



## Changing approaches to heritage

*Archaeology: parallels with heritage*

### Julie Wilkinson

John Schofield is a respected archaeologist who now works for English Heritage. His long career puts him in an ideal position to track thirty years of archaeology, and draw out the parallels between the development of this discipline with the development of the understanding of heritage.

### John Schofield:

I suppose my interest in archaeology really began when I went to university to read archaeology. There was still a very traditional view of archaeology. It was still a very traditional, conventional discipline. It was still taught in a very traditional, conventional way, certainly in the university that I went to, but things were changing at around that time as well, and the main thing that was changing was this thing called “New Archaeology” which was starting to emerge at around that time. Coming over mostly from the States but also through the University of Cambridge, through David Clark, for example, and the New Archaeology was really a new way of thinking about and interpreting the past. Lewis Binford in America, for example, had been promoting the idea of ethno-archaeology, studying communities that live today in remote parts of the world, and using them to learn lessons about the deeper past. He looks at the Nunamiut and used his studies amongst the Nunamiut to compare that to Stone Age communities in Europe, for instance. So modern material culture was being used to understand material in the distant past. It’s interesting now that modern material culture is being studied in its own right for what it can teach us about ourselves, and maybe that’s why I’ve gone from being interested in pre-history to being interested in the modern period so seamlessly, it appears.

Archaeology was also becoming much more scientific at around that time so scientific methods, and statistical methods, and so on, much more archaeologically it had become much more rigorous as well in the way that it approached the data that was being retrieved. It didn’t really apply so much in the sites that I worked on but in urban excavations, for example, there was a tendency to move through very quickly some of the later layers in order to get to the earlier stuff, the stuff that was the real focus of the Directors’ attentions. So you could imagine the situation where all the post-medieval remains and the material culture, and the layers, and so on, were removed in order to get to the medieval. For example. The idea of Modern Archaeology is a very a modern idea. When I was starting out in archaeology, post-medieval archaeology was quite new. There was a time when even medieval archaeology was a fairly radical idea.

You can also track this through the schedule of ancient monuments, and a research student a few years ago looked at the way the schedule had evolved from the introduction of scheduling in the 1882 act, introduced by General Pitt Rivers, and the schedule that we still have today, and how it evolved over time. The twenty-four sites on the first schedule in 1882 were all pre-historic and they were all monumental, so they were stone circles and things like that. The schedule continued to be dominated by pre-historic sites, right through into the early 20th century, but then Roman sites started to be introduced onto the schedule. Someone at some point, somebody will have decided, and it would have been agreed at a committee meeting that the Roman period wasn’t particularly well represented, if at all, on the schedule, and the schedule would have evolved accordingly. The same thing would have happened then with medieval archaeology at some point, and then at some point, and now we are coming more up to date, the post-medieval period would have been introduced, and during my time at English Heritage, of course, the 20th century has been a major addition to the schedule, with

a lot of Second World War sites, and Cold War sites, Cold War period sites as well have been added.

A few years after the ending of the Cold War and the realisation that it really was over, the Ministry of Defence and the Defence of State in Britain started to downsize and a lot of its properties and training areas, for example, and camps and RAF stations were closing down, and one of our roles at English Heritage is to record some of these places before they're changed, before they're developed, either through photography or survey of one kind or another. It was off the back of one of those surveys, and the closure of Greenham Common airbase, to take it back one step, the removal of cruise missiles, and then the closure of the base and the Americans obviously went home, and so on, and so on, and the Royal Commission undertook a survey of the site after it had been abandoned. And then there was a recommendation that the cruise missile shelters at Greenham Common, which are the most iconic structures on the site really, these are the key structures in terms of the Cold War history of Greenham Common, there was a recommendation that these sites be considered for scheduling.

So I visited Greenham Common with some colleagues and we went specifically to visit the so-called GAMA site – Ground Launched Cruise Missiles Alert and Maintenance Area – fantastic name – and we visited the site and we did our inspection, we had a look around, and we decided that it probably was appropriate for scheduled status, the way in which it was being used, and so on, and as we were driving away, with a little bit of time to spare before we put one or two of our colleagues back on the train to London, one of my colleagues made a sort of connection between the visit we were making and a visit that he'd made in the past when his wife had been at Greenham as one of the peace women. He noticed a road off the main road, and said "I think it was up there", so we drove up this road which led us back to the GAMA site, it's a dead end, you drive up and it comes to the gate, and you park, and you can wander around. So we did just that and we wandered around in the woods and, sure enough, we found the signs and the traces of the peace camps that had been there – this was "Green Gate" it turned out, one of the many peace camps that surrounded the base, all named after colours. We found earthwork structures, we found bits of binder twine and so on in the trees, which had either suspended the benders, the tents that the women lived in, or washing lines and things like that, and we found some wonderful painted fence posts and things like that. My first question was well, why aren't we considering this for scheduling too, why only that bit – because it's all part of the same thing. As an archaeologist looking at this I see it as one landscape, part of that landscape is the monumental architecture of the military establishment, and part of it is the ephemeral remains of the peace camps, and in the middle is the fence – so why are we not addressing all of this in a holistic way, why are we separating one thing off from another?

I suppose part of my answer to that question was well, we know what survives off the GAMA site; we can see it, these huge concrete structures. Apart from a few painted fence posts and a few bits of string in the trees, it's hard to establish precisely what survives archaeologically of the peace camps, and that then led to a field archaeology project which had the aim of establishing exactly what it was that did survive at some of these camps. And it was a really interesting project because we had to change our methods halfway through. We started off with the intention of excavating some of these peace camps, as we would a prehistoric campsite, for example; in fact there were lots of comparisons between the peace camps at Greenham and prehistoric campsites with the, you know, the central fire pit and the tents arranged around, I mean it's all completely logical, but it's interesting that that layout, that basic form transcends different periods of time.

