

## **Interview with Dr. Geoffrey Wainwright, Chief Archaeologist at English Heritage**

**Could you explain to us your exact role within the English Heritage structure?**

I'm what's called Chief Archaeologist, which comes down in line from General Pitt Rivers, who held the first job in 1892. My job, really, is to act as head of profession for archaeologists within English Heritage (there are about 150 archaeologists employed by English Heritage) and to define archaeological policy for English Heritage - which, as we are the statutory advisors to the Government and local government on all matters to do with heritage, is quite a job.

**Do you see English Heritage as a cohesive organization, given the competing elements within it?**

Yes, we are pulled together through our mission statement and through the corporate plan, so we are all working towards common goals, and those common goals are, essentially, to ensure the conservation and good management of the heritage, and to ensure the public enjoyment of it. That is really, in a nutshell, our mission statement. It's what's laid down in the Heritage Act which set us up in 1984.

**Have you any comments about the way the organization has developed since Sir Jocelyn Stevens became head?**

Well, one of the first things that Sir Jocelyn did was to develop a strategy for us, to show the way forward over the next five years, and that was a super thing to do. He is immensely committed to the heritage. I've never met anyone with more commitment, and I can safely say that I've never met anyone who pursues that commitment with more vigour. Altogether he's been an excellent thing for the organization and has given drive and purpose to it.

**His role in the latest budget debate surely was quite critical. As it was reported, you were threatened with quite substantial budget cuts, until he made a quite dramatic and public stand against it.**

Yes, that's right. That's good.

**Do you feel that the present system of competitive tendering for archaeological projects is necessarily the result of policies formulated centrally some ten years ago?**

I think we need to look at that in a much broader context. When I first came into this job in 1980, if anything went wrong in the archaeology profession people looked to us (we were then part of the old Ministry of Works, the Department of the Environment of that time) to put it right. And that's a very unhealthy thing, because instead of thinking constructively for itself, the profession just turned around and gave us a good kick. I was very determined in 1980 to put that right. Since then, over the next ten years, we've worked to bring the subject into the planning system and into the broader conservation movement in the country. So that in 1990 this culminated in the production of PPG16 and Archaeology and Planning. One of the offshoots of that has been that archaeological matters are now fully considered in the planning process. Secondly, that if developers wish to destroy a site, they have to pay for its recording. But first of all the case for that archaeological site being preserved is fully considered, and that's a good thing. The spin-off from that - and now I come to your question - is that from being a rather monolithic organization, the profession has split into different sectors, as it does in most professions. So you have contractors, who undertake archaeological work for developers. You have what are called curators, who say what has to be done to protect archaeological sites and what has to be done to record them; and you have consultants, who advise developers. Everybody needs consultants. So I think it's been an entirely healthy thing. But growing up, which is what the profession is doing, is a very painful process, and you'll get a few squeaks on the way.

**Particularly in the transitional period, before PPG16, was fully implemented?**

That was an interesting time, yes. We were developing the policies which are now embodied in PPG16 for about five years before PPG16 was actually published. There were major problems in York, in Winchester - in a lot of major historic cities - where sites were being destroyed because planning authorities were not using the powers which had been given to them to protect those archaeological sites. And what we got away from during that period was the knee-jerk reaction that if an important archaeological site was to be destroyed, the most cerebral reaction to that was to ask English Heritage for a grant. And that was just about the thickest thing that one could do. We have now got away from that, and I'm delighted that we have.

**At Heybridge, PPG16 wasn't in force when the developers had permission granted to build their new town. Consequently EH stepped into the breach and a substantial percentage of your archaeological budget for a couple of years was devoted to that end. Would you see that purely as a short-term weakness?**

Yes. It's just something that we have to shoulder. I'm told the system has worked its way through. We're still getting pre-PPG16 planning applications which haven't got the right conditions attached, and we have to take a view on whether we're going to fund that work or not. But the main impact of PPG16 has been towards the protection of archaeological sites.

**Do you think that competitive tendering has led to a drop in standards in archaeology, and in pay and conditions for staff?**

I'm really not in a good position to answer the first part of that question, because the standards are really set by the curators, and the curators are on the whole the archaeologists employed by local authorities. Now, if standards have dropped, it's because the briefs which are given to contractors are not sufficiently thought through. As far as the career structure is concerned, I'm quite prepared to accept that it is deficient.

