

INTERVIEW

Interview with Mike Pitts Editor of *British Archaeology*

Interview conducted by Hilary Orange and Andrew Shapland on 13th June 2007



After studying at the Institute of Archaeology Mike Pitts, by a circuitous route, became editor of *British Archaeology* in 2003. In the intervening time he was curator of the Alexander Keiller Museum at Avebury, before opening a restaurant called Stones, also in Avebury. More recently he wrote *Fairweather Eden* (Pitts & Roberts 1997/8) on the discoveries at Boxgrove and *Hengeworld* (2000/1) about Stonehenge and Avebury. He has been a regular contributor to print journalism, radio (including a historic drama on Radio 4) and television, and briefly edited *Current Archaeology* before taking up his current post.

AS: You studied at the Institute...

MP: Yes, I did my first degree at the Institute and graduated in 1975. I then got a state studentship which paid for me to do a PhD. I was looking at Neolithic axes: I was really interested in lithics and I still am. I liked the technology of it. I find it fascinating that there is this really sophisticated technology that was originated by a species other than our own. Handaxes are incredibly sophisticated things in terms of the technology to make them, but they weren't made by modern humans: they were made by an earlier hominin species. In most of the writing about the evolution of the human mind people do not appreciate just how complicated and sophisticated the process of making of a handaxe is, the amount of mental skill required to do that.

I was travelling around the British Isles. I'd worked in virtually every museum in Britain that has a prehistory collection – but what I didn't do was finish the PhD. It was in those days when supervision for postgraduate work was almost non-existent. I didn't really know what I was doing and there was no pressure: it was the same for a lot of contemporary students. I had a sort of unworkable subject really, and I just drifted on and after 3 years the grants ran out and I hadn't begun to write a PhD. I'd done masses of research and had tons of data, but it wasn't going anywhere. I was more interested in other stuff.

I'd get into these museums, and the thing that interested me was the state of them. Most of them had not been modernised and so there were these wonderful old collections full of dust, old boxes, and curators who often didn't know what was in their collections, grossly under-resourced museums. There were always manuscripts, excavation mate-

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rial from the 1920s and 30s or the 19th century and a lot of weird things: stuffed animals and paintings, wonderful art. So this PhD never got written, and then I needed to apply for a job. What I wanted to do was teach in a university, but I ended up doing something which I wasn't expecting to, which was to be curator of the museum at Avebury.

AS: So how did you become editor of *British Archaeology*?

Well what happened was: I was curator of the museum for exactly 5 years from 1st April 1979 – 1st April 1984. I took the job, moved down to Wiltshire from London, and had a good time, I enjoyed it. It was difficult because I was technically part of what was then the Ancient Monuments Inspectorate, but would now be English Heritage. It was a government department so I had to sign the Official Secrets Act as a civil servant to be this museum curator. I was out there in Wiltshire, and very rarely saw anybody from London, so increasingly what I did was get involved with the museum and Avebury, and the community and the history of the place. It was very interesting: but at the same time I was still applying for university jobs, and after a year or two it was clear that I wasn't going to get any. All my archaeological friends and colleagues were at university, and I was very excited, like we all were, about the New Archaeology. I can remember hearing that David Clarke had just died and stuff like that. I thought *Analytical Archaeology* was brilliant. And so when I move out to Avebury I physically leave this university world behind.

So I'm out there in Wiltshire, in this tiny little museum, which has its own very peculiar history. And what happened is it had a custodian who dealt with the public, who was on the ground floor. If you've been to the museum at Avebury it's absolutely minute. The public space is just one room and behind that there's a little room where the custodian sits and makes tea. And above that is a curator's office and a store. The custodian, Peter Tate, was a very extrovert, sociable, man. He wanted to do the best for the people who came to visit the museum, which at that time included very large numbers of schoolchildren. As soon as the Curriculum came in the coachloads of schoolkids virtually dried up, because Avebury isn't in the Curriculum. Large numbers of kids used to come to the museum and he liked to entertain them. The museum display was just a bunch of flint and bones with little labels underneath, so every so often Peter would march upstairs and say: "Mike, can you tell me what this is?" And sometimes he'd ask me to come down and talk to these kids. Gradually I got drawn into a different world.

