Teaching the next generation - archaeology for children

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Introduction

Archaeology is no longer a discipline solely for academics; instead it is a subject worthy of interest to even the youngest minds. Archaeology has been used as the primary educational tool in exciting and involving children in their local heritage and cultural issues in and around Adelaide, South Australia. Over the past two years 1222 school children aged between seven and fourteen have been directly involved in a number of 'hands on' historical archaeology projects. In addition to conscientious classroom study, it has become apparent that children can perform the most diligent on-site excavation work, providing contextual information that equals that from most undergraduate archaeology students.

Schools archaeology

Schools archaeology concerns the education of children regarding the methods, theories and practices of archaeology. Whilst many children will have encountered archaeology through television or a weekend trip, few will have experienced the joy of excavation and finding artefacts untouched for many hundreds of years.

Establishment of a schools programme requires a number of fundamental basics: an archaeological site, school children and a small team of archaeologists willing to develop educational material concerning the history and material culture relative to the study site. With the minimum of expenditure it is possible to deliver a complete package that describes modern archaeology, site selection, excavation techniques, as well as artefact recovery and processing. Following these basic guidelines three schools programmes were implemented by the authors at Fern Avenue, Burra and Brighton.

Fern Avenue Community Gardens Archaeology Project

Fern Avenue was a complete Public Archaeology programme investigating an historic Adelaide Jam Factory (Owen and Steele 2000a; 2002). Collaboration between the authors, The Unley Council and Alternative 3 Inc (land managers) saw 583 local children, aged 7-14, learn the archaeological basics. In school the children were presented with interpretative material, relating to artefacts excavated from the site. This material encouraged the children to understand the associations between human interaction, artefact and site. In the field children followed an archaeological trail around the gardens, identifying site features and structures visible in trenches. Excavation under heavily controlled conditions with experienced archaeologists (graduate level), allowed the children to recover artefacts and process them accordingly. A reference collection enabled sorting and drawing of previously catalogued artefacts, teaching the children about preservation and the various materials recovered on site. The project was awarded a Community Grant for development of the schools programme, allowing the publication of an archaeology book for children (Owen and Steele 2001).

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Figure 1. *Burra Community Archaeology Programme - in school teaching. Children are introduced to archaeological basics, whilst their class teacher oversees their activities.*



Figure 2. *Burra Community Archaeology Programme - in school, small groups create an intense learning experience for children.*



Figure 3. *Burra Community Archaeology Programme - showing the on-site set up. In the background children excavate under controlled conditions, whilst in the foreground children draw and process artefacts.*

Burra Community Archaeology Programme

Archaeological investigation in Burra focused on nineteenth century miners' dugout housing, the PhD research of Peter Birt (Flinders University). Invitation for the schools programme came directly from the local community (Owen and Steele 2000b). The project presented a new challenge, as the large landscape site in Burra provided no identifiable structural features. The in-schools activities focused on creating a picture of the miners' lives over 150 years ago. On-site the children excavated in an area with a high artefact density, drew recovered artefacts, and participated in a field-walk discovering further dugout homes and surface artefacts. The activities created an image of the hardships and crowded living conditions faced by the miners and their families during the 1850s.

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Figure 4. *Burra Community Archaeology Programme - explaining how sites are recorded, in this case using the total station.*

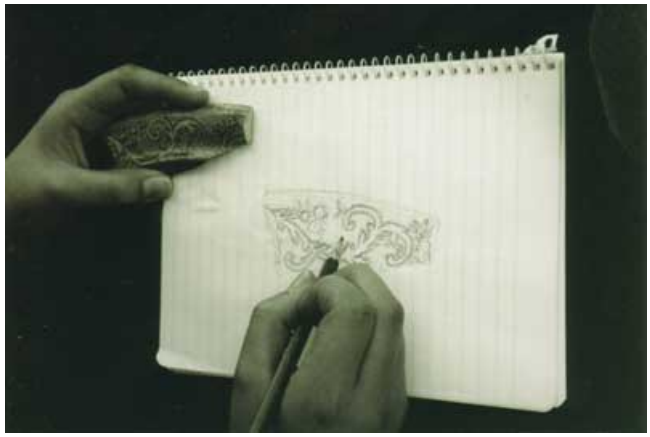


Figure 5. *Burra Community Archaeology Programme - an example of the high standard of archaeological illustration of which children are capable.*

Brighton Smugglers Tunnel

The Brighton project was instigated by the Holdfast Bay Historical Society to discover a 1860s Smugglers Tunnel in suburban Adelaide. As the extent of archaeological activity involved surface and geophysical survey, the project taught 246 children using entirely non-intrusive techniques. Whilst classroom teaching provided the archaeological background, the interest of the children on-site was maintained through a number of 'hands-on' activities, echoing from the professional work. The children were asked to plan and survey the site, examine historical and modern aerial photographs and documents and identify historically significant buildings. Drawing results from all the activities together, the children were asked to identify the path of the tunnel beneath the ground.

Conclusions

Schools archaeology is a very rewarding technique that can easily draw a local community into an archaeology project. This may open up many alternative avenues for project funding and support in kind. The creation of a schools programme should be considered a fundamental component of most public archaeology programmes and material should be developed from a project's inception.

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