**Is there one?**

Well, there may be one within archaeological contractors. There is certainly one within the profession at large. In other words, one can take a decision as to whether one wants to go into consultancy, whether one wants to go into the curatorial work, either in local authorities, or in English Heritage, or the National Trust. There are now jobs being created increasingly in planning consultancies and developing firms. It's perhaps within the contractors themselves that career structures are not too good. I mean, that's up to them. They have to pay their staff what they think the market will take, and on the whole I think they do their best. But within the profession at large I think there's much more scope for diversification.

**What about the effect of tendering on local units, which may well know their local area a great deal better, but be undercut by much more commercial units coming in from outside?**

I'm not sure I understand the question. Are you saying that it's good for archaeological contractors to have a particular area in which they operate?

**It might lead to a greater knowledge of what is on the ground, and a more detailed knowledge of the area.**

Yes, I accept that. But it's part of the price one has to pay for a profession growing up. If they're any good, they'll beat off competition.

**When it comes to the contracting process, apart from the criterion of cost, what other determinants are there to decide which unit should get which contract?**

You really ought to be addressing this question to those people who actually set the briefs. It's they who determine what archaeology is done. And it's up to the clients - that is, the developers - to decide who does it. How clients choose their preferred contractor is a matter for them, and I have no idea how they do it.

**It would be quite easy to envisage the situation where they would simply take the lowest bid.**

It would be, but there's no evidence that that's happened. The client has to meet the demands placed on them by the local planning authority. Believe me, they know well enough that if somebody puts in a very low bid, they smell a rat.

**What about the effect of this contracting system on amateur societies? After all, one of the strengths of archaeology in this country for the past two hundred years has been its amateur element.**

That's absolutely right.

**Is there not a danger that they may get squeezed out?**

Not at all. I don't recognise that problem at all. Amateur societies on the whole have always done what they wanted to do. The ones to which I belong have always had their own projects which they wish to pursue. They haven't been involved particularly in rescue archaeology, and there's absolutely nothing to prevent them developing their own projects. I don't see the problem.

**Concerning London, what is your opinion of the crisis facing MoLAS, whose site archive has already closed. The Passmore Edwards unit is also closing down.**

In my long experience of MoLAS it's been in a permanent state of crisis. It's always survived.

**Would you agree with the suggestion that archaeology is now basically developer-led with EH's priorities shifting away from the funding of purely research-based excavation? Do you feel that perhaps it is the universities' role to fund excavations of this nature?**

Not at all. There are a lot of issues in that question. To begin with, you can't equate research with excavation. Also, there are still a number of opportunities for research excavation in this country. In the old days, the sixties and seventies, a number of people, including myself, derived a great deal of pleasure and enjoyment from big digs. Unfortunately, a number of them have never been published. And we've got away from that, thank goodness.

I think also you need a clearer view of our particular role in this new world. When PPG16 was published, it was fairly clear to me that it would have been possible for someone in authority to come along and say, 'OK, Wainwright, you don't need an archaeology budget any more because you're not funding rescue digs.' And we've

moved the trajectory of our funding away from funding rescue excavation into the research which is necessary to pull that developer-funded work together. And that is what we do at the moment. We publish an annual account of that in *Archaeology Review*. It's also on the Internet. So if you're saying to me that we've turned our back on research, I would say that's a lot of nonsense.

**Is it a synthetic approach you're adopting, as opposed to a new archaeological approach? Are we now moving away from excavation-based research strategies?**

Not at all. The amount of interventions which are funded by developers has gone up from about a thousand in 1990 to about three thousand in 1994. There is a huge potential research base there for anybody who wishes to examine the material. Our job is to make sure that people know what's being done through developer funding, to know where they can find it and to provide the research base which enables that work to take place - and which enables the developer's work to take place aswell. Our strategy for this was published in 1991.

I ought to point out that at least three of the articles in the most recent number of the *Proceedings of the Prehistoric Society* were developer-funded projects. I've just received today a volume today from Essex County Council on a very important medieval settlement which was entirely developer-funded from beginning to end.