There's something about the monastic atmosphere at universities which I really like but at the same time there's another side of me which just likes having a good time, which enjoys travelling and company and theatre and music. When I came out to Wiltshire I realised that there was more to life than university. I found working at the museum that I was becoming frustrated, because I could see that there was this huge public out there who were as interested in the archaeology of Avebury as I was, but nobody was talking to them. The official guidebook was incredibly dry and admonishing, and every so often there was a sentence which made you feel that you had no right to be there at all, or to have your own ideas about what was going on in the past. And the museum display was undoubtedly aimed at other archaeologists. The numbers coming into the museum

were growing and, as I said, there was a huge component of schoolkids and most of the exhibits meant nothing to these kids, and neither did the guidebook. The salvation for the children was Peter Tate, who was absolutely wonderful, and would make up stories, and I came to think that it doesn't matter if what he says about the people who built the stone circle was complete fancy, totally out of his imagination. He would give characters names and tell anecdotes about people out in the stones, but the kids loved it, and they engaged with it and it drew them in. It meant something to them.

There wasn't such a thing really as public archaeology then, certainly not in the way that we now think of it, and still less was there any kind of way you could think: "I might be able to earn a living out of being a public archaeologist". And then along comes this news that Margaret Thatcher is going to hive off Ancient Monuments into a separate department which was going to be known as the Royal Commission on the Historical Monuments of England, which was eventually branded as English Heritage. It would still be grant-aided from central government but the staff would no longer be civil servants. We all had to sign this bit of paper saying that we would like to transfer, but there was a box where you could tick that said: "No, I don't want to transfer". And if you ticked that box, they had to find you an equivalent job within the civil service. But if they couldn't find one then they made you redundant, which would mean you'd get a pay-off and you'd be let loose. I gambled that there was no way they'd be able to find an equivalent job to the curator of the only museum the government actually had.

In the meantime, as this moment was approaching, here I was in this office of this little museum, and across the yard there was a bigger museum which was known as the 'Great Barn'. It had been opened by a local charity called the Wiltshire Folk Life Society, and the buildings were owned by The National Trust. I don't know exactly how it came about but the Wiltshire Folk Life Society had signed a lease with them, restored the barn, then filled it with stuffed sheep and old farm implements and had this little tea room. They weren't really any good at either of those things: they couldn't really run a museum, but they were better at that than running a tea room, which was a complete disaster. My wife had finished her PhD, and this English Heritage thing was coming up, and I was thinking: "Maybe I'll leave the job, but I don't know what I want to do", and then we saw this tea room that was vegetating. We had about three or four months to put the business plan together, borrow a load of money, decide what we were going to do, and gut this wing and turn it into a restaurant. So I ticked the 'No' box and got a redundancy pay-off from Ancient Monuments, so left on the day that English Heritage was founded and moved across the yard into this restaurant. Having been in the museum I knew exactly what visitor patterns were like in the village. I created a business plan where we opened for seven months and we closed for five. And it worked. Incredibly at the end of the first year the budget that I had created was £5 off what we actually made.

So the non-business side of the plan was a five-month vacation, and what I wanted to do was get into writing and broadcasting. The first thing I did was I wrote a guidebook which I published, and also some postcards because I thought that there was nothing for the ordinary visitor. The guidebook did really well; in fact, it's only just gone out of

print. I can't remember how many times I reprinted it and I kept updating it. Altogether I sold about 100,000 copies, which if you think about it is a bit scary. At the time I wrote it part of me was still at university in a sense, intellectually, so some of it was a bit serious. But I think it was pioneering. A very important thing, which no guidebook to Avebury, or Stonehenge for that matter, has ever imitated – the current official guidebook is still just about Neolithic Avebury – was that I wrote about the whole landscape right up to the present day.

HO: How did you get to what you're doing now?

