



## Archaeology, the public and the recent past

Rachael Kiddey

To cite this article: Rachael Kiddey (2016): Archaeology, the public and the recent past, International Journal of Heritage Studies, DOI: [10.1080/13527258.2016.1255909](https://doi.org/10.1080/13527258.2016.1255909)

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/13527258.2016.1255909>



Published online: 07 Nov 2016.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 5



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)

## BOOK REVIEW

**Archaeology, the public and the recent past**, edited by Chris Dalglish, Woodbridge, The Boydell Press, 2013, 189 pp., GB£30 (hardback), ISBN 978-1-84383-851-7

The explicit political consciousness of archaeology and the capacity for community archaeology to reconnect people with the places in which they live lie at the heart of this stimulating edited volume. For everyone with an interest in community archaeology – theory and practice – this book goes beyond blithely asserting that ‘the public’ should be involved in undertaking archaeological work to unpack the powerful ways in which participatory community archaeology assists in processes of remembering and forgetting that shape local identity and inform local and national politics in the present day. Several contributors confront the question of why community archaeology often concentrates on the recent past suggesting that, contrary to axiom, it is not because more modern material remains are somehow less valuable or more accessible than those of earlier periods, rather it is that they can more readily inspire oral reminiscence and inform inter-generational work. Thus, as Isherwood states in this volume (77) community archaeology projects centred around ‘living memory’ sites ‘... can serve as an arena for the construction of community in the present’.

The book is divided into two parts: ‘Constructing memories, constructing communities’ and ‘Engaging the past, engaging the present’. In the first part of the book, Catriona Mackie provides an excellent critical example of the ways in which archaeological material can be hijacked by romanticised narratives and sold as representing a past that never was. Concentrating on the open-air folk museum at Cregneash on the Isle of Man, Mackie carefully demonstrates how attempts to preserve the material remains of a particular period of history have resulted in the creation of an eclectic assemblage which, although well-intended, is problematic in terms of authenticity. Mackie acknowledges that, on the other hand, the presence of the museum has reinvigorated local interest in Manx folklore, reviving traditions and knowledge that were in danger of being lost. Picking up on the problems of social remembering and forgetting, Harold Mytum draws on Paul Connerton’s (2008) ‘seven types of forgetting’ to offer analysis of World War I memorials and a holiday camp, also on the Isle of Man. Mytum describes how the holiday camp, used as an internment camp 1914–1918, was returned to its owners at the end of the war and how all physical traces of its use as an internment camp were removed. He highlights how, almost a hundred years on from the end of World War I, only military deaths are remembered through names inscribed on the dedicated war memorials, leaving everyone else – those maimed and wounded, women, children, animals, prison camp internees etc. – lost to local historical narrative through a process of ‘social forgetting’ (48).

Sherry Arnstein’s often cited ‘ladder of citizen participation’ is referred to by several contributors. Using Arnstein’s model, it is demonstrated that those community archaeology projects described in the book represent a shift away from hierarchical approaches towards models that mobilise community participants to contribute directly to the construction of their local heritage. Contributions highlight the move away from thinking of community participants as passive volunteers directed by ‘expert’ archaeologists towards “‘social learning” approaches, where problems and their solutions are collaboratively defined’ (6). In his excellent chapter on the significance of power structures that characterised the *Dig Manchester* community archaeology project, Mike Nevell draws on Arnstein’s ‘ladder’ and briefly discusses critiques before identifying the ways in which ‘the ladder’ remains a productive model for understanding how participants benefit from community archaeology projects. Unpacking the usefulness of the Inspiring Learning scheme, an assessment framework developed by the Museum, Libraries and Archives (MLA) Council, Nevell goes on to demonstrate that the *Dig Manchester* project was successful in breaking through barriers, bringing together not just local people and over twenty-four stakeholders but also voluntary sector agencies across the region and from various disciplines, some

for the first time! The first half of the book ends with a compelling chapter in which Robert Isherwood argues that community archaeology projects ‘act as a locus for the preservation of memory, not just memories that directly relate to the site being investigated but also to places elsewhere’ (85). Echoing other contributors to this book, Isherwood suggests that community archaeology projects can help to revive deprived places by drawing on material remains of industries and traditions that shaped the local area and providing a framework through which such may be remembered, reinterpreted and commemorated. Thus, community archaeology can usefully contribute to local community identity and social sustainability in the present. Isherwood claims that ‘...it is the engagement of the participants with ... archaeology and their responses to it that determine the significance of the site as a heritage place’ (88) – a statement with which I wholeheartedly agree.