**The general line concerning research excavations is that even very important sites should be left untouched until standards of excavation and recovery have reached a proper level. Who is going to decide when these standards have reached a proper level?**

It is a serious issue, but it comes back to sustainability. Archaeological sites are a diminishing resource. If we just dig every site when it's threatened by developers, it's good fun for us but it's not too good for the future. And I think it's quite right that the local authority archaeologists should take a view on what should be preserved for the future. Of course, that begs the question of what we're preserving them for. I think it's quite reasonable to anticipate that future generations will have better techniques than we have at the moment, therefore it might be better to explore them in the future. Or, indeed, it might be better just to leave them there. But it's not a black and white policy, as we've shown in the excavation we've funded through UCL at Boxgrove, which hasn't been threatened for the last two years. We've continued funding it because it's a good research excavation, and we couldn't turn our back on it.

**Do you think that English Heritage has a particular role to play in ensuring that archaeologists publish their excavations?**

Yes, we do our best, but you can bring a horse to water but you can't make it drink. We do it by example, by exhortation. It's a general principle within the profession.

**There exist a number of links between the Institute and English Heritage in terms of research funding. Would you like to see such links expand, and, if so, what policies would you like to see the Institute adopt to encourage such expansion?**

We do through our funding encourage other organizations, such as the Institute, to undertake work on our behalf, and we have a number of posts at the Institute which do this. There are certain areas of work which are clearly going to need expansion in the future. One of those is dendrochronology, because of the building recording work which is now going on. I haven't mentioned PPG15, which enables the curators to ask for the recording of buildings, but that's now beginning to bite very well. I would like to see the universities moving much more into synthetic work, but not necessarily, of course, relying on the funds which we give them. We give about a million pounds a year to universities to enable them to do this work.

**What is your attitude towards theoretical archaeology? In the past there has been insufficient grounding for students in this, but there now seems to have developed an industry of theoretical archaeology. What are your thoughts on this?**

It is extraordinarily difficult to get theoretical concepts embedded in the work which we fund, and it's not through lack of asking people to contribute, because we do. We are about to issue a new agenda for ourselves, because it is six years since we published *Exploring our Past*, which was our agenda for the next five or six years. We've revised that, we're about to issue it for consultation, and I do hope that people will respond to that and put the theoretical concepts into it which perhaps it will lack.

**What do you think is the most important challenge facing EH over the next ten years?**

I think probably the advent of Lottery funding is going to change the way we work a great deal because the amount of money which we can put into building repair work in particular, as well as archaeology, is minuscule compared to the amount of funds which are available from the Lottery. We're already advising the Lottery on the grants which they give and I can see that increasing in the future. I think probably EH will be unrecognisable in about two or three years' time. I think that is a good challenge. In general terms, it's really working with others. It's working with the Lottery, it's working with NERC, it's working with other organisations to establish common goals. No one organisation is now able to cope with all the challenges which are facing us in the conservation world.

**Do you think that ethically there's something questionable about about relying on Lottery funding as a substitute for direct governmental contribution via increasing the EH budget?**

I'll rely on the assurances that were given when the Lottery was established, that it won't impinge on core funding. This is the whole principle of additionality.

**Do you believe that?**

Yes, of course I do. I always believe what I'm told by politicians, particularly when they say it in public. As long as it doesn't impinge on the core funding which we receive from central government, I'm quite content.

**In what direction do you see the future of archaeology lying in the long term?**

I think it's in a very healthy state, because we're growing up as a profession. As I said earlier, there are growing pains whenever you're growing up; but it's better, I think, to be part of the broad conservation movement than being a pressure group on the periphery, which we were before. Now we are regarded, quite properly, as a material factor in development decisions which are taken. The 'the polluter pays' principle has been firmly established. I think, given confidence within the profession, then we'll do well.

**What's your opinion of the proliferation of the 'heritage industry'? Do you think there have been too many museums and heritage centres opened recently?**

I think the market place is showing us there are, because they're having big problems at the moment. Part of the problem, of course, is Lottery funding, which has partly given rise to this. They cover the capital costs of a visitor centre but they don't cover the costs of running it. So there have been quite a few kites flown which are not going to do too well in the future. But if you look at the tourist figures and the aspirations of tourists, then heritage tourism is a big thing as far as this country is concerned. So there is a good future there, but I don't think tourists will take to any crap.