MP: What happened was: We're getting really busy with the restaurant. It's getting pretty much near capacity. It's a listed building owned by the National Trust. We couldn't do anything to the building. The quality of the food really couldn't have got much better without significant increases in prices which we weren't going to do. I just wanted to do something different. The challenge had gone and I'd got bored. At the same time I wanted to get back into archaeology and I wanted to write and work in broadcasting. I befriended a producer in the local BBC radio station who taught me how to edit and make little pieces with a reel-to-reel tape recorder, razor blade and sellotape. I went round interviewing local farmers, and guys who made crop circles, and had a jolly good time doing that. I wasn't being paid but I was basically getting free tuition from a really skilled, experienced radio producer. Then I managed to get a few pieces onto Radio 4, and so I was enjoying that, and I was enjoying the writing, but none of it was really going anywhere, and I felt I wanted to finish my PhD. I went up to the Institute and sat down with journals, and went through the past 15 years' journals or something like that. And to my amazement I discovered that nothing that I had done when I was researching this unpublished PhD had yet been done or said. It was as if there had been 15 years of archaeology in that particular area and nothing had changed at all. I looked at it and thought, "Well I don't need a PhD. What use is it going to be to me? I can't really see a PhD here". So what I did was I just wrote it up as an article and it was published in PPS (Pitts 1996).

Then along came an old friend, Clive Gamble, now Professor at Royal Holloway, but he was at that time at Southampton University. Clive rang me up and said "I've been asked to write this book about Boxgrove, but I don't really want to do it. Would you be interested?" At that time I thought: "There's no book about Boxgrove – all they've found is a bone". Because that's all we knew – Mark Roberts hadn't published anything. And that's actually what I said to two editors at large London publishers. They'd asked if someone could write the book about the story in the news, and I told them it wasn't worth it. But one of them – Mark Booth at Random House, bless him – said: "Go away and prove it: how do you know there's not a book there?"

So what I had to do was find Mark Roberts, but Mark did everything he could to avoid me. I'd ring up, and he'd slam the phone down. I grew up near Boxgrove – so I know the area well – and I was seeing my family down there one day, and he answered the phone. And I said, "Look, I'm just down the road at the moment. My family are here. Why don't we meet at this pub?" And he said "All right". I couldn't believe it. So I

go along to the pub, and of course he doesn't turn up. And as they were announcing closing time, in walks Mark Roberts. I realised after about 10 minutes talking to him that there was only one way I was going to get him on board. And I said "OK Mark, if we do this, you can have half of the royalties". And that was it. That was *Fairweather Eden*.

So what happened then was I'd got this book contract, and that was what then gave me the confidence to say "I'm going to go on". And I got another contract, which was *Hengeworld*, on the back of that. So I just took a leap out into the dark really. When *Fairweather Eden* came out the publisher got me a commission to write a piece about Boxgrove for *The Daily Telegraph*. What I then did was start bombarding other science editors with stuff, and I was lucky in that there was a science editor at *The Guardian* who thought it would be rather cool to have archaeology in its Thursday supplement, so I wrote tons of stuff for him.

I wasn't making a huge amount of money, and I hadn't been able to get a third book contract, and I was struggling. I had produced endless proposals for a lot of books that I'd still like to write, but none of them quite came off. Then John Vimpany came to me from English Heritage and said: "We've got this project down at Stonehenge to build a road tunnel, and could you advise us on the contents of the new visitor centre?" So I said: "Of course". So I joined the Stonehenge Project as a consultant for about nine months and discovered that English Heritage were sitting on this absolutely fantastic project, and all I knew about it when I started was what I'd read in the press, which were a few articles rubbishing it, saying how it was going to devastate the World Heritage Site (WHS) and that it was all commercial.

English Heritage over the years had come up with various schemes for a visitor centre at Stonehenge, and most of them were in the WHS, which went completely against the whole spirit of what the WHS was supposed to be. Then they gave up trying to do it themselves and they thought they could do it with a commercial partner. Madame Tussauds produced this phenomenally hideous, ghastly proposal which fortunately everybody trod on and they didn't get permission for. So then they had to go back to square one and design their own project, and the final thing was brilliant, which is the project they're now trying to launch.

