

# Preface

This book is one of the series of cultural heritage manuals which, by providing overview and ‘key-facts’, is intended to help people work as archaeologists around the world. Many people associate archaeology with travel and adventure – not surprisingly given its image in popular culture – and many people come to Britain to learn about and ‘do’ archaeology. Wherever you are, archaeology has certain universal core principles. Archaeology is about exploring society and culture through its material traces, learning about the influence the past has had on the present, and using that knowledge to help shape the future. But despite our networked modern world, many aspects of archaeological methodology and practice are still very localised, and owe a great deal to the culture which produced them. This is the case in Britain, which is not really considered a country so much as a series of connected regions and localities by some people. We have therefore prepared this book to help newcomers to Britain learn how to get along – not just in archaeology, but in some other areas of life as well.

Before explaining what this book is and what it can do, it might be better to describe what it is not. It is not a complete guide to the archaeology of Britain – you will not pass your first-year course in British archaeology by just reading Chap. 3. Nor is it a history of archaeological practice, although you might find much which is useful and interesting in Chaps. 1 and 2. And it cannot hope to provide an intensive review of the laws relating to planning and heritage protection. Nor is it a guide to methods, ethics and standards – reading Chaps. 4–8 will not help you rise rapidly to the top.

What this book does provide, however, is an overview of all of these areas. The authors are together experienced in all of the four main sectors in which archaeological practice takes place in Britain – universities, local and national government, museums and commercial archaeology – and have drawn on that experience to produce a practical handbook for the first-timer in British archaeology. Specifically, we have tried to do four things:

- Explain how British archaeology has evolved, who is involved with it and what roles they perform.
- Provide an overview of the ‘archaeology of Britain’ – a snapshot of three-quarters of a million years in a little over 15,000 words!

- Describe the way in which archaeology works today – the legal framework, the profession, and how to actually get involved with survey, excavation and research.
- Provide sufficient background in all these areas to enable you to actually get on and do it!

As with any archaeological book, the information here is always subject to change. New discoveries change our understanding of the past, and who knows what discoveries will be made while the book is in press. Equally, the planning and heritage protection regimes are changing, so these too may be different when you read this book from how things were when we wrote it. Supplementing this book with online searches will reveal any significant changes in these areas. We have tried wherever possible to point you in the direction of other resources which may help, and we provide lists of reading and Web sites at the end.

With such a considerable breadth of coverage, and with the foundations of heritage practice constantly shifting (and especially so now, it would seem), there will inevitably be shortcomings and omissions in this book, shortcomings and omissions which some readers – and especially those ‘in the know’ – may find irritating. We have tried to reduce these to a minimum but are aware that we may have subconsciously adopted an Anglo-centric perspective on some topics, with less consideration of some aspects of Welsh and Scottish archaeology, and the text boxes (such as on health and safety, vehicle maintenance, or landscapes) also reflect personal views. It was never our intention to be definitive. Rather, what we provide here is an introduction, a way into a subject that is both complex and fluid. All of the relevant information is available, most of it online, and we provide links to many of these resources. But above all, our advice is to use this book in the way it is intended, as an entry to a complex and potentially confusing world.

Britain was really where modern archaeology began, resulting partly from contact with the New World which provoked thinking about national identity. National identities have always been constructed in relation to others, and for the first time from the sixteenth century it was possible to look at non-European ‘others’ and surmise how distant ancestors may have lived. From the seventeenth century, the rise of scientific empiricism during the Enlightenment encouraged a culture of quantification, and the two things came together in the eighteenth century with the discovery of landscape and the picturesque. As the nineteenth century gathered pace, fuelled by industrial enterprise and increasing scientific understanding, new approaches to ‘natural philosophy’ encouraged the development of individual areas of science – and of these geology, ethnography and natural history were all highly influential in transforming antiquarianism into archaeology. During the twentieth century, we have seen fluctuations in the balance of archaeological power and authority – museums and universities are no longer alone at the cutting edge of archaeological research for example; they have been joined (and some might say overtaken) by entrepreneurial private enterprise in the now well-developed system of professional commercial archaeology. The story of archaeology in Britain is, therefore, an echo of the story of modernity.

The structure of archaeology today is like many aspects of life in Britain – it is probably not the system that anyone would have been created given *carte blanche*. Parts of the laws relating to cultural heritage go back to the middle ages, and most of the legal and administrative framework can be traced back to the late nineteenth century. The present-day planning system is an amalgam of various legislative initiatives during the twentieth century – and even recent attempts to streamline this have fallen foul of the British preference for slightly muddled precedent. British archaeology contains a mixture of state institutions, private enterprise and charitable bodies – each with overlapping areas of responsibility and interest. The system is therefore a complex field – both for those familiar with the more rigid state-controlled systems in much of the European Union, and for those coming from the New World where the idea of a state-funded organisation which sends people out to survey earthworks for research purposes might seem ridiculous. For many of us working here, the flexibility and compromises inherent in the British system are one of its great strengths. It allows individual ideas to be tested, and new methodologies to develop. Discussion is open, free and fair, and there are very few ‘sacred cows’ which people are afraid to topple. Indeed many aspects of the culture of British archaeology actively encourage thinking ‘outside the box’.

One of the disadvantages of this system to an outsider is that it may be very difficult to figure out who is responsible for which aspects of archaeology, and how to get anything done. That is where this book comes in!

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