Archaeology's crossroad; working together or striding apart

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In this climate of stringent cuts and quantifiable values, where can we as archaeologists find a foothold on an increasingly steep and slippery professional slope? Discovery and research should be fundamental to our profession alongside public inclusion and dissemination of knowledge, yet we only have a vague understanding of what we produce, why we produce it and who it is produced for.

In Martin Carver's editorial in *Antiquity* (December 2010), he contends that our currency is knowledge which holds equal value with the output of any other profession. By increasingly bowing to commercialism we risk losing touch with that value. Knowledge is no longer our official currency: at best it represents the loose change rattling around in our pockets, and accepting mitigation archaeology and preservation *in situ* as methodologies for managing the archaeological resource ensures a lack of progress and decline in data and information. This will have devastating consequences for the future of archaeology as a whole. When market forces rule our lives we get sucked into the vortex, and while the cut-and-thrust of the commercial world may be good for some industries it does not sit well with archaeology.

Discovery, by its very nature, deals with the unknown and it is this square peg that can never fit comfortably into the round hole of the timetable or spreadsheet that underpins the commercial world. Inevitably, mitigation archaeology results in discovery becoming a problem, a piece of temporal contamination that needs to be either avoided or removed within increasingly short timetables.

In an attempt to protect our position we invent phrases such as 'the historic environment', 'preservation *in situ*' and 'mitigation strategies', which allow us to exist in our increasingly self-important and self-referencing little world. We make ourselves 'relevant' to economic forces but lose touch with those who most benefit from archaeological discovery, and with a few notable exceptions, archaeology does not feel that it needs to

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communicate with the public in anything other than the most cursory manner.

What we do not need or want is archaeology to become the sole preserve of the commercial unit or — just as frightening — carried out by a detached academic clique. Archaeology needs to be truly inclusive and non-elitist, for does it not deal with the fundamentals of who we all are? If we accept that society as a whole obtains clear benefits from the pursuit of knowledge, why is it that we have a desire to prevent the public from taking part in all but the most corralled of circumstances?

There are those who would like archaeology only to be carried out by professionals, with bars to entry and tighter regulation. However, I would fight for increased public participation in conjunction with — rather than at the expense of — 'professional' archaeologists, because if the public loses interest in its past due to marginalisation, who will be left to speak up for archaeology when bulldozers and concrete literally obliterate our past?

The simple truth is that more public participation means more professionals, and more investigations leads to new knowledge, the real riches that archaeology has to share.

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