provided to fit the available funding and I am not sure we are ready for that challenge.

My own career history in London can serve as a working case study for many of the recommendations put forward in the Manifesto: a World Record breaking archive, sustainable community projects such as the Thames Discovery Programme, several large, successful contracting organisations and a regional HER and curatorial service in the shape of HE's team at GLAAS, who work effectively with their equivalents in the City and Southwark. Yet London remains without a dynamic and accessible research agenda, synthesis of results is rare and the archive is creaking under pressures of funding. So what is the reason for this? Partly funding of course, but also partly habitual stasis. I believe that if a contractor starts a conversation with curator and client about synthetic publication of adjacent projects it can end positively. Likewise, a consultant might agree that large open areas are preferable to small trenches and work with the contractor and curator to persuade the client; or a curator will understand the value in using archaeology for innovative public benefit and ensure clients invest in this. On a local level these things do happen and have all happened to me. All these improvements require specific local knowledge which is also crucial if we are to facilitate meaningful public participation into our work.

We are still undecided as to whether we need a single voice to lobby for our sector, and if so – who it would be. Amongst the myriad groups that collaborate with SAL (or have SAL reps on their committees) are The Archaeological Forum, The Heritage Alliance, The Historic Environment Forum, Heritage 2020, ClfA, FAME, ALGAO, Rescue and the CBA. Although these all have slightly different remits they all assume a leadership position. There is a focus on internal politics which can lead to

¹ Society of Antiquaries of London, 2020, The Future of Archaeology in England: A Manifesto.

² <https://www.mola.org.uk/archaeology-and-public-benefit-ukri-future-leaders-fellowship>

³ Nixon, T, 2017, What about Southport? A report to ClfA on progress against the vision and recommendations of the Southport Report (2011), undertaken as part of the 21st-century challenges in archaeology project

inertia and without inviting external views it will always be difficult to make changes that will be viewed positively by all constituents. This speaks to the need for inclusive consultation, an ongoing challenge for those in leadership roles. When enabled through a subversion of the usual channels of communication a new type of authority can be achieved, one which is based on negotiation, if not always on consensus.

The social media discussions that ensued after the publication of the Manifesto suggested a degree of disquiet, both with the content and format of the consultation. This has reduced the potential impact of the Manifesto and set any progressive actions up for criticism and rejection, as those who feel excluded or disregarded are more likely to complain than to contribute. In cases like this, the great majority of archaeological practitioners have not been consulted and although they are free to respond to the Manifesto few will, given its framing as a document produced by senior members of the profession. Formulating a response that may be negative or disagreeable is more difficult when you are in a position of little power or influence, and so the same circle turns again.

From my perspective as a field practitioner I must take issue with a misunderstanding in the Manifesto of the degree of dynamism in the contracting sector. This is not to say it is without its fundamental problems but my own concerns of destructive workforce models (eg short-termism, reactive business models) are not raised in this document, despite being in the Southport review. Contracting organisations regularly collaborate on large projects, sharing our skills and knowledge, although admittedly these tend to be inward looking, and any meaningful consideration of how to improve public benefit is debateable. I can't fault the criticism of lack of synthesis, which is rightly viewed as a failure of my generation and those who came earlier. There is a need to collaborate more closely with the academic sector although we should ask why the successful examples of synthesis have not been widely replicated since. I don't anticipate the academic sector having capacity to instigate collaborative research. Perhaps SAL could provide this, acting as a research hub for new projects and bringing our disparate strands together.

I would take slight issue with the assertion that it is the *structure* of British archaeology that has resulted in less public benefit provision than we would hope. This ducks responsibility and I see the issue more as being one of expectation and assumption: that we expect people to be interested in what we report and that we consistently assume other things are responsible for our own lacking (the *structure* here could also be the *client*, or perhaps the *skills shortage* which is a problem of retention not recruitment).

Ultimately I think we need to better understand what our public benefit should be. It is unlikely that that will be illuminated by archaeologists themselves. Crucially, we really shouldn't just engage with people who want to be 'engaged with', this is a complete repudiation of responsibility and in my view perpetuates exclusionary practice. For this reason I also find the onus placed on research in the Manifesto to be somewhat old-fashioned when archaeology has the potential to provide far more than just knowledge.

Lastly, I would urge archaeologists, whether in leadership roles or not, to respond to the suggestions in the Manifesto.

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