I enjoyed that a lot, and then Andrew Selkirk asked me to work on *Current Archaeology*, and I thought that would be fun, so I edited a couple. And then Simon Denison said: "Would you like to take over *British Archaeology*?" So that's what I did. Now what I do is *British Archaeology*, which, largely because of what I've done to the magazine, has become a pretty big job. It takes up a lot of my time, but I'm still doing it freelance, and so I do other stuff as well. It's healthy when you freelance to have a range of things. If you've got a lot of things going on then hopefully there'll be enough work to keep you going.

AS: How do you consider the difference between public interaction at a site like Avebury as compared to a landscape like Stonehenge - having worked on both of them?

MP: An obvious difference is that people go to Stonehenge with big expectations whereas most people go to Avebury not really knowing what they're going to see. The sad fact is that when you go to Stonehenge you have a pretty dreadful experience. So you've got high expectations which come from seeing photographs of the stones, and reading books which make it sound really exciting and you get there and you feel, I think, insulted. And the whole environment is dreadful and tatty with the roads and the facilities, all the other tourists and the fences. And to their credit these days English Heritage do about as good a job of it as they could – I think the little rope around the stones is very effective. It's nice to see the stones with grass amongst them. It looks good, and in the photographs it can be you, the grass and the stones, and for many people that's a big thing. The custodial staff at Stonehenge are really helpful, they're a friendly bunch and the place is well-run now. That makes a big difference: in the past you could get a really frosty reception if you asked the custodian anything. But nonetheless it is a pretty dreadful experience and you've gone there with high expectations. Avebury on the other hand is a huge place where you are largely free to do what you like and so you have this sense of personal discovery when you go there. There are all these surprising things there, and then you have this great sense of achievement and reward that Stonehenge doesn't give. I think that's really the biggest difference.

AS: What do you see as a future for Stonehenge, both in terms of the road plans and the visitor centre?

MP: What's actually going to happen is anybody's guess. I gather that the current stance is that the government have said that they will tell us what they are going to do about Stonehenge at the end of this year. I don't know how many times that decision has already been postponed, and so whether we really will know at the end of this year remains to be seen. Why should it take so long – either they are going to spend the money or they're not – what are they trying to do? Are they – which one would like to believe but it somehow seems a rather naïve view – are they actually waiting until a point where the budgetary cycle will allow them to say that we can afford to do what needs to be done at Stonehenge, and then announce: “Yes we are going to do it”? Or are they going to spin it out as long as possible so that the energy of the people that want it to happen will just have died out by the time they announce “no” and then they'll be no one left to protest?

What should happen is what has been approved at public inquiry. The visitor centre and whole road scheme has been approved and it's a good scheme: it's good for archaeology, it's good for the public, it's good for the monument, it's good for the landscape, it's good for the ecology, and I think in many ways the most important thing, the scheme if it was implemented creates an entirely new environment from which a new Stonehenge in the modern world would grow. If this were to happen it is just the beginning.

At the moment you've got this phenomenally busy, dangerous road which completely severs the World Heritage Site. The axis of movement through the WHS runs parallel to that road north and south of it. If you remove that road then the potential movement within the WHS is freed. Lines of barrows run north-south and one of the really great dry valleys in Britain runs north-south through the World Heritage Site and ends at Stonehenge. If these changes happen the whole landscape will be re-orientated and the possibilities will be there for people to discover an entirely new Stonehenge and I think that would be brilliant. Whether it is going to happen, who knows?

AS: How did your book *Hengeworld* fit into a discovery of a new Stonehenge, if you think there needs to be one?