We also, at about the same time, started trying to make contact with some of the former occupants of the campsites, and one of the first people we contacted made it very clear to us that these were sacred sites and they felt, or she felt that it was inappropriate that we should be (a) excavating at all, digging into these places; and (b) removing the artefacts from them. Of course that immediately seemed completely obvious and why hadn't we thought of that before? It was also at that point that I started to realise, again, something that perhaps dawned on me rather too late that I'm a chap in a women's peace camp, and digging it up

was probably the worst thing that I could be doing. She didn't seem to have a problem with that but I was conscious of that from that point on really.

That contact led to lots of other contacts and the oral history element of the Greenham Common project became very important, and it sort of sat alongside the field archaeology component of the project. It was a very short-lived project, we did quite a lot in the time that we had, but it drew down a few years ago now, but interest continues with Greenham Common, and I think it always will actually. Recently Lucy Reynolds has been doing some work as part of her research, and that's an art-based project based on oral history, and based on a series of walks around Greenham Common, and her contributors have continued to shed some very interesting light on Greenham and the way in which the base is perceived now, and their interpretation of the landscape now after what is it – fifteen, twenty, twenty-five years, I suppose.

Archive recording

### **Sama**

Where we're walking now would be where the soldiers would walk between the two layers of fence and there would be an incessant, you know, movement of soldiers and vigils just going round the base with their full war gear with their weapons and their helmets to defend, so where we're walking now is actually where they would be walking.

### **John Schofield**

So an example is Sama who lived at "Green Gate", which was this camp that we discovered when we were looking at the Gamma site, and she lived there for six months through a very cold winter and makes particular reference, in fact, to the fence which was so interesting to us as archaeologists when we came back twenty or so years later.

### **Sama**

The fence was always, the fence was like a blank canvas. We would hang stuff from the fence, sometimes even our washing, you know, sometimes women when they would be menstruating would plaster their soiled pads against the fence to say to the soldiers if you want blood, well here it is, we've got it for you.

### **John Schofield**

Sometimes when I give lectures on these things someone might ask yes, but is it archaeology this project that you're describing for us? And my answer to that is well, yes it is archaeology, I'm an archaeologist and the starting point for what I'm doing here, for example at Greenham, is the material remains, that's where I start. What you then do in order to be able to interpret these places can involve a whole range of different methods that you borrow from other disciplines, but the starting point is material culture and you're using it in order to understand things. It doesn't, of course, conform to the traditional definition of archaeology, of the pursuit of understanding with regards to something ancient, but I don't that matters, and archaeology has sort of reinvented itself, and I think it's absolutely right that it should.

So um, I think we've now reached the point where we now all acknowledge that it can all be archaeological, and that archaeology isn't so much a thing that you dig up, but it's a way of looking at the stuff that one digs up.

When I joined English Heritage twenty years ago, and perhaps even ten years ago, I think most people if they were asked about archaeology and archaeologists they would have come up with a very clear view of what an archaeologist is and does, and looks like, and what archaeology is all about, and that is a profession that deals entirely with things from the deeper past, from ancient times, and archaeologists largely as a white, middle-class, male profession. Unfortunately that is still largely the case, not necessarily the male bit, but the white middle-class bit certainly, and that's something I hope will change in the next ten years – but in terms of what we study, I think that has changed a lot. I'm always interested in pushing the boundaries a little bit and trying to think of ideas for projects that might challenge people to think about archaeology in new ways and the relevance of archaeology to people.

Archaeology I suppose is a method, it's a way of looking at the world and whether I'm looking at prehistoric sites or modern sites, I do so as an archaeologist because it's the way I see things. I'm interested in material culture, the material remains, and that's my starting point, so that makes me an archaeologist, in my view. Heritage is a set of management structures, procedures, administrative procedures for dealing with all of that stuff, and that equally can apply to old things just as it can apply to new things. Although I started out in prehistoric archaeology when I did my first degree and my PhD, and in fact my earlier years at English Heritage I was a pre-historian and everybody knew that, but something changed in the mid-1990's and I started to work on the modern period, particularly World War II at one stage, and then more recently I've started to do a lot of archaeological work related to the contemporary past, which means basically the period within living memory.

I joined English Heritage in 1989 and I think that in that period what one of the things that really changed is the way that we think about the heritage, and the way that we tend to break it up into – well, when I first joined, special places, that's what really mattered, it was the things that met criteria of national importance, for example, and were of special historical interest, and of architectural interest. We were thinking about scheduled monuments, listed buildings, and conservation areas – things that one could put a red line around. The problem with red lines, to my mind, is that they do tend to be interpreted as meaning that everything outside the red line holds no value at all.

Now I know that's not true but that is the perception of a lot of people, and I do struggle with that, and that's I think one of the things that's actually changed in the last few years, I think there is a much greater realisation amongst heritage professionals that those areas beyond the red lines actually matter, and often matter most, matter more than anything else because sometimes those places are hugely valued by the local communities. They may not necessarily have the historic depth, or the archaeological interest to merit consideration for designation, but they are valued by the local community. One of the things that's most encouraging is the way that we as an organisation, and we as a profession, have come to terms with this idea that the heritage in some way hasn't in the past been, but needs to be much more representative of a diverse society, and the approach that English Heritage is taking towards the landscape as a whole, recognising the landscape in a holistic sense, where everything is represented and everything is present, and everything is recorded.