



DIGGING THROUGH THE DOWNTURN

Christine Baker offers suggestions and solicits opinions on the future of archaeology in the current economic climate.

The clichéd stereotype of an archaeologist is generally of a stripy-jumper-wearing, dreadlocked idealist who digs with a spoon and is fond of holding things up! And while this may be true in some cases, it is by no means the whole story. As archaeologists we discover, unearth, recover. We record, interpret and illustrate. We research, protect and educate. We publish, present and disseminate. What we do is important for our culture, our heritage, our sense of identity, our sense of place. Archaeology is important in defining where we come from and how we came to be. It is information mainly from a time before the written word—finite, irreplaceable, valuable.

The information that archaeology provides is unique, and those of us who have worked in this profession will know the appetite that exists for that information—from the people who want to visit excavations; from tourists who will visit our well-known monuments; from local people who will attend their historical or archaeological society talks, survey their graveyards, attend conferences or go to exhibitions; from the articles read and the books bought. During the past twenty years especially we have produced the most fantastic finds, sites and information that will enable us to rewrite our story locally, nationally and internationally.



There is no doubt that the last two years have been extremely difficult for self-employed environmental archaeologists like myself. With the slow-down in new projects, there is an inevitable drop-off in post-excavation work. Personally, I've seen my income halved since 2008, and I spent three months last year working entirely outside the

archaeological sphere as a researcher/writer to maintain some level of income. On the up side, however, I've also had the opportunity in those two years to work on some exciting projects, including the Kilkenny Courthouse site and the Viking Age settlement at Barronstrand Street, Waterford. I and my colleague Dr Bettina Stefanini have also set up the IPEAN website, which facilitates communication between palaeoecologists and environmental archaeologists around Ireland. The IAI has encouraged this initiative and has invited contributions from us on various topics of interest to the profession as a whole. My experience in working outside archaeology has taught me that we have many transferable skills, not least our ability to write well, which we can apply to other research areas. So, overall, I'm upbeat about the future—plus I've been able to spend lots more time with my little girl, Áine, which is always a good thing!

Dr Eileen Reilly, self-employed environmental archaeologist



We completed the fieldwork of our last Irish project in July 2008 and have been operating at a different scale ever since. From six-month contracts, managing multinational teams of up to 50 archaeologists, our bread and butter is now one-day historic building surveys and geophysics here in Cornwall. Things are not all that bleak, however. Whilst there's a lot

less butter, still less bread and some of the larger units are scaling down, where the archaeology is more important than fiscal return there is still work to be done. In the pre-Tiger era, how many of us dreamt of regular paid work in archaeology? We consider ourselves incredibly fortunate to have been a part of what many rightly view as a golden age of Irish archaeology. Whilst the present is hard, the IAI and IfA have done much to champion our profession as well as to equip us with the skills to adapt. The legislative reforms of the last twenty years have complemented the rising popularity of archaeology to make it a substantive and inalienable part of Irish and British law and culture.

Matt Mossop, Archaeological Consultancy Ltd



While intermittently excavating in the pre-boom years while at university, most of my career as a licensed archaeologist has been in the 'Celtic Tiger' period. The relative security and normality of working for archaeological consultancies has given way to never being able to think two months ahead. Following redundancy, I have continued part-time doctoral research with considerable support from the School of

Archaeology, UCD, along with summer research excavations, completing publications, part-time lecturing and teaching evening classes, along with a number of community archaeology projects. My initial reaction to the employment crisis was anger, isolation and panic, and although I have considerable transferable skills I don't have an obvious alternative without the unfeasible prospect of new long-term training. While prone to the occasional night of paralysis, I am determined to remain an archaeological professional. I hope for a sustainable Irish archaeological sector that is better regulated and more community-orientated, and an environment that promotes research, public engagement and engagement with new media to promote our heritage and at the same time to show its economic benefits. I believe that the Institute should and could promote this agenda, along with promoting minimum living standards and fair employment conditions for those working within the profession.

Matt Seaver, archaeologist



The recession has decimated the commercial archaeology sector, of that there is no doubt. I try to take positives out of every situation but the greatest optimist in the world would struggle with this one. Nevertheless, the destruction of commercial archaeology in Ireland does present the archaeological community with opportunities. We have an opportunity to reinvent ourselves and to improve our approach to the application of our trade. We also have opportunities to diversify the services we offer, particularly in relation to tourism. The amazing experience we have gained through the successful execution of massive archaeological projects resulting from the National Development Plan is unrivalled. Our knowledge could be applied in other jurisdictions where there is limited experience of such endeavours. Options: as I see it, we have two main choices—we can wait and see whether the government will start building roads again, or we can get organised and help the IAI to build a formidable, internationally recognised professional body that will tackle the many challenges that face our profession. Personally, I can see ways out of the current crisis but it will take a massive readjustment in how archaeologists are employed in Ireland and the ways in which they ply their trade.