MP: I don't know if *Hengeworld* has had any effect at all: there is still a lot of snobbery. There is this snobbery about stuff that is written for, that is consumable by, an ordinary reader, by someone who isn't a specialist, and archaeologists ignore it. There is a review of *Hengeworld* that was published in *Antiquity*, by the then editor of *Antiquity* who happened to have succeeded me at the museum in Avebury. I've never had an extended conversation with her, I don't know her, and where that review came from, I have no idea. Why it was so bilious I don't know but the fact is there is barely a sentence that is factually correct in her review. I didn't complain about it; I thought, "What's the point, she's editor". I mean what can I do? I felt that that was an extreme form of academic snobbery about writing for a broader readership. And so as much as I'd like to think that books like *Hengeworld* could actually affect wider thinking I'm not sure they do.

Although I will completely contradict myself because Gerald Hawkins' (1965) *Stonehenge Decoded* had a huge impact on public thinking about Stonehenge and fuck all impact on academic thinking. *Hengeworld* is still in print; seven years later people are still buying it. I know people read it because they write to me and I get emails and they are by and large positive. People are inspired so I suppose it's had some effect.

AS: So do you think it is possible to address both an academic and a more popular audience?

MP: Oh I think it's possible to address them; the problem is getting the different parties to actually listen, definitely. I think it's something at which archaeology is very, very bad. In extreme cases there's Binford who is still saying: "You may find this difficult to read – I have made it deliberately difficult to read because if you do not work hard at trying to understand what I'm saying you're not going to understand it properly". He says that and David Clarke sort of says that but not in the kind of self-righteous way that Lew Binford said it. David Clarke's justification is that: "I'm dealing with difficult concepts, so inevitably they're going to be difficult to understand and therefore the writing is going to be difficult". I disagree with that as well but at least it's not self-righteous; it's not a sort of puritanical thing. But nonetheless most of the books that

professional archaeologists write are written for their friends and colleagues. They are not written for people who know nothing about archaeology.

There is this idea that if you write for people who know nothing about archaeology then you are dumbing down. Now look at history. Some of the great writers of the past two centuries have been historians – they are literary writers and the books often have very complicated ideas in them. It's a completely different approach and academic historians often, not always of course, do aspire to literary writing. That is not something which archaeologists do. There is this idea, despite public archaeology and all these conference sessions about archaeology and the media and so on, that if you write or broadcast or talk in a way that is going to engage people who aren't specialist archaeologists, that somehow you are going to be leaving the essence of real archaeology behind. And that has to be wrong – but it's not something which is that easy to change.

If someone could give me a job in university, I'd like to set up a course that is just focused on writing good archaeology, that's about literature, that's about writing stuff that is well-written but is also challenging, that's exciting to read, that draws on historical and philosophical and archaeological traditions, that is very aware, that's very self-conscious but is also good literature and can actually be enjoyed and read and challenge anybody. I think people need to be told that this can be done and that it's a worthy cause. To a certain extent it's something that you can teach: you can analyse literature, you can analyse writing, you can analyse ideas. Ideas and literature are not isolated things: they work together. Something that's really well written is very good at communicating sophisticated ideas, and equally if you're going to think really clearly, and this is where people like Lew Binford get into a complete knot, you have to be able to write clearly, otherwise you lose track of your own arguments – to say nothing of the poor buggers trying to read the thing.

HO: Do you think there is an amateur/professional split evident in the readership of *British Archaeology*?

MP: I don't feel it. For what it's worth, the letters I get for the magazine come I think in equal proportions from people who are professional archaeologists and people who are not, and frequently making the same kinds of points. It's not something that concerns me. As far as I'm concerned whether somebody's a professional archaeologist or whether they're a banker or a church warden or a plumber has absolutely no bearing on the quality of their interest in their past. That's what's important.

HO: I've noticed a shift in *British Archaeology* towards coverage of archaeology of the recent past and more articles about artists working with archaeologists. There's things like the Van article (Newland et al. 2007), the Long Kesh/Maze article (McAtackney 2005). So how important are such kinds of considerations to you and why has that shift occurred?

