Supporting communities online: CAF two years on

Dan Hull & Suzie Thomas (CBA)

Introduction - DH

Community archaeology has been a topic of intense discussion for almost ten years now. Though descriptions of its origins, definition and make-up vary, there is no doubt that it has brought with it very real opportunities for participation in archaeology. The number of newly initiated projects which have come into being, excavating, surveying and recording aspects of our historic environment not previously researched, is difficult to quantify, but is certainly great. By its very nature, community archaeology can seem elusive to those seeking to locate and characterise it. Often small in scale, sometimes (though not always) based outside of and separate from archaeological organisations, community projects are sometimes described using terms like 'organic', 'local', and 'by the people and for the people'. In order to capture some of its extraordinary and ever-changing variety, the Council for British Archaeology created the online (SLIDE) Community Archaeology Forum in 2006 as both a platform from which community groups and projects could broadcast their work to the wider world, but also share ideas, contacts and strategies with one another. After its first, somewhat experimental three years, this paper assesses the Community Archaeology Forum today: has it been successful, what kinds of groups are using it, and what might we have done differently. But this paper isn't just meant to be a reflective exercise; looking to the future, and with funding from the Headley Trust, the CBA is now carrying out a wider project assessing the nature of voluntary involvement in archaeology in the UK. The reasons for this are three-fold. (SLIDE) Firstly, for reasons which I will come on to in a moment, we felt the time was right to review what the voluntary sector *is* today: in all its variety, who are the 'avocational' or 'amateur' enthusiasts who participate in archaeology in their hundreds of thousands, what activities do they carry out and what do they feel they are missing out on? In at least two recent studies of community archaeology, it has been asserted that community archaeology is specifically an invention of the last thirty years.

While recognising that community archaeology has brought with it a new impetus and new opportunities for voluntary work, in no small part brought about by a variety of new funds made available from the late 1990s by, for example, the Heritage Lottery Fund, it is important to recognise too that community archaeology is inextricably linked to the far broader and longer tradition of local societies in archaeology. Many of these, particularly county societies, began their existence in the first half of the nineteenth century, and there was a further surge in their numbers through smaller district societies in the post-war era, and the establishment of special interest groups of various kinds in the 1970s and 80s. For some, community archaeology differs demographically, intellectually and in terms of the activities it carries out from this longer tradition, but in fact the overlaps between the two today are so complex and frequent that drawing a distinction between community archaeology and the local society network without a fuller understanding of what each are doing in the present would be an artificial exercise. The CBA has long-championed the role of the volunteer in archaeology since our very creation in 1944, but we also recognise that over those 65 years the vast numbers of people who have participated in archaeology have done so in ways which were never static or simple. Any assessment carried out even two years ago may now be out of date and will miss some important subtleties. So for this reason

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the research we've embarked on recently is of the whole of the voluntary sector in archaeology and heritage, rather than just community archaeology alone, though in characterising the different activities carried out by groups, some meaningful distinctions may emerge.

But this research is not just interesting in and of itself. The second reason why it is important to us is that it will help inform many aspects of what the CBA does in practice. In particular, how can we redesign the Community Archaeology Forum as a valuable resource for as many people as possible. How can we persuade even more people to use it, and what do they want from such a resource? Thirdly, this research will also help us to plan for a series of practical training workshops in archaeological skills which we have planned from later in 2009 onwards.

I'll spend the next few minutes describing the Community Archaeology Forum as it is now, the thinking behind it, some of the groups who use it regularly and what it offers now. I'll then hand over to Suzie Thomas, our new Community Archaeology Support Officer, whose task it is to carry out this piece of research and to implement some of the additional support we want to provide for voluntary groups.

The Community Archaeology Forum

(SLIDE) The Community Archaeology Forum or 'CAF' was created as a 'wiki' in the autumn of 2006. A wiki is sometimes described as a collaboratively-authored resource, the content of which is not under single ownership but is assembled and maintained by many, and is therefore also constantly changing. It was hoped that groups and projects around the country would use it to upload descriptions of their work, along with images, sound files and anything else they felt would describe their work and that others should know about. To do this, they simply register (SLIDE) by creating a username and a password and they are then free to go ahead and create pages for themselves. No knowledge of html is required and content can be simply formatted and laid out in a 'WYSIWYG' fashion. (SLIDE) To add files, pictures, sound files, spreadsheets etc, contributors have to contact us so we know they are a real human with an archaeological interest, and not a spambot from the former USSR.