Colm Moloney, Managing Director, Headland Archaeology (Ireland) Ltd



While the economy has certainly slowed down, the benefits of archaeological geophysics are still being utilised—and are understood much better than they were in the past—by well-informed curators and end users. Earthsound Archaeological Geophysics is continuing to work on a number of projects across the country, including work at Portumna Castle, Clonmacnoise and the Magh Adhair royal inauguration site, as well as various commercial works. These projects, combined with our ongoing research at Cashel, Co. Tipperary, and Kilcashel, Co. Mayo, are keeping us busy. We are currently expanding our geophysical and

geochemical capabilities, as well as combining multi-technique approaches with high-resolution methodologies. The need for thorough and adaptive geophysical assessments has not gone away: it will continue to play a large role in development projects, mapping and management of archaeological and cultural resources in the future. The IAI provides a great forum for presenting geophysical results and new ideas to the general archaeological community. The regular conferences held around the country facilitate the exchange of ideas and new research.

Heather Gimson, Earthsound Archaeological Geophysics



Local Authority archaeologists provide a comprehensive archaeological service at local county/city level. The recent open forum facilitated by the Heritage Council on the future of the archaeological profession highlighted the need for an effective public service. The biggest challenge facing archaeology in the public service at present is the lack of a coherent structure and strategic

direction, emphasised by the recent embargo on recruitment and the redeployment of staff in the National Monuments Service and public agencies such as the NRA. The employment of County and City Archaeologists at Local Authority level would be the most appropriate means of delivering an optimum public service. At present only six local authorities employ archaeologists in a full-time capacity. The work carried out by the LA archaeologist can vary but generally includes development management, strategic planning, supervision of LA schemes, tender preparation and review, maintenance of a paper and photographic archive, management of Heritage Plan actions, public awareness initiatives, and projects such as special-interest publications. The emphasis on developer-led/funded archaeology has shifted and so it is critical to realise the potential of other heritage-related activities, many of which are rooted in local community-based projects.

Ciara Brett, Cork City Archaeologist



As we are all well aware, these are very difficult and challenging times and no one is immune to the economic downturn. For the NRA this change is apparent not only in reduced budgets and allocations but also in reduced staffing numbers. The impact for the NRA Archaeology Section is that fixed-term contracts will not be renewed and, consequently, we will be losing several staff over the coming weeks and months,

while further members of the Section will be placed on the public service redeployment panel. The NRA is committed to fulfilling its role and discharging its responsibilities, particularly with regard to the delivery of final archaeological reports (of which more than 85% of those currently due have been submitted to the statutory authorities). Equally, the Authority is committed to maintaining its track record with regard to dissemination and public engagement, as we see these as metrics for measuring value for money. Looking back over the past decade one can see the considerable advances and progress made across the entire spectrum of archaeology: fieldwork methodologies, reporting, post-excavation analyses, dissemination, publications, contracts and research. Collectively this work has not only national but also international implications. For the next decade we have to build on these foundations, recognising the need for greater focus on and understanding of the specific requirements of archaeological mitigation.

Rónán Swan, Head of Archaeology (a.), National Roads Authority

Like other professions, archaeology has been decimated by the recession/downturn/economic implosion. Figures from June 2009, when the Institute of Archaeologists of Ireland (IAI) undertook a survey of employment levels in Irish archaeology, showed a significant drop in the number of archaeologists employed, from 1,709 (in 2007) to 248 (in 2009). Anecdotally, that figure of 248 archaeologists working may be even lower now. We've become inured to figures—billions here, hundreds of millions there. What is 1,461 in the scheme of things? Well, it's 1,461 people who have contributed to the recording of unique and finite information; 1,461 people who can no longer support themselves or their families in their chosen profession; potentially 1,461 less taxpayers; 1,461 people with archaeological expertise who have left the profession, if not the country. These people represent over 80% of the skill-base built up in the last ten to fifteen years—gone; 80% of our collective memory—gone. Archaeology is a young profession. A significant number of its practitioners are in their 30s and 40s, with all the responsibilities that that entails. Many had relatively stable if not pensionable jobs. Many had plans. Many, myself included, have had recent experience of signing on, something that

we may never have done before—or at least not since the early 1990s. Unfortunately we are not alone in that and we must reassess ourselves both as individuals and collectively.

So what are we going to do about it? We have skills that we can repackage and that can be used in related disciplines. The challenge is one of perception. While we are aware of our proficiencies in project management, teamwork, problem-solving, writing and IT, not to mention our strengths in dealing with the public, meeting immovable deadlines in adverse physical conditions and our highly educated workforce (80% of whom have a primary degree), others perhaps are not.

