



Changing approaches to heritage

Archaeology: Ford transit van

Julie Wilkinson

John Schofield, who you last heard speaking about archaeology and heritage, has recently been involved in a contemporary archaeology project that has attracted more than its fair share of debate. This is how John describes it:

John Schofield:

English Heritage One of the projects that I've been involved with recently, which has been particularly challenging and controversial has been the work I did on a Transit van which I excavated in 2006. Although we started out looking for a car of any description we actually ended up with a Transit van and a Transit van, interestingly, that had been used on archaeological projects - it was the field unit van from the Ironbridge Institute. The project was essentially an excavation, that's effectively what we did. Some people think we actually dug the Transit van out of the ground, but it wasn't that, it was taking apart the Transit van; the Transit van was the archaeological site. And we surveyed it and dismantled it and recorded all the bits we found in it and so on, so it was a forensic investigation. And the other thing that sets the Transit van apart from anything else I've done was that a film was made of the whole process. 'In Transit' was a documentation of the project, right from the very start to the very end, made by Greg Bailey who was then doing his Masters in Archaeology of Screen Media at the University of Bristol. It wasn't so much a film of the excavation. The film was part of the excavation in a way. It documented the process but it also became part of the process, so you hear fragments of interviews and there's no discrimination between Professor of Archaeology, Professor of Fine Art, cleaning lady from the local school, schoolchildren, and so on, and so on. All of these voices are heard at different times, sometimes agreeing with each other, sometimes disagreeing with each other.

Voice

(man) NB: "When I" clipped

(When I) first heard about the project I did think what sort of link-up did that really have with archaeology?

Voice (man)

It's a novel approach. Yes. It's social history, yes.

Voice (man)

Is the whole process worth it?

Voice (woman)

Why is it you're actually doing it?

Voice (woman)

If that's what you want to do, then so be it.

Voice (man)

Is the process worth it in the first place? I'm not sure.

Voice (man)

I'm not sure how this is going to relate to traditional approaches to archaeology.

Voice I think we've just developed quite an intimate sort of relationship. I think it'll be quite nice to hear how it speaks.

John Schofield

It documented the process of doing archaeology. There are a lot of connections, a lot of resonances between the Transit van and I don't know, a Neolithic long barrow, for example, being excavated, so we drew things in plan, we drew sections, we collected artefacts off the surface, recorded their location, took regular photographs, completed context sheets – everything that you would normally expect to do and, in fact, in 2009 a report, a full excavation report is being published in the Cambridge Archaeological Journal. Cornelius Holtorf, in a recent book, mentions the fact that archaeology isn't necessarily so much about the results of the endeavour, but the process of getting there, and I think with the van, and I can think of lots of other examples as well, that's absolutely true, and we're often asked with the van, when we present it at conferences, well what did you actually find out? I almost don't want to answer that question because it's so much more about the process and when you watch 'In Transit' and you listen to all the voices, all of those interviews were conducted because we were doing that project. They wouldn't have been conducted otherwise. We'd never have heard from any of those people if it hadn't been for our project. We're used to listening to professors of archaeology, and so on, who give lectures to students, and there are one or two of those in the film, but the majority of people that you hear when you listen to the commentary that goes with 'In Transit' are people who just happen to be passing during the two weeks that we were doing the project. One woman just shrugged her shoulders and said "why?" – that was a really eloquent view, I thought, very well put. And one boy got it absolutely in saying that this was archaeology gone full circle, archaeologists doing archaeology of themselves, and for a 12/13 year old boy to come up with that I thought was really special.

Extracts from 'In Transit' film
Dur: 24"

Voice (girl)

Like you think of archaeology looking at such precious things but if you take something so ordinary, so everyday, it's a lot more interesting, and you see the way things work.

Voice (boy)

It's living people's memories, its not like dead people's memories. Yeah.

Voice (girl)

Bringing it forward.

Voice (boy)

It's good that you're not focusing on one thing 'cos when you think of archaeology it's always the same old thing, like Romans, digging up things, but it's good that it's like branching out into other areas.

Voices

Yeah. Yeah.