Users can assign their new content to one of a number of categories, like advice and guidance, new projects, events or people. Anyone can comment on others' pages, and we encourage people to make use of an associated community archaeology email discussion list to compare results, seek advice and make relevant announcements.

Before we went live with CAF, there were some concerns about its sustainability. What would happen if people abused the facility, deleted each others content, or used the collaborative framework as an opportunity to violently contradict one another's contributions (as has happened in the past on wikipedia). In fact, all of these initial fears have been dispelled, and a resource has been created by a large community consisting today of 43 projects, 14 advice and guidance pages, and 158 discussion list participants. Web statistics show that an average pf 1,800 page visits are made per day, almost 700,000 per year, by around 27,500 distinct hosts. The site has been used in responsible, innovative and often surprising ways by – to date – 207 different contributors.

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I should stress that CAF is not, and has never been intended to be a comprehensive round-up of all the community or voluntary archaeological projects going on around the country. A list of groups and societies is instead available from the CBA's Archaeology Online section. Instead, it is collaboratively authored, and therefore only exists because others feel it is useful and worthwhile to contribute. We would not presume to describe or impose a definition of community archaeology to which others must conform; instead, the wonderful variety of projects represented on CAF is a patchwork of very different offerings by groups who have identified themselves as community projects and defined their own work in their own way.

It is symptomatic of the amazing range of content that I can no longer sum up CAF contributions easily in a conference paper, in the same way as I could perhaps 18 months ago. To give you a flavour of content added in just the past year, we have(SLIDE):

- The Coventry Historic Environment Project (CHEP) which has just begun as a partnership between the Coventry and District Archaeological Society (CADAS) and Coventry City Council, funded by the Heritage Lottery Fund.

- (SLIDE) Another new project was recently announced on CAF: the Digitisation of the Bradford Buildings Register.

- (SLIDE) There are longer-established projects like the Anglesey Rock-Art Project, or ARAP, who have now very recently gone on to establish the Welsh Rock-Art Association.

- (SLIDE) Also included are the winners of the Marsh Archaeology Award last year, like the Badsey Society and the North of Scotland Archaeological Society.

- (SLIDE) There are also university-based projects, like the Cardiff and UCL-based Caerleon Legionary Fortress, whose excavation blog last summer attracted more than 13000 page visits and received coverage by, among others, Radio 3.

Some create many pages, while others announce their projects briefly, then return much later with updated results and developments. CAF also has a small but growing number of advice pages, on topics like methodology, where to seek funding and where to archive project results (SLIDE).

The research plan - ST

As mentioned already by Dan, the CBA received funding from the Headley Trust to employ a Community Archaeology Support Officer to carry out research into characterising the scale, nature, location and needs of the voluntary sector in UK archaeology. Building on the findings of this research, the CBA will enhance CAF and develop a programme of training for voluntary groups, both of which I will come back to later in this presentation.

(SLIDE) The project design for the research phase of the project consists of a number of methodologies. Firstly, there is the ongoing review of the relevant literature, pertaining to public and community archaeology but also to wider research concerning voluntarism. There are a variety of themes to be explored such as the

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theories underpinning voluntarism, like Bourdieu's notion of 'social capital', as well as the theoretical approaches currently adopted towards community archaeology itself.

In addition, I have spent several months making initial contact with different groups that I intend to consult in my research. I have attempted to target as many groups as possible that are likely to be engaging with archaeological heritage in different ways, and so have aimed to look at a wide variety of groups, which I shall describe shortly. My initial contact with such groups has allowed me to confirm correct contact details, but also, importantly, allowed an opportunity to introduce myself and the research project ahead of the survey.