How do we change perceptions? How do we channel our skills into different areas? Retraining, rethinking and repackaging. The IAI (www.iai.ie), which is the professional organisation representing archaeologists on the entire island of Ireland, is currently putting together its CPD (Continuing Professional Development) programme for 2011, with an emphasis on practicality and progress. Proposals include seminars and workshops on transferable skills, practical (un)employment and communicating archaeology, as well as on areas of technological advancements such as LiDar and GIS and the applications of geophysical survey.

In March the Heritage Council facilitated a workshop entitled 'The Archaeological Profession in Ireland: A Workshop on Future Possibilities' (www.heritagecouncil.ie). Anyone who was there that day can attest that the dynamism and positivity were palpable. Out of it has grown an archaeological strategy group, the aim of which is to devise a strategy for the entire profession on issues from education to political lobbying, from heritage tourism to employment potential, and from funding to regulation. It is up to the entire profession to participate. As can be seen from the contributors from the various sectors of the profession, we're battered and bruised but all is not entirely lost. Tellingly, the commercial sector is underrepresented. Those still in employment were sensitive to their former colleagues who have been 'let go'; those not in employment did not want to 'parade their woes'. As one of the latter said to me, 'There's no point in waiting for others to do it for us; we have to get off our arses and do it ourselves'. We've got to keep on digging through.

Christine Baker, CPD coordinator & administrator, Institute of Archaeologists of Ireland



I was lucky when I graduated from college in the late 1990s. Back then, like all my classmates from UCC, I found that there were plenty of jobs in archaeology for those who wanted to work in it. I followed the traditional route of archaeological fieldwork, while maintaining my specialist area of human osteoarchaeology. I was involved with what has been typically called 'commercial archaeology', but I always felt that that particular term

was dismissive of the extensive expertise and professionalism of those archaeologists who cut their teeth in that environment. The richness and complexity of Irish archaeology was confirmed and expanded in the 'Celtic Tiger' years. Then, of course, the economic slump, or avalanche, came. The cull of the archaeological workforce was, and is, astounding. Inevitably, often through necessity rather than choice, a significant number of archaeologists and their expertise have been lost to Irish archaeology. Personally speaking, in 2009, for the first time in well over a decade, I found myself without regular work. Since that time I have been able to get by with osteoarchaeological work. It is difficult to adjust to a substantial drop in salary, but I would consider myself to be one of the lucky ones who, so far, have been able to weather the storm. But I also consider this time almost as a breathing space. Things became so fast-paced in the past ten-fifteen years that the actual detailed research process fell somewhat by the wayside. Now I finally have time to complete a doctorate that has long been in the offing. It is obviously not the same for everyone, but I for one am glad of that breathing space. No one knows what the future of Irish archaeology may be, but it is essential for those remaining not to lose heart. It is essential that Irish archaeologists finally put an end to the disbelief in their own profession. Indeed, the recent IAI conference in Dublin appeared to confirm that this was finally happening. The legacy of the so-called boom years is only now coming to the fore. There are good and there are bad consequences. It is entirely up to ourselves how we deal with it. Our profession is always seen to focus on our past. But we need now to focus a little on our future.

Linda G. Lynch, osteoarchaeologist



Despite the implosion of Irish commercial archaeology, there is still strong interest in the archaeological heritage among the students in Dundalk IT and also among the general public.

While not necessarily for everyone, the challenge remains to engage with the public to ensure that heritage does not fall off the agendas of responsible authorities. The current upheaval perhaps offers an opportunity to regroup and set new targets and directions and to develop a better range of 'products' for the various markets and audiences interested in archaeological heritage. Particular opportunities might involve exploration of

other avenues surrounding the dissemination and communication of archaeology to wider audiences. The creative use of new technologies in particular is of immense potential, as is the development of the heritage tourism product. Projects are currently under way in DkIT exploring collaborations with other disciplines like Computer Science and Hospitality to bring some of these ideas to fruition. Given the major decline in the availability of research funding, it will perhaps be necessary to explore more collaborative and perhaps reciprocal arrangements between organisations and individuals with expertise and equipment. The increased interaction with and involvement of local communities with small-scale projects being run at local level is perhaps another path to follow. Such approaches might attract funding from sources not normally tapped into for archaeological research. Should such projects be connected or integrated there is the potential to make meaningful contributions to knowledge at regional and national level. Those members of our profession who are currently unemployed could play a major role in such initiatives, given their considerable pool of skills and expertise. Certainly, refocusing and creativity are what will be required, and the IAI clearly has a leadership role in the journey ahead.

Conor Brady, Department of Humanities, Dundalk Institute of Technology (DkIT)