

## FORUM

# Why Archaeologists Must Stop Working for Free: A Response Inspired by The #FreeArchaeology Debate

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This response will be informed almost entirely by my short experience of the contemporary environment in professional and academic archaeology. I will discuss the obstacles that have had a particularly profound effect on the way that I view the situation for archaeologists in the past five years or so. Indeed as I write I realise that I really have only been involved in archaeology for five years - the first four of which I have been a student, and only the last two of which I have been truly aware of what, for me, has been a truly troubling issue not just in heritage but across the whole cultural sector.

### **Defining the issue: class biases live on in the cultural sector**

Sue writes on some very important issues, providing interesting insights, in particular on gender and race inequalities as an obstacle for diverse career trajectories within archaeology. Whilst I do not in any way intend on diminishing the importance of these topics for healthy growth and development in the professional environment, it is my belief that there are some far more nuanced and indeed taboo subjects that need to be teased out in order for us to make real progress. Gender and race have now become comfortable

topics for us - whilst inequalities of this sort undoubtedly still run rife in Western society, it is generally accepted that they must be openly challenged and discussed. But what of the problems that have yet to be tackled?

Under representation is not confined to broad issues such as gender and race. The problem that I will focus on in this article could come under the category of inequality between classes, because what I am concerned with is the bias which leads to the very troublesome current situation in archaeology - the idea that those who can afford to work for free or for unacceptable pay conditions are able to progress their careers before those who can't. That is, the idea that those in 'high-power' or 'advanced career' roles in archaeology and heritage are those fortunate enough to not *have* to work, but to be able to *afford* to. This problem is complex. Below I will consider what I perceive as several of the main causes and effects of these inequalities.

### **Detangling the problematic topic of the volunteer culture in British heritage organisations**

Whilst the boundaries between classes have undeniably blurred in post-war Britain, and indeed many obstacles created by class differences are no longer in existence, we must face up to the fact that class remains a very real limiting factor in professions that are seen as 'surplus to requirements' in contemporary

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society. This is particularly true in times of economic downturn, such as the one that Britain is currently experiencing. Young people from diverse backgrounds may be able to gain access to higher education through student financing, but their fates after graduating are shaped by their personal financial status.

With a vast percentage of young people leaving education with varying degrees of debt (some may simply have student loans to pay off, but others may have had to seek personal or governmental loans to pursue their educational goals, especially where post-graduate education is concerned) there is a need for high-skilled, well-paid jobs to support educated, albeit indebted, individuals.

To my mind the problem that most freshly graduated archaeology and heritage students encounter upon their entry into the 'real world' is defined by a distinct lack of well-paid jobs. When jobs do arise, they are often poorly paid or part-time<sup>1</sup>. This can be explained by two main factors, the second of which is a direct result of the first, and the first of which is perpetuated by the second:

1. Funding (governmental or otherwise) in heritage and archaeological environments is sparse,
2. Heritage bodies therefore rely heavily on a volunteer workforce.

We now find ourselves in a vicious cycle. Lack of funding means that there is not enough money to pay qualified individuals a decent salary. This means that volunteers and part-time workers are brought in to do the work of full-time professionals. The fact that organisations show themselves as willing and able to run (if not efficiently, then at least passably) with a very small team of full or part-time salaried staff and a whole cohort of volunteers exempts them from any further funding or attention at all. Progress is essentially impossible until this cycle can be broken.

These discussions have recently been developed amongst the online community



**Figure 1:** The tweet that initiated the #Free Archaeology debate.

of archaeologists and heritage professionals. The idea was conceived of when I tweeted about considering writing a blog post on this potentially controversial topic (see **fig. 1**). The response was quite phenomenal and, with the birth of a hashtag (#FreeArchaeology) and my initial blog post (Johnson 2013) the topic became a real-time discussion amongst scholars on the web. Others picked up the debate (particularly worth mentioning are Hardy 2013; Rocks-Macqueen 2013; Shipley 2013) and there was at one point, talk of taking the discussion to conference. Since then I have published an article on the subject in an Open Access eBook on blogging archaeology (Johnson 2014).

I pause here to reflect on the nature of this online discussion, as it could provide an important insight into the way that we understand the nature of debate amongst a small and geographically scattered network of professionals. I believe that one of the main reasons that this somewhat controversial discussion was finally able to take place was that it was conducted in an informal, online environment. Those involved in the discussions were able to engage in meaningful debate in a friendly environment where

the perceived formalities of academic publication or public speaking do not apply - essentially they felt safe enough to speak out<sup>2</sup>. And here is where the first obstacle for overcoming this issue comes into play:

*People don't feel safe talking formally about obstacles that they face in their professional lives because they fear that they might hinder their own chances of advancing their careers, or even risk losing their jobs.*

This may well be the reason that a #FreeArchaeology conference never came to fruition. Indeed several people who were approached to contribute to this collection of papers declined, even when offered the opportunity to publish anonymously (Morel 2014, pers. comm.).