Following on from that phase, I have just distributed a questionnaire, which is available at www.britarch.ac.uk/communitysurvey (SLIDE), and I am currently monitoring the results as they come in. Among other things, I am asking the respondents how many people are in their groups, what the age-range is like, what activities are carried out and what activities the groups might aspire to do in the future. In addition, feedback is sought on CAF, and on what type of training groups and societies may be interested in or feel that they need.

I am also in the process, literally in the past few days even, of visiting a sample of groups for more extensive consultation and observation of their activities. This also provides an opportunity to talk to more than one representative of the group in question. I am also interviewing an extensive sample of professionals who count community archaeology as all or part of their work remit, in order to gain perspectives from the professional as well as the voluntary sector. Do come and talk to me afterwards if you would also like to contribute to our survey or share your experiences and opinions with me. Much of this interview and observation phase of the research will borrow from ethnographic techniques, in that it is my intention to leave the interviews as unstructured conversations in which interviewees can feel comfortable to talk about the issues that they want to raise rather than to be pushed into answering set questions. Participant observation also falls in this category of methodology.

Another research option, which may be tried in the next few months, is the conducting of focus groups, which I am keen to try, but is limited by the potential cost and logistics of organising focus groups of sufficiently representative participants, not to mention the materials and staff time involved in setting them up. At present it is a decision that will be made later on into the research phase.

Group contacts list: nature, variation and distribution

I want to come back now to say more about the types of groups that I have contacted for the questionnaire survey. It is hoped that this survey will be as exhaustive as possible, and while we anticipate that not all those contacted will respond, it is hoped that a reasonable proportion will, especially given that I have spent time contacting many of these groups individually beforehand.

In order to enhance response rates, care was taken with those who were contacted via email (the preferred method where possible as it saved on postage costs) to personalise each email message and subject title. For those who had no email address, a paper copy of the questionnaire was sent by post.

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In selecting the groups to target, I carried out an extensive desktop survey of groups deemed to be relevant. This broad selection included, for example, traditional county archaeological societies; special interest groups such as industrial archaeology or Roman archaeology groups; Friends societies of museums or heritage sites; civic societies; nautical and maritime archaeology societies; historical societies; conservation or preservation groups; metal detecting clubs; natural history societies, and specifically-named "Community Archaeology" groups.

In addition, care had to be taken to make sure that this list was representative of groups engaging with archaeological heritage across the whole of the UK, and from different settings such as large cities, rural areas, suburbs, and smaller towns. In total, 1250 are included here, of which 350 are CBA affiliate members. We hope that a further 900 will subsequently be included with the help of other umbrella bodies such as the Civic Trust (etc) forwarding this survey to *their* members. This [SLIDE] shows roughly the distribution of the groups contacted based on the contacts' postcodes, which gives an indication of the distribution of groups that may be engaging in, or have the potential to engage in community archaeology. Later, pending survey results, this data may be added to and used to indicate any regional differences in terms of the nature and activities of community archaeology participants. It will be interesting to see, for example, whether the relative affluence, age-range and occupational background of an area are in any way reflected in the level and type of activities taking place. Use of human geography research tools such as GeoConvert could be used to enhance this data further.

The importance of assistance from relevant organisations in distributing the survey cannot be over-emphasised either. Archaeology Scotland included the survey in a recent mailing to it's affiliate members; the Civic Trust has agreed to notify its c.750 member societies of the survey, and ASHTAV – the Association of Small Historic Towns and Villages, will do the same with its members. In addition, the General Secretary of the National Council for Metal Detecting allowed me access to the contact details of the representatives of their all of their affiliated metal detecting clubs.

Because the survey is available online, it can also be announced in other relevant places, such as discussion forums and email announcements to large mailing lists, in case any groups have been missed inadvertently, and in order maximise the survey's coverage.

Further conclusions to date

Due to the early stage which the project is at, it is difficult, and potentially misleading, to offer even interim findings. I have visited six groups, and spoken to seven heritage professionals involved in community archaeology already, but have many more still to investigate. Certain trends are possibly emerging, however. For example, a number of professional archaeologists have expressed concern about the quality of work carried out by some groups, and the implicit obligation that remains often unfulfilled to deal with post-excavation work and to disseminate findings, and not just abandon a project once the 'fun' excavation or survey phase is over. Equally, there is concern from at least some community archaeology groups that they are not taken seriously by professionals, due to their voluntary or 'amateur' status, and that they potentially have much more to contribute than is currently realised, especially in

terms of their long-term commitment to – and knowledge of – a particular locality or subject specialism.