MP: It would hardly be a shock horror story for an editor of *British Archaeology* to

say that he tries to make the magazine into something which reflects his own interests, which of course it does, and the past few issues are as close as the magazine has got to the way I would really like it to be. It's taken time to get there simply because people have to write for it, stuff doesn't just flood in. Almost all the stuff that's written for the magazine I've asked somebody to write. I have no money to pay people who write features (I believe it's the same at *Current Archaeology*). For me that was a very strange concept, having spent several years working as a freelance journalist, where I couldn't write unless I got paid, because I was dependent on it. It was a difficult thing for me to ask somebody to write something knowing that I couldn't pay them, but of course *British Archaeology* is not like a normal magazine. It's one of the things that I think makes it really special in magazine publishing, and to see it in Smiths and Borders and so on gives me a real thrill, because it's written entirely by archaeologists – or people who call themselves archaeologists.

HO: And in a similar vein we noticed that one reader cancelled their subscription over the Van...

MP: Yes! Yes that's right. I was so proud to publish that letter, I was so pleased. The CBA [Council for British Archaeology: www.britarch.ac.uk], and the Director Mike Heyworth are very good to me because I'm editing as a freelance and I basically put into the magazine what I think is right. Of course I'm aware of what organisation the CBA is and broadly everything in the magazine supports the values and aims of the CBA, as it should. But sentence by sentence the magazine does not necessarily reflect their ideas, and I think that is to the enormous credit of the CBA. I think the result of that is that the magazine is much more interesting and challenging than it would otherwise be.

I was utterly committed to a career in professional archaeology when I was younger, but I was always interested in other stuff. When I was doing my PhD I'd go to museums to look at stone axes and end up spending most of my time looking at Victorian underwear or the work of a 19th century watercolourist I'd never heard of. Actually I think, "Why do we study archaeology? Why are most people interested in archaeology?" It's because thinking about the past, about people in the past, engaging with the physical remains of the past is an extension of your life; it's part of what people are and what they do. In the same way as having a routine at breakfast and going to work, going to the movies, going on holidays, whatever it is you do – work and play. There are not precise boundaries for most people on all of these things, and if you are interested in archaeology then that's another part of your life, and the boundary that the academic world sometimes puts around archaeology does not exist for most people. So that's what I try to do with the magazine, on the one hand by putting stuff in there about contemporary art or, for example, in this issue [July/August 2007] on the back page I've got an interview with Billy Bragg, who surprise, surprise, is not a university lecturer on Neolithic Greece! On the one hand I'm saying to people who are archaeologists, who work in excavation, consultancy, or in English Heritage or at a university, or indeed who are active members of their local archaeological society: "You may be interested in archaeology but did you also know there are people who are not professional archae-

ologists who are also interested in archaeology?” And they’re people you should be thinking about: this is the bigger constituency.

On the other hand, what I’m saying to people is that you buy this magazine because you’re interested in archaeology and of course it’s about archaeology but I’m showing you that archaeology relates to other things in your life. If you absorb, unconsciously perhaps, the message of that then you’d start thinking archaeologically and you will be better equipped to engage with the past in a personal way. Because you will lose this idea, that might have been encouraged at some time or other by an archaeologist, that to really be an archaeologist you need to *be* an archaeologist. So you can’t be a Waitrose till assistant and be an archaeologist, you can’t engage in your own way with the past – you have to rely on other people to tell you what to do and to see. And I’m trying to say, “No, that’s not the case – *you* can be an archaeologist. Look, here is Billy Bragg – he’s in an archaeology magazine”. The broad message is: thinking archaeologically is a big part of our everyday lives.

HO: Do you think that *British Archaeology* can have a role in putting pressure on people who deal in unprovenanced antiquities?

MP: No, I don’t think it can put any pressure on people who deal in antiquities because, almost by definition, people who do that are going to have their own agendas. They will know that professional archaeologists disapprove of the antiquities trade and they also know that you can make money out of it. They’ve made their judgements and they’re going to do it. Nothing that *British Archaeology* says is going to stop people trading.

