

# Council for British Archaeology



## CBA Correspondent

### Widening inclusion and participation in archaeology increases our impact and legacy, says Neil Redfern



Above: The day after protesters in Bristol removed the statue of Edward Colston (see Spoilheap, this edition), its plinth is surrounded by carefully arranged Black Lives Matters placards

Right: A live whiteboard at the 2019 Chartered Institute for Archaeology's Conference in Leeds, in a session titled, "What makes the Ideal Archaeologist?"

CATLIN HOBBS/WIKIMEDIA, ROB LENNOX

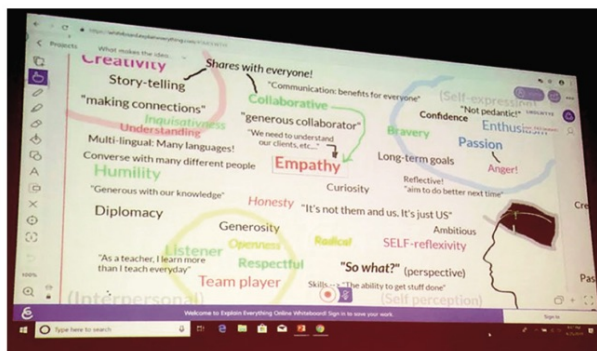
At the 2019 Chartered Institute for Archaeology's Conference in Leeds I ran an interactive session with my good friends Rob Lennox and Mark Spanjer, titled "What makes the Ideal Archaeologist?" We called on participants and audience members to help design the characteristics that archaeologists need to embody if we are to maximise the impacts, benefits and legacy of what we do. We were not addressing the mechanics of archaeology such as geophysics, excavating or archiving, but how we can behave and think differently. How can we break down the narrow boxes that define us, and restrict our potential to achieve greater impacts? The session sought to understand the approaches and behaviours we should adopt to help empower us to think differently, and apply our expertise in a more open and dynamic manner.

You can still watch our introductory presentations online (see endnote), and the discussion's results were captured by a live online

whiteboard. These illustrate to me the most important things we need to consider as archaeologists: notably that we need to listen. We need to allow room for alternative voices as we grapple with understanding the material remains and past environments we encounter. And we need to do so with empathy, to understand the perspectives of others and why they might think differently to us, and therefore think differently about the past and how it is presented today.

I would go even further in this. For me, the most important thing about archaeology is that it is not actually about the past: it is about the present. Yes, we look at the material culture and surviving evidential value of past peoples and environments, but we do this from the present; the here and the now. Therefore, we are fully governed by our own perspectives and life experiences – these are the lenses through which we act and think as archaeologists. While we can try to be as objective as possible, we would not be human if we did not bring some of our own self to looking at the world around us and our work.

Understanding and accepting this, working within this open and subjective framework is not problematic, it is not being dishonest to the past, it's actually very liberating – understanding that our work reflects more about us than the past or the people who preceded us, allows us to grow and develop the range of questions we ask of the material and experiences we encounter as





archaeologists. It is about being honest to the present and the world around us today, and the issues we face. If we cannot understand these issues, then how can we ever apply narratives to the past from the very limited material we see of it? Limiting our perspectives restricts and damages our thought processes and the questions we ask. To me the most important skill an archaeologist needs is to be able to open their eyes to the present, and the issues we face in today's world. Only by doing so can we seek better questions about the past and the material culture we encounter.

Never has this been more important as we think about the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement, the protests around statues and the narratives of the trans-Atlantic slave trade and our colonial past. At the Council for British Archaeology (CBA) we have been looking at our own approach and considering what we can do better to reflect society today. As an organisation we acknowledge that we have work to do, not only to better understand many of the issues facing individuals participating in archaeology, but to create changes that ensure archaeology is accessible and open to everyone.

The CBA is not representative of UK society. We are committed to working towards diversity, inclusion and equality in the heritage sector. However, the BLM movement has made it very clear that more work is urgently needed. We have been considering how we can make changes to ensure that we continue to work towards these goals in everything we do.

The CBA believes wider participation is essential to archaeology, and underpins our core values and approach to our work. Anyone can participate in archaeological activities and archaeology should be open to everyone. We actively aspire to help people to discover and explore stories and connections using archaeology. We believe archaeology enables us to bring



SAM SAUNDERS/FLICKR/CC BY-SA 2.0, CBA

together diverse communities and create inclusive practice. It can help people to learn about the past and encourage them to feel connected to the places and communities around them. However, this does not mean that we believe all legacies from the past should be preserved statically or without question. Heritage is constantly being redefined, reinterpreted and renewed, and we must ask what we want our contribution to the story to be.

Our history has shaped our present, and that includes the darker parts of history which have led to inequalities and prejudices in our modern society. Many aspects of heritage are contested. While some people have positive associations, others find them

painful or difficult. Public representations of heritage which are connected to a history of violence against some communities, are not only traumatic for those communities but risk perpetuating inequalities.

For all these reasons, it is important that we listen to communities who tell us about contested heritage, particularly as black, Asian and minority ethnic people are under-represented within the heritage sector and therefore have been excluded from decision making. Heritage cannot contribute to community wellbeing, and support learning and discovery about the past, unless the practice we undertake today is both diverse and inclusive.

Reflecting back to our session

*Above: A Bristol street in June*

in Leeds, what strikes me as most relevant was how Mark Spanjer in his introduction sat and talked about his life experiences as an archaeologist, the friends he had made, the experiences he had had and how they had shaped his thinking. It was a powerful testament to my proposition that we need to understand ourselves today if we are to better understand the past, and that often archaeology says more about us than it does about our predecessors. So, the more open and inclusive we are the more we have to offer.

*We have launched an Equality & Diversity Hub on our website to help you explore these issues further: <https://new.archaeologyuk.org/equality-and-diversity-hub>. Our full statement and commitment to addressing equality, diversity and inclusion in archaeology is here: <https://new.archaeologyuk.org/news/statement-on-equality-diversity-and-inclusion-in-archaeology>. The 2019 CIfA session can be watched at [www.youtube.com/watch?v=7OlVPC9v980&feature=youtu.be](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7OlVPC9v980&feature=youtu.be). Neil Redfern is the executive director of the Council for British Archaeology ■*



*Above: The CBA has launched online resources to help you explore issues of equality, diversity and inclusion – see text*