From a theoretical perspective, there are challenges to be found with the semantics used in the research. Students and practitioners of archaeology have long been aware of the challenges faced by those trying to define terms such as 'heritage', 'artefact', and even 'archaeology' itself. For the purposes of this research, 'archaeology' is taken as a very broad term incorporating activities that contribute to our knowledge and understanding of the past, such as historical and archival research, conservation, and so-called living history - inevitably incorporating aspects of experimental archaeology. This was done in order not to exclude any groups that could potentially benefit from any future support that the CBA may provide.

The way in which some groups self-identify, when many of their activities could legitimately be regarded as an archaeological activity, may prove to be a barrier to some groups responding, feeling perhaps that the research does not apply to them. One archaeological society member even recently remarked to me that a number of his society's regular activities and functions were not listed as specific response options in the survey (although every respondent has the option to add extra activities not already listed under the response option: "other – please state"). This in itself indicates the potential risks in trying to quantify the types of activities thought to be core to voluntary societies within the heritage sector, as well as hinting at the expected diversity that the research project will reveal.

Added to the challenge of defining 'archaeology' are the varying definitions of 'community', and the myriad terms for voluntarism, such as 'third sector', 'voluntary sector' and 'civil sector', and the ways in which these vague terms relate to the traditional local society network in the UK. The inclusion of such groups as metal detecting societies potentially muddies the waters further, since many metal detector users regard themselves as 'hobbyists' rather than 'volunteers'. While, then, precise definitions of community archaeology are problematic given its extraordinary scope and variation, a key principle is that involvement by non-professionals is encouraged. There is also the ongoing debate over whether community archaeology essentially originates and is led by the voluntary sector, and whether so-called 'top-down' models, where a professional organisation is the initiator, is in fact 'archaeological outreach' rather than 'community archaeology'.

Conclusions: the programme from here

As mentioned earlier, it is still too early to make any definite conclusions from the community archaeology research project itself. However, conclusions from research recently carried out by a colleague of ours, Richard Lee, into the troubled adult education sector suggest that links between voluntary projects and societies and adult education continue to be strong, and must remain so if training and learning in archaeology at a local level is to be sustained.

It is expected, in fact, that the results of the CBA's research into community archaeology will be known by this coming autumn, with a number of deliverable outcomes following on from that. Firstly, CAF, about which all interviewees and questionnaire respondents are asked, will be redeveloped and enhanced, taking into account the needs and expectations of both current and potential users. Although CAF continues to be popular, and we've been lucky so far in picking up a British Archaeology Award in 2008 and an Innovation in the Community Award in 2007, we

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know it is far from perfect and could do much more to serve as a platform for community work. This will no doubt mean that the software used will be made more user-friendly, particularly for those who may be less familiar with website development or indeed computers in general. Technology has moved on and there are much better blog and wiki interfaces available now that enable people to create their own content more easily. The content may also be modified based on issues identified by respondents, ensuring that CAF 2.0 will be non-prescriptive and democratic in its development process. There are many more good sources of advice out there which the site can aggregate and signpost to. But we also need your help in telling us how it should look. Just as in 2006, we are very keen not to impose a top-down model for a site which is meant to be ground-up.

A second outcome will be the development of a series of training workshops across the country, informed by the skills gaps and training needs of the voluntary sector in archaeology, as identified during the research phase. This will take place firstly as a series of pilot workshops, with the aim of developing a more comprehensive programme in the following years.

In the interim period, those interested can follow my blog, which is hosted on CAF and charts my activities and research progress, and on a more formal level can view the project's research page hosted by the CBA's main site.

Ultimately, it is hoped that the results of the research will provide useable baseline material that can inform strategic development not only of the CBA but also other archaeological organisations with an interest in encouraging and supporting community involvement.