What *British Archaeology* can do, I’m convinced, is to educate people into understanding what the impact of that trade is, and people are, I have to say sometimes, willingly naïve about the impact of the trade in antiquities. It’s still quite common to see things like African masks or ancient Greek sculptures in the backgrounds in photographs in sophisticated lifestyle magazines: beautiful *objets d’art* are a reflection of the sophisticated taste of the owner. That is still part of our western middle class-culture and I really think that one of the jobs of a magazine like *British Archaeology* – obviously there’s much more to the magazine, so it’s not going to do it on every page – is to help get out the message that this is wrong, that a sophisticated antiquity in your household is more likely than not to be an indication of your ignorance. If you really knew the trail that that object had been through before it ended up on your wall it would not be there.

HO: *British Archaeology* is a publication of the Council for British Archaeology, as we know, and has recently featured opinion pieces from MPs. What do you see as the magazine’s political role, if any?

MP: Well, not least representing the CBA. It must have to a certain extent a campaign role because that’s what the CBA is, I think. The CBA was set up to represent archaeology many years ago at a time when there was no public voice at all representing the

profession or the past, the archaeological past. The magazine must do that and of course that includes talking to elected politicians. In fact as an indication of that, the CBA sends a copy of the magazine to everybody who is on APPAG [All Party Parliamentary Archaeology Group] so a lot of copies of the magazine actually go to the House of Commons. There are also MPs and members of the House of Lords who subscribe who get the magazine as well so I'm very, very conscious of that: as a proportion of readership, of course, the number of copies that goes to the Houses of Parliament is very small but potentially it's very significant. Sometimes I'll flag something up in the magazine that's really there principally for those people at Westminster who I know are going to get the magazine: whether they're going to open the bloody thing is another matter. Engaging with the present in the way that this magazine does is partly about trying to show politicians that archaeology is relevant – it's about the real world. It's not a geeky collecting thing, it's not treasure hunting, it's not *Antiques World*, it's about people's lives.

HO: What, in your opinion, is the best approach to alternative archaeologies? The example we have is the alleged pyramids in Bosnia. Should archaeologists ignore them, study them or attempt to debunk them and how can we most effectively communicate such ideas to the public?

MP: I think you can't ignore alternative archaeology; I think it can be very entertaining to slag it off – but it's a very easy target and in extreme cases I have to say I think you're dealing with people who are mentally unstable. But really it doesn't achieve very much. We all know as archaeologists that there's some absolutely dreadful stuff out there, some of it is very cynical and manipulative. Some of it is just dreadfully naïve, but I think that just slugging it off doesn't make you look good. If you're miserable, bitter and twisted about stuff and rude about people then you're not going to get a lot of respect from anybody. I mentioned *Stonehenge Decoded*. When that book came out archaeologists were incredibly rude about Gerald Hawkins in public, and I'm sure it might actually have encouraged a lot of people to feel, well maybe Gerald Hawkins is on to something. Because people tend to, especially in this country, be sympathetic if somebody is being persecuted. I think there's always this danger that if all you do is slag people off then people will be suspicious of you and will think that you've got ulterior motives. In some way I'm not sure that archaeology has to do anything specific about it; with the Bosnian pyramids I published a piece from Tony Harding and I was very pleased to do that, as I think it needed airing. It would have looked very odd to have had an article from the bloke who thinks there are pyramids there because that would have then suggested to other people reading the magazine, most of whom would have seen it was complete rubbish, that they couldn't trust anything that was in the magazine. I like to think that whatever's in the magazine can be trusted so in a sense it's kind of refereed by me.

But I think the real way to address them is to write stuff that's just as compelling, that is exciting but is actually something that we think is valid and is what we believe in – *Hengeworld* was written in that vein. Here is a book that I set out to be archaeologi-

cally acceptable in the sense that it's properly thought out – it draws on the evidence, it offers challenging ideas about archaeology and encourages people to think about the nature of archaeological evidence, but it's a good read and people will enjoy it, I hope, and that's the aim. That then is a much better response to a book about the astronomy of Stonehenge, which came out about the same time as *Hengeworld*. If you wrote a book saying, "This book is rubbish", then everybody's going to completely ignore you, but if you write a book that has a completely different narrative but is as good a read then people can make up their own minds and I think that's the way to deal with it. It's interesting at the moment: sometimes you almost feel there are more books being written about how bad alternative archaeologies are than good books being written about the ancient past. I think we need to remember actually that we just need to write the good stuff!

