

CifA Brexit Survey report

A personal statement from the author:

At this point in time (early December 2016) I will admit ignorance of the current Institute negotiating position regarding Brexit related discussions. I would however like to express a personal view of Brexit and the state of the nation and attitudes to Brexit both from a UK viewpoint and also from the point of view of an archaeologist working in other EU/EEA countries. This might serve to stand as both a 'typical citizen' and 'typical archaeologist' view point, in addition to the results of the Attitudes to Brexit survey, discussed in section 4.

Much has been made in the media regarding the level of knowledge (or lack of knowledge) of the Brexit process and the terms under which the government will be negotiating the UK's departure from the political process of the EU. As I write the Supreme Court has just finished hearing an appeal against the decision that the triggering of the Article 50 process requires a decision of Parliament and is not subject to Royal prerogative. That appeal process will also consider whether there is a need for affirmation from the 3 three devolved assemblies of the UK and, if the appeal fails, whether the process can be triggered by a motion in the House or whether a full Bill will be required. The appeal court is unlikely to report its decision before January 2017, but irrespective of that decision the Government has announced that it wishes to keep to an announced timetable of giving notice to the Council of Europe by the end of March 2017 at the latest. Ignoring whether or not that timetable is feasible, it engenders a general sense of urgency to the whole process of Brexit, that suggests those unable to make it to the station on time might well miss the express train of opportunity.

To extend the 'Brexit journey' analogy further. Although the landscape and destination of Brexit is currently uncertain, (soft, hard, grey, red white and blue have been suggested) and its resemblance to other locations hazy in the mists of obfuscation (Norway, Canada etc), there already attempts by various sectors to guarantee as far as possible a soft landing. Clearly there are economic factors of scale that make a difference here, so that the car industry and financial services for example, appear to have already cushioned the potential punitive effects of Brexit.

It is difficult to see, at least from a personal point of view, whether 'archaeology' as a business, is 'significant' enough to merit 'special treatment' in its own right and if not which carriage of the train it needs to be travelling in to guarantee that it is not entirely overlooked. Options could include allying itself to the environmental cause, to academia, to sciences, to Arts etc etc. My personal opinion is that if the archaeological profession concludes it is unable to make an argument for special consideration in its own right, it needs to identify the ally that is most likely to succeed at the earliest possible stage. The role of the Institute is crucial here as it is the ONLY body that can authoritatively claim to represent both the industry and the discipline in such negotiations.

There is a danger of course that the closer Brexit comes to fruition, minds will be concentrated on 'essential' sectors and elements of UK society (the NHS, defence, education etc) and archaeology both as discipline and praxis could be relegated to a lesser 'non-essential' status. I think it is important that a proportionate effort is made to campaign against adopting such a view (particularly as there may be pressure from other quarters to seize the opportunity of Brexit to devalue archaeology in the planning process for example). Again this would appear to be a case of archaeology choosing the most effective allies in helping to put this case across. A large element of the Brexit process appears to be founded on the undermining of both expertise, technology and intellectualism. Archaeology needs to be wary of the danger of projecting an image that allows it to be discriminated against on any of those grounds, whilst at the same time protecting the integrity, accuracy and probity of our research.

Since 1991 I have worked extensively in Europe (in Sweden, Norway, Germany, Denmark and Bulgaria) and mixed this with periods working back in the UK. Outside of Europe I have also in that time worked in Australia, in the USA and in the Middle East. I have taken as full advantage of freedom of movement within the EU and the more general diaspora of UK born archaeologists being welcomed throughout the world, due in no small part to their technical skills, a balance of academic and practical knowledge and a demonstrable flexibility to be able to cope with the pressures of archaeological excavation often in and unfamiliar and inhospitable circumstances.

Like many UK archaeologists in the same situation, I have along the way gained additional training and qualification to be able to fit closely with local licencing and employment requirements, gained language skills and acquired a non-British partner and family (in my case a Norwegian wife). This is just to demonstrate that working outside of the UK requires investment in career terms above and beyond that which could have still assured a productive archaeological career if I had remained solely working in the UK. During all that time, I have also remained a corporate member of the ClfA and tried to maintain the ethos of the Institute, even in situations and locations where it was not recognised by employers.