### **Painting a portrait: small-scale consequences of a nation-wide problem**

So what are the consequences of these particularly poor conditions of pay and job availability? Firstly, there is the danger of frustration and dissatisfaction bubbling beneath the surface of many organisational bodies, which is never a positive environment in which to be doing work that should be contributing positively to an area of study or interest. For me, this boils down to two main effects that such a situation can have on individual lives and careers:

1. Persual of an alternative career,
2. Poor mental health.

I have spoken to many people who have expressed disillusion with archaeology - feelings of wasted efforts in their education and, quite frankly, despair at their current financial situation. This has inevitably led to large numbers of individuals (myself included) abandoning their passion and pursuing a different career that will enable them to live comfortably. The short term nature of most contracts of employment (particularly for entry-level jobs) and the poor pay, along with requirements for geographical flexibility (not

to mention the essential voluntary and paid experience that most employers now expect) all act as a barrier to individuals starting off in archaeology as well as those who have managed to maintain a string of jobs in such an unstable working environment.

These problems might often be made to seem inconsequential. Poorly paid heritage workers are made to feel like petulant children for complaining about their pay conditions - they are doing their dream job and should have absolutely no right to complain! But the fact of the matter is that these are very important issues. Financial and employment stability are serious aspects of adult life, and heightened worry for both or either of these reasons can very seriously affect mental health. According to a survey published by UK health charity Anxiety UK (2012), the main cause of anxiety for people in the UK is finance. It seems obvious to point out that paying someone a low wage (to the point of making their chosen career unfeasible) for work that they see as being of high value will have a distinctly negative effect on their feelings of self-worth. Robert Chapelle (2013) has written about mental health in Irish archaeology on his blog, and there have been other informal discussions online, but the topic is otherwise untouched. Chapelle touches on the lack of support for those with mental health problems in Irish archaeological organisations, and I can't help but wonder what the Human Resources (HR) situation is in its UK counterparts. My guess would be that HR is practically ignored, partly due to lack of awareness, but also due to lack of funding. Again, we are on the subject of poor funding; where will the money to pay an HR professional as part of an administration team come from, when there is little to pay people to do the actual archaeology in the first place?

It is my intention to simply point out the above two issues - I cannot tease apart the intricacies of such sensitive and poorly researched problems in this short commentary. However, I believe that the more people

who express their concern for the problem, the more likely it will be that others feel they can overcome research biases and look into forbidden subjects like this one.

### **The bigger picture: what this means for archaeology**

Sue points out that under representation in professional and academic archaeology is particularly troublesome because it means that certain ways of doing archaeology have become much more conventional than others. This is always dangerous when considering that archaeology is concerned with the entirety of the human experience. This is something that cannot be defined by one, very culturally limited, group of individuals. It is something that requires a diverse range of experience, expertise and skills in order to provide a balanced interpretation. Put simply, it is impossible to draw on this multiplicity of the diverse human experience when those with the qualifications and necessary (voluntary) experience all come from one, deeply privileged background. I am loath to point it out, and do not have any statistics to cite with reference to this observation, but I am sure that many others will agree that a vast majority of those in well-paid, well-advanced careers in archaeology and heritage are from a middle class, white background<sup>3</sup>.

### **Conclusion: why we must face up to the facts**

Issues of finance and job stability, whilst being openly discussed and lamented by many archaeologists in informal settings, are yet to be properly researched and formally circulated amongst an audience of professionals. The most important thing in order for us to make changes to the way that such an important branch of the cultural sector is viewed is to create an environment in which people feel as though they can discuss these obstacles without putting their careers on the line.

There should be more guidance for students who study for relevant qualifications, along with support for those currently in the profession. We should be working to create

a safe and stable working environment for a group of deeply passionate and intelligent individuals who have as much right to fulfilling and dependable employment as any professional on any career path.

These goals may seem far-fetched or unrealistic to many, and that is the reason that we must continue to work to increase awareness of this particularly difficult situation for heritage professionals. I am absolutely convinced that with more open discussion and the increasing involvement of those who have relevant experiences in these conversations then these obstacles will be overcome.

This short article has been written not to offer up a set of well-defined causes, effects or solutions - it has been a call for more exposed discussion amongst professionals in the cultural sector. I have written it in the hopes that it will give other, more qualified individuals the confidence to offer their stories and experiences. If I can do it, anyone can.

### **Notes**

<sup>1</sup> To add insult to injury the application requirements for these positions are unfeasibly high for young people. The fact that the jobs are so oversubscribed gives employers the opportunity to have very specific and high expectations of the successful applicant, often requiring post-graduate qualification along with years of experience, both paid and voluntary. This is an unattainable goal for graduates who require a stable income in order to negotiate a sustainable role in contemporary society.

<sup>2</sup> Lucy Shipley (2013) did, however, write in her initial blog post that she was 'frightened to even post this blog' which I find to be extremely telling of the way that young archaeologists feel about expressing opinions on this deeply taboo subject.

<sup>3</sup> I do not wish to imply in any way, however, that intelligence, hard work and determination can't get those from a less privileged background into a career in heritage related organisations.


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