HO: Talking about writing good stuff: Are you interested in contributions from research students and if so, what advice would you give them for writing for *British Archaeology*?

MP: Of course I'm interested! I'm always interested in hearing from anybody. There are some basic principles to bear in mind. *Current Archaeology* prints stories based on press releases that have already been covered elsewhere. I would never do that. So, for example, if your dig has been in *The Daily Telegraph*, then unless you have a very significant new development to report, *British Archaeology* will not cover it. Come to me first! I deal in exclusive, new material which is why stories in the magazine are frequently picked up by the national and international media. Occasionally something comes along that is so important that I will add to existing coverage, but that is very rare (I think I've done it twice in the past four years, with the Anglo-Saxon grave at Prittlewell and the palaeolithic finds at Pakefield). I will normally only print articles written by people who were actively involved in the research: I want to hear from you about your own work. Don't spend ages formatting your text in a Word file, at least on my behalf; I always remove all formatting before I read anything. The availability of good photos is extremely important, and if they are digital, that means high resolution.

The simplest advice I could give, and this is what any editor of any newspaper or magazine would say, is to look at the most recent issue. See what's in it, maybe the past two or three issues and think about the way stuff is written, and think about what some of the subjects are and imagine someone reading it. As editor I've got in my mind an imaginary reader: look at the magazine and try to think what that imaginary reader is like and then how can you write for that person. That's the most important thing. The rest of it is dead easy. It helps if you can write reasonable English, it makes my job a lot easier, but if you can't I'll edit it – I'll edit it anyway, but if you can't, I'll even re-write it. Obviously I'm not going to give you examples, but occasionally something ends up in the magazine where there's not a word of the original piece in there. You wouldn't know it I hope, but that's my job as an editor. What I most like and respect is a professional attitude, so if I say to a contributor: "Can you re-write this bit?" or, "this bit doesn't make sense", or, "I think you need to add this", you don't turn around and

say, “No, that’s not true – I’m right”. This is really important if you want to write for newspapers or something: it doesn’t matter what an editor says that might upset you, at the end of the day they are the editor. And you’re a potential contributor, but you’re only a potential contributor. Just make it interesting: if it interests me, then the chances are I’ll want to put it in the magazine.

HO: Last question. What is the most significant story you’ve covered in your time as editor and why?

MP: It would be the Pakefield feature in Jan/Feb 2006 (Parfitt et al. 2006). First, the artefacts were obviously archaeologically significant. The failure to find hominin evidence in the Cromer Forest-bed Formation after so long and so much searching, had made the absence a fact of European prehistory; the proof that there *was* such evidence has not only extended the human story in this region by 200,000 years, but opened up very exciting possibilities for future discoveries in a unique organic-rich deposit. Second, it was a great feature, written by four people at the heart of the research, about difficult stuff in a way that is interesting to the casual reader and useful for the archaeology student, and, I like to think, even for specialists. Third – and the journalist in me values this highly – it did brilliantly what a magazine like *British Archaeology*, I think, ultimately exists for. The first publication of the news was in *Nature* – it was their cover story. It was a short, highly technical piece: there were more authors than paragraphs in the text! The *Nature* cover is a prized slot in the scientific world, and the magazine is quite properly defensive of its exclusive rights. No one could pre-empt it. It so happened that I had a magazine coming out at the same time, and by delaying its publication by one week, I was able to just follow *Nature*. Within a day, the esoteric technical text was backed up by an attractive, 10-page colour feature – which naturally had taken a lot of earlier preparation – that anyone could understand if they put in the effort. Now that is popular archaeology at its best – and to my knowledge, it remains the only decent feature of its kind on Pakefield and Happisburgh, and yes, there are still a few back copies of that issue at the CBA...

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