Audrey Horning necessarily complicates the rosy picture of community archaeology by drawing our attention to situations in which there is no clear subaltern narrative, rather the past remains contested. In contrast to the problems of ‘social forgetting’ (see Mytum), Horning identifies that, in Northern Ireland, the problem is more correctly how the past is actively remembered. In her chapter, Horning uses the 17th century Plantation period to problematize the notion that community archaeology should strive for plurality by showing how a talk that she gave on the city of Belfast as a mediaeval stronghold changed the perception of the mixed audience (Catholic, Protestant, non-disclosed). As Horning points out, rather than placing into question her right to comment on the past this situation demanded that, as an archaeologist with expert knowledge, Horning had a *responsibility* to comment. Jim Dixon joins Horning in asserting that archaeology has political power that can impact present day ‘problems’. Applying archaeological method and theory to the contemporary world, Dixon builds a cogent argument for archaeological approaches being used to materialise present day politics and makes suggestions for how we might mobilise archaeology as a tool for affecting politics more directly. In the chapter, Dixon recounts an example from his time as a doctoral student when he organised an event at the Regional History Centre at the University of the West of England. Dixon invited local MP, Stephen Williams, to participate in the session as discussant. He describes how, after three Contemporary Archaeology papers – Dixon’s own paper on the ways in which 1960s planning ideas haunt the contemporary landscape, one on the social impact of the building of the M32 and a paper on homelessness – the MP gave a summing up in which he acknowledged that deeper (archaeological) understanding of the ways in which people use the city and the agonistic politics of particular sites changed the way he thought. As Dixon points out, this clearly exemplifies how archaeology might affect contemporary politics in potentially radical ways.

In their linked papers, Powers et al. and Wilson et al. discuss the rise of post-mediaeval burial excavations and the various concerns that these raise for archaeologists. Wilson et al. advocate a long-standing – one is tempted to say ‘old fashioned’ – approach in which archaeologists hold the balance of power because archaeology is conducted for wider public benefit, for example, in terms of better understanding disease and improving forensics. Powers et al. acknowledge similar ethical, legal and practical issues, while pointing out that the general public often do have an interest in human remains and what happens to them. A situation which they suggest calls for better communication between archaeologists and the publics for whom they labour.

In conclusion, it is interesting to note the number of times that contributors to this book positively identify the *organic* development of teams of people as being central to the success of their community archaeology project and the sustainability of its legacy. Projects that provide opportunities for people to participate in *genuine* archaeological work and that ensure that groups come together through a *shared interest in archaeology* rather than, for example, as a result of being a child, an unemployed person, elderly, disabled or an ex-offender, would seem to enhance the development of more meaningful, lasting ‘communities of interest’. This book illustrates how community archaeology projects can function powerfully as mnemonic arena in which what exists – material remains – is what links people whose lives and experiences may be diverse, at times conflicting. As Horning, Isherwood and Sián Jones (see last chapter) note, community archaeology in the UK has a long history in which professional archaeologists have overseen keen (often but not exclusively white, middle-class, educated,

affluent) amateur volunteers. This is in contrast to how community archaeology has developed in the United States and Australia where the authority of archaeologists has been powerfully challenged by indigenous groups since the 1970s, resulting in community archaeology functioning as a form of advocacy or 'action' archaeology. This book complicates the picture of UK and Northern Ireland based community archaeology and in so-doing, moves it usefully several steps further on. Offering examples and advice on how non-archaeologists might be involved in the business of the past, posing questions concerning how we forget and remember and in providing a variety of practical advice for how impact can be assessed, this is a well-timed book that will be of interest to all archaeologists who engage with the public or have an interest in how the recent past is investigated. But as Siân Jones notes, the material world is not merely a backdrop for public engagement, it is the tactile medium through which community archaeology flows. Archaeology is still about things and stuff.

### **Reference**

Connerton, P. 2008. "Seven Types of Forgetting." *Memory Studies* 1: 273–278.

Rachael Kiddey  
University of York  
 [rk649@york.ac.uk](mailto:rk649@york.ac.uk)

© 2016 Rachael Kiddey  
<http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/13527258.2016.1255909>