

Council for British Archaeology

CBA Factsheet 5: Working in archaeology

What kinds of jobs are there in archaeology?

There are many different types of job roles in archaeology, so where you work will depend on what area of archaeology you are interested in. Below are the main areas, but there are many sub-disciplines and specialisms, too numerous to list here.

National agencies

The four main public archaeological organisations in the UK are:

- English Heritage (www.english-heritage.org.uk)
- Historic Scotland (www.historic-scotland.gov.uk)
- Cadw: Welsh Historic Monuments (www.cadw.wales.gov.uk)
- The Northern Ireland Environment Agency (www.ni-environment.gov.uk)

Their main role is to bring about the long-term conservation and widespread understanding and enjoyment of the historic environment. These organisations employ Inspectors of Ancient Monuments who deal with the preservation and protection of sites and monuments, monitor fieldwork projects, and recommend grant aid. Inspectors usually work within a large region, and this generally involves much travelling.

Much of the work is taken up with writing reports and giving advice. Historic Buildings Inspectors have a similar role in relation to buildings and have detailed knowledge of art history or architecture. English Heritage also contains the Centre for Archaeology, part of whose role is to advise on archaeological activities funded by English Heritage, and forms a mobile field team for surveys, evaluations, watching briefs and excavations.

English Heritage also has sections concerned with the conservation of finds, illustration and publication, and specialised scientific services provided through the Ancient Monuments Laboratory. Most of the national agencies have education services which provide information about educational opportunities at national monuments, educational resources, and advice.

Royal Commissions

There are now two Royal Commissions:

- Royal Commission on the Ancient & Historical Monuments of Wales (www.rcahmw.gov.uk)
- Royal Commission on the Ancient & Historical Monuments of Scotland (www.rcahms.gov.uk)

England's Royal Commission was incorporated into English Heritage in the late 1990s.

The main aim of the Royal Commissions on the Ancient & Historical Monuments (for Scotland and Wales) is to compile and make available surveys of ancient monuments, buildings and other field remains of all periods, details of which are collated into national databases for each country. An important aspect of their work is aerial archaeology, and the curation of major collections of aerial photographs.

Other national bodies

The National Trust (www.nationaltrust.org.uk), founded in 1895, exists to promote the permanent preservation for the nation of land with outstanding natural features and animal and plant life, and buildings of beauty or historic interest. There are estimated to be more than 40,000 sites of archaeological interest in the ownership of the National Trust, about 6 per cent of the national total. The NT employs a number of Archaeological Field Officers who record, survey, and occasionally excavate sites in its care. The equivalent body in Scotland is the National Trust for Scotland (www.nts.org.uk).

Numerous other national bodies also employ archaeologists including the National Parks (www.nationalparks.gov.uk), the Environment Agency (www.environment-agency.gov.uk), the Highways Agency (www.highways.gov.uk), the Forestry Commission (www.forestry.gov.uk), etc.

These organisations employ archaeologists to look after archaeological sites in their area. Such posts include recording, surveying and sometimes excavating sites.

Several other organisations, such as the Council for British Archaeology (CBA) and Archaeology Scotland (www.archaeologyscotland.org.uk), employ archaeologists. These bodies provide a bridge between amateur and professional archaeology, acting to promote the subject with emphasis on information, education, conservation and publication.

Archaeological field units and trusts: 'the contractors'

Most archaeological fieldwork occasioned by development is carried out by independent units. These vary a good deal in size and organisation, some being attached to museums or local authorities, others to universities, or existing as independent commercial companies, trusts or charities.

Archaeological Field Units and trusts provide the bulk of jobs in the practical side of archaeology – such as surveying, excavation, photography, finds processing – together with the special expertise needed to bring field projects to publication (eg the study of animal bones, human remains, artefacts, finds conservation, editorial and drawing skills).

A list of contractors is available on the Archaeology Online section of our website (www.britarch.ac.uk/archonline).

Local authorities: 'the curators'

A majority of county councils, districts, unitary authorities, employ archaeologists.

An important role for many of these posts is to provide advice on the conservation or recording of archaeological remains when applications for planning permission are being determined, and to ensure that fieldwork is carried out to a sufficient standard.

Some county councils operate their own field units to carry out survey and excavation throughout the county. Such curatorial work relies upon the Historic Environment Record or Sites and Monuments Record: a database of the historic environment, usually kept at county or regional level. An HER/SMR should have its own team to keep it updated, and to assist the local authority in monitoring planning applications.

A list of curators is available on the Archaeology Online section of our website (www.britarch.ac.uk/archonline).

Consultants

Developers who hire their own archaeological contractors may turn to a consultant for advice. Consultants may also be called upon to advise local authorities on particular issues, and are sometimes engaged by national agencies or the private sector to undertake specialised research. Most consultants are based in engineering companies and also provide environmental impact assessments, impact mitigation plans as well as design services in which archaeology may take a contributory role.

In the last few years an increasing number of archaeological positions have become available with consultancies as developers request the consultancies to undertake the archaeological and heritage aspect of the development. Some of these companies are international organizations, whilst others may be UK based; most have several offices throughout the UK.

Museums

Museums offer a range of opportunities. Keepers of Archaeology may be involved in fieldwork, but are more often responsible for the curation of artefacts and related tasks of interpretation and research. An important part of the job of the museum archaeologist is to deal with enquiries from the public, often identifying finds that they have brought in.

Many museums also offer opportunities for conservators working with artefacts and finds. Some museums also operate on Outreach service involving the public with education and archaeology.

Heritage interpretation centres are becoming more common, with emphasis on reconstruction and presentation to the public. These create opportunities for archaeological consultants, especially those with experience in the fields of marketing and design.

Archaeology in Education

Over 50 universities and colleges of higher education offer careers as lecturers or technicians. Competition for lecturers' posts is fierce, and is not usually to be considered without a doctorate, or an equivalent level of achievement.

Universities are centres of archaeological research; some of the most interesting and progressive projects are based within them. A number of universities also foster specialised aspects of the discipline: for example maritime archaeology, archaeological science, aerial or industrial archaeology.

A list of universities is available on the Archaeology Online section of our website (www.britarch.ac.uk/archonline).

How do I become an archaeologist?

Archaeology is a very broad subject and within it are a wide range of specialisms, from excavating in the field, geophysical survey, finds interpretation, chemical analysis in laboratories and dating techniques to forensic investigation for the police.

Additionally the period of the past that you are interested can also become your specialist area, whether it's Prehistory, Roman, Medieval or Industrial archaeology.

So archaeologists enter the profession through a wide variety of routes and courses reflect this broad range of disciplines. The most important question therefore is: what sort of archaeologist do I want to be? If you already have a passion for an area of the subject then you may have already answered this question. If not then we'd suggest you do some volunteering to get a flavour of what you're interested in (see our factsheet on 'Getting Involved in Archaeology').

For further information, please contact:

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