I was in Sweden on June 23/24th this year, one of 4 UK archaeologists in a team of 50 or so working on a large urban excavation in Gothenburg. It would be inaccurate to say that I woke to the news of the referendum result on that Friday morning, as I hadn't actually gone to bed the night before. Instead I sat in my living room, watching BBC World News, increasingly shell shocked as the Leave vote piled up.

The following Monday at work my Swedish, German, Latvian, Irish and Maltese colleagues treated the Brexit result with some amusement. A number asked whether it would actually happen. Surely the British would pull back? The Swedish national media treated it more seriously although with some incredulity. I was contacted by Norwegian friends who expressed the same view.

As the weeks moved on, the initial amusement was replaced by head shaking when the subject was raised, but there were already some indications that the relationship had changed. A number of UK field projects were advertised at the time, many of which would have been eminently suitable for Swedish colleagues. There was however hesitation. I was asked 'Is it true that foreigners have been attacked in the street?', 'Are UK archaeological employers allowed to take on foreign workers?' 'Do I now need a visa?'. When the situation was explained 3 or 4 applied (and were taken on. One in particular, taken on as a site assistant, was promoted to supervisor in his first week after it was realised that both his archaeological knowledge and English language skills were far above what the employer had expected).

We move onto the final fortnight of the excavation and an example of the advantages that have accrued to archaeology through UK membership of the EU/EEA over the past 40 years. A few days earlier we had come across an unexpected section of cemetery within the footprint of the proposed development area. It was necessary to clear the cemetery ahead of the proposed development and to their credit the developer was sympathetic to the difficult position the archaeological team found themselves in. To that end the developer offered additional funding to take on extra staff, but was unable to extend the deadline, due to a committed work programme involving a piling project.

The response of the archaeological team was to ask colleagues if anyone knew of experienced archaeologists who could be available at very short notice (48-72 hours) to come to Gothenburg and work on a 2-week contract to clear the cemetery and finish the project. Of course, there were

incentives offered (paid flight to Sweden, free accommodation, a salary of c £800 per week), but that was also offset against a long working day and 6 days a week working for the 2-week period. It was thought (probably correctly) that the immediacy of the need to start work, did not allow for an official advert to be posted in either Sweden or the UK.

The upshot of all of this was that within 72 hours, eight additional experienced archaeologists had been recruited (4 Brits, a German, a Greek and 2 Swedes). The project proceeded, the cemetery cleared and the site vacated in time for the piling crew to begin their scheduled work.

At the post-site excavation team debriefing, the transitory, insecure and reactive nature of modern-day field archaeology was raised, specifically with reference to the stress of the final two weeks, and with the usual archaeological bravado that at the end of the day we had fulfilled the archaeological brief. A deeper analysis however questioned whether if the same scenario was to arise at a future date, would a Swedish archaeological project be able to call on UK based archaeologists at such short notice, without the need for working visas, special travel arrangements, insurances etc etc.

Furthermore it was recognised, partly by design, partly through the impact of the small number of UK archaeologists already working on the project, that the site organisation, the recording protocols, the procedures and praxis of excavation, Health and Safety regulations, standards of PPE were so similar to that of a typical UK urban excavation, that experienced archaeologists were able to 'hit the ground running' when it came to starting work and required only the very briefest of site inductions. Even where techniques were used that were unfamiliar to at least 6 of the 8 new staff, (e.g photogrammetry instead of site planning, the use of the Intrasis site GIS), familiarity with the techniques of single context stratigraphic excavation and recording allowed for an easy and fast transition.

Losing the flexibility that the free movement of staff and the similarity of excavation techniques that have developed in the past 40 years of archaeological co-operation throughout Europe will be a backward step for both our profession and the discipline of archaeology.

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