**What do you think of more popularly-aimed projects like Jorvik at York?**

As a profession, and I come across this every day, we have been very bad at putting the importance and interests of our profession across, both to the public and, indeed, to officialdom. Anything which improves that has got my full support. I enjoy Jorvik, I enjoy what they've done at Canterbury. If the public like it, that's fine. I've no personal animus against it.

**There is a distinction between interest in and knowledge of. For example, the Archéodrome in Burgundy does seem to be raising interest rather than raising understanding.**

That's fine. I've absolutely no objection to that at all. I think there is a danger in the implications of what you say that the profession would be transferred to an élitist ghetto. If things arouse interest, that's fine.

**Do you regard your job as being one which cloisters you in an ivory tower? Do you really feel that in your senior position at EH you are still in touch with the expectations, hopes and indeed fears of local archaeologists?**

No, I don't. It is extraordinarily difficult for me to get around and to talk to people as much as I used to or would like to do. I also find it extraordinarily difficult to get people to talk to me, on the other hand. I notice they usually run a mile when they see me walk into the room. I'm prepared to accept that as a criticism. On the other hand, I do rely on my colleagues, who do still go around and hopefully are in touch with the grass-roots, to transmit those feelings to me. I read avidly, of course, the pressure press - *British Archaeology*, *Rescue News* - and this gives me a feel for it. Believe me, I'm not short of advice. But you're quite right, I'm not as in touch with grass-roots views as I would like to be.

**From a personal perspective, are there any specific achievements with which you are particularly pleased?**

I'm particularly pleased with the fieldwork I did in my early days. I enjoyed it and I do feel it's made a contribution to our knowledge of the subject. In more recent years, I suppose I'm particularly pleased with my role in bringing the subject into the late twentieth century. Previously it was hanging around, as I said earlier, as a little élitist subgroup somewhere on the fringes of real life, and now it is there as a central issue. That's why you get so much press about it. If you mention Shakespearean theatre in London, if you mention human origins, if you mention Stonehenge, then it hits the press. People are interested. It's a central subject in public life and I'm very pleased about that. And I'm very pleased with the small contribution I've been able to make to that.

**Do you think that in the past the development of archaeology was patronage-based?**

It was hobby-based, really. There's nothing wrong with that. I think perhaps sometimes that some of my more senior colleagues would like just to return to the hobby base for the profession - something which was done out of pure interest, in one's spare time, a nice thing to do. But things have changed, things have moved on, and we can't turn the clock back.



**Have you any particular memories of your time at the Institute?**

I have very clear memories of the Institute. I have very clear memories of the lounge in the basement, which I don't think has changed since I first went there in 1958. When I walk in there, I'm in a time warp, it takes me back. I think one of the biggest changes which Peter Ucko has made is taking the director's office from the ground floor to the second floor. Whenever I walk past that window, I look in and expect to see Professor Grimes or John Evans or whoever it may have been in there. I miss that.

But I have got very happy memories of the Institute. When I was interviewed by Grimes to be accepted as a doctorate student (because I took my first degree at Cardiff), he said to me, 'Yes, we'll take you. Now we'll start teaching you something.' And it was perfectly true. Some of my happiest memories are working with Frederick Zeuner, who taught me a great deal about multidisciplinary archaeology. My first published paper, in fact, was not on straight archaeology. It was on a study of soils which I'd done, which were under the Nutbane Long Barrow. So when people query my credentials as an environmental archaeologist, then I quote that paper.

**Do you have any pressing objectives which you would like to attain in your remaining time at English Heritage?**

Yes. They are narrowing down, as you can imagine. One is to create a proper solution for Stonehenge. It has become almost an obsession, and we must get a proper solution there. Apart from that, I just want to leave a nice, clean desk for my successor. There are various things which have to be sorted out, like a future agenda, but I'm quite content at the moment.

**How far off would you see a Stonehenge solution, given that there has been movement from other governmental departments?**

We are determined at the moment to get a solution in place by 2000.

**Have you made plans for a busy retirement, in archaeological terms at least?**

No, I haven't. I'm from a small village in Pembrokeshire and I just want to go back, really, get my head together, and decide what I want to do. I've no particular ambitions beyond when I leave EH. In fact, I've got no plans. For someone who's notorious for making plans for other people, I've got no plans for myself.

Interview conducted by Gwyn Davies, Ron Farquhar and Laura Preston